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Developing Museum Display for Informal Learning

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Nottingham Trent University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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1. Introduction

I am both an academic and a practitioner and believe this symbiotic combination enriches both fields. For the last twenty years I have sought to place museum exhibition practice within an academic context and, in turn, to apply academic rigour to practice. Combining the roles, I have produced two books that have a continuing impact on the museums profession, evidenced through sales (for example, both have reached number one in the Amazon UK museology bestsellers list), through citations in both practitioner and non-practitioner publications, and through the range of invites I receive to give keynote papers. By April 2014, *The Engaging Museum* (2005) had sold over 6400 copies in English, and was in its 11th reprint. It is used by both practitioners and museum studies students, and has been translated into Chinese and Greek. According to Google Scholar it had received 224 citations. Meanwhile, *Transforming Museums* (2012) had sold over 2000 copies in English and was in its 3rd reprint. It has been translated into Turkish.

Exhibitions in which I have acted as Interpretive Consultant, which are the physical representation of my discourse, have twice won the UK £100,000 Art Fund Prize (Galleries of Justice, 2003 and Royal Albert Memorial Museum 2012) and been on the final shortlist for the Prize (Weston Park Museum, 2007), as well as winning its predecessor the Gulbenkian Prize (Galleries of Justice, 1996), the Guardian Family Friendly Museum Award (Weston Park Museum, 2008), the Special Judges Prize at the Interpret Britain Awards (Thackray Museum, 1997) and the English Tourist Board's "England for Excellence" Tourist Attraction of the Year Award (Galleries of Justice, 1999). Two of the museums reached the final shortlist for the European Museum of the Year Award (Galleries of Justice 2000, Thackray Museum, 1997). Combining the two roles, I was selected to provide an Impact Case Study for the 2014 Research Excellence Framework submission for History by Nottingham Trent University.

This introductory chapter re-visits a fundamental part of my research and practice, namely the development of an audience-centred approach to museum display that enhances the role of the exhibition as a tool for informal learning. I have been fortunate in my career to be part of a wider movement within the museum and

heritage profession that favours such an audience-centred approach. In commenting on my own work, I would highlight my relentless focus on the holistic nature of the museum experience and on museum audiences being in control of their visit and their own learning. This is primarily about a conceptual and practical shift from an approach to museum display that focuses on the transmission of knowledge in a didactic manner to what is seen as primarily a passive audience (Black, 2005: 130), to one where the museum creates a participatory learning environment which visitors engage with for themselves – audience driven, with the museum as enabler and supporter. The creation of such a learning environment influences every aspect of the museum visit – but it begins with the museum developing a much greater understanding of its audiences. My first book, *The Engaging Museum* (2005)*,* provided both the theoretical underpinning to such a museum and an exploration of its creation in practice, reflected in the strapline to the title: 'Developing museums for visitor involvement'.

The corollary of this is that museum personnel must be constantly aware of the impact of their actions on visitors. Placing the audience first means planning for choice. It also means recognising the rapid changes taking place in contemporary society and responding equally rapidly to these. This, in turn, has led me to re-imagine the museum of the future as a multiple-level experience. Theoretical background and approach are explored in my second book, *Transforming Museums for the 21st Century* (2012)*,* while the model was first published in a more recent book chapter (Black, 2014). It is these publications that have led to so many organisations asking me to give keynote papers.

I discuss my work in three phases, which reflect a coherent, chronological progression in both my practice and my writing. First, I explore the importance of planning, through what I have called 'Focus on the Concept: adapting the interpretive planning process to museum display'. Secondly, I examine the switch from the object-focused, didactic museum to one that is centred on audiences, which I have called 'Focus on the Audience: the engaging museum'. Finally, I look to my concerns for the future relevance of museums, which I have called 'Focus on the Future: museums in the Age of Participation'.

2. Focus on the Concept: adapting the interpretive planning process to museum display

I began my career, in 1973, as a field archaeologist. By 1978 I had realised that I preferred engaging people with the archaeology and its results to carrying out the excavations themselves. I moved into a curatorial role and, in 1984, became Senior Curator of Nottingham Castle Museum. At first I was able to concentrate on developing exhibitions. As the role became increasingly administrative, I left in 1988 to become an exhibition consultant.

My formative experiences began with the Story of Nottingham Gallery at Nottingham Castle. In the 1980s, at most museums worldwide, little attention was paid to researching the nature, needs, motivations and expectations of visitors. Nottingham Castle Museum was a publicly-funded, free admission site. It was taken for granted that people would come. There was little sense of arrival. Curators saw their primary purpose as being collections care and documentation. Visitors were left in the hands of museum attendant staff whose core function was (and is) security and who learned the job by 'buddying' experienced attendants (a guaranteed way to pass on bad habits). Exhibitions remained unchanged for many years (and still do).

The Story of Nottingham Gallery was a team development, drawing on the expertise of education and design staff from the outset; it also crossed over curatorial disciplines. Both factors were rare in museums in 1984. In other ways, we were behind the times, not least in audience research. We decided, on no evidential basis, that tourists would use the Gallery as an introduction to Nottingham, while local people would come back regularly to view different elements. Yet there was little provision made for families, or for schools. Nor was there any reference to diverse communities. There were no associated activities or programming, and no encouragement to 'find out more'. There was no scope for changing content. However, I am glad to say that the gallery did have some strengths. It incorporated the latest historical research (at the time), brought important objects out of store, made extensive use of historic maps and illustrations and applied an effective text

hierarchy throughout. But it was basically a classic didactic linear history, with single-voiced content and objects there largely to illustrate the story being told.

When I left Nottingham Castle in 1988, my first projects as a consultant were The Lace Hall (opened 1988) and The Tales of Robin Hood (opened 1989), both in Nottingham. These were heritage destinations which charged an entrance fee: this immediately ensured a different relationship with audiences. Both involved a capital spend far beyond my previous experience. Whilst the Story of Nottingham Gallery had cost well under £100,000, The Lace Hall cost c£1 million and The Tales of Robin Hood c£2.5 million. Both also involved much larger floor areas, the Tales in particular with nearly 2,000 square metres of publicly accessible space. Both projects received extensive and positive national media coverage and both won a series of national and regional awards.

Moving to sites that depended on admission fees led to a transformation in my attitude to audiences. Initially I concentrated on an understanding of basic market segmentation, but by the time The Tales opened in 1989 I had realised that knowing the types of people likely to come was not enough. What was really required was to understand the needs and expectations of the different audience segments, all part of a paying public who expected to enjoy themselves as well as learn and did not want the exhibition equivalent of an illustrated lecture. Effectively, while neither I nor they could voice it at the time, they expected an audience-centred approach to content creation, and one that worked for families as well as adults. This has been the focus of my work ever since and it has never been easy. In my innocence in 1989, I saw two potential routes forward: one within the museum education sector; and the other, entirely new to me, an alternative world of environmental interpretation.

The rise of learning as a core function of museums reflected the impact of the earlier new social history and societal upheavals of the 1960s. Vergo's edited volume *The New Museology* (1989) caught the mood, countering criticisms of the elitist nature of museums with a new focus on the visitor experience, on learning and on social access. This became important to me by the mid-1990s. However, in 1989, there was little dynamism from which to build. Instead I discovered Interpretation.

The origins of Interpretation lie in the environmental movement in the USA. John Muir, the founding father of the USA National Parks Service (NPS) and Enos Mills, the first writer to identify the role of the guide as an interpreter, were early pioneers. However, it was Freeman Tilden's influential book *Interpreting our Heritage* (1957) that first set down specific principles to follow. As with other interpreters, I condensed the principles down to three words, RELATE – PROVOKE – REVEAL, the basis of a very active visitor experience. Lewis (1980) built on this, emphasising the importance of self-referencing (relate the site to visitors' lives, interests, experiences and knowledge), questioning, the use of all the senses and learning through doing. The major contribution from Ham (1992) lay in the concept of the theme – the stories used to engage audiences with the subject matter, developed in a way that encouraged thought and wonder, and therefore led to meaning-making – so important to museums today. Veverka (1994) focused on the importance of planning.

Put all these elements together and you have the proven-in-practice basis for a totally different approach to museum exhibition development, focused on active visitor participation, physically and intellectually, but no one realised it at the time, and most museum professionals are still unaware of the debt they owe to the interpretation movement. When I 'discovered' interpretation in 1989, there was some use of interpretive approaches in UK national parks (beginning in the Peak District in the late 1960s), while local civic societies and other heritage bodies were developing guided tours, interpretation panels and self-guided trail leaflets around nature sites and what were beginning to be called 'historic urban quarters'. I became and remain an active member of the UK Association for Heritage Interpretation, being awarded a Fellowship in 2001. In 2012, I gave the keynote paper at the Association's annual conference.

I set out to apply the principles of interpretation to museum display, initially by developing and extending Veverka's interpretive planning framework to establish an approach to the creation of museum exhibitions which I called 'Concept Development'. This is the beginning of the creative process. It is largely concerned with the establishment of a central message, the development of the main themes and sub-themes that will engage audiences with that message, and agreement on

the order in which the stories will be told. Crucially, the theme and sub-themes must be something with which the audience can <u>relate</u> – back to core principles of interpretation, particularly the importance of self-referencing.

This planned approach must also take in key factors such as visitor routes. These determine the way in which the exhibition story can be told. This can be very complex in large and/or historic buildings. At The Galleries of Justice in Nottingham, we eventually took the decision to cut a tunnel through from court buildings at the front of the site to the prison at the rear as the only way of sensibly moving visitors around the site. The physical route through a building, however, is only one aspect. Exhibition layout has a major impact on visitor engagement: for example, is it to be a linear, chronological route through a history gallery or a central space with display modules around, etc.? The choice of approach will reflect the style of content: for example, linear exhibitions have a tendency towards the single-voiced didactic and, in history galleries, risk descent into triumphal progress. Modular and other forms of display require much better orientation. Layout will be finalised at design stage, but the museum's overall objectives from the route/layout will be agreed in this phase – and should take into account what research there is available on visitor behaviour in galleries (see below).

I applied the Concept Development approach to Thackray Medical Museum in Leeds (developed 1995-97) and the Galleries of Justice in Nottingham (phase one developed 1995 – 1998). Each museum initially cost over £3.5 million. The second phase of the Galleries of Justice (1998-2001), in which I again acted as interpretation consultant, cost a further £6.1 million. In it, I ensured that interpretive planning became an integral part of the overall project management of the scheme, and I have retained this approach in every scheme I have been involved with since. Phase two of the Galleries of Justice won the first £100,000 Museums Prize in 2003 (now the Art Fund Prize).

Importantly, I shared the experience through publication in 1999 and 2000. Re-reading 'Developing the Concept for the Thackray Medical Museum' (1999) reveals the extent to which I had already established a planning framework for exhibition development by 1995, and had already defined the cocktail of factors influencing the

concept, particularly the museum mission, collections, location, 'interpretive principles', structured educational use and 'visitor needs'. I was also already adapting the interpretive approach by adding display-related elements – very different to the needs of guided or self-guided tours - including the role of pacing in display development as a counter to 'museum fatigue' and a stimulus to fresh engagement, and the use of 'layering' to meet the needs of different users. All remain central to my work today.

'Quality and Concept Design' (2000) contains many of the elements I developed further in *The Engaging Museum*, particularly the planned nature of concept development; starting from the point of view of audiences and their needs, using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow 1954) as a framework; and an attempt to re-configure core interpretive principles to underpin not just concept development for museum display but the nature of the designed visitor experience.

Thus, by 2000 I had established my core theory and practice for the engaging museum, and had proven its effectiveness in two major museum developments. Interestingly, these two initial publications were in books targeted at the heritage tourism industry, not at museums. Both were used as case studies on graduate level tourism courses for a decade. I have retained my links with the tourism sector, acting as a referee for articles submitted to *Tourism Management.* My next planned publication is a chapter in an edited volume on heritage tourism, comparing and contrasting visitor research in museums with that carried out by tourism professionals and academics.

3. Focus on the Audience: the engaging museum

The idea of *The Engaging Museum* was formulated in 2004. By then I had been working part-time at Nottingham Trent University for nine years. I was there as a practitioner, giving vocational training to students on the MA Museum & Heritage Management course, but I was also able to make time for extensive reading and research visits. I could not find a publication that argued for, and gave practical guidance on, the types of audience-involving museums that I was trying to convince my students were the future of the profession. I could point them in the direction of numerous books and articles on aspects, for example the American Association of Museums (1995) on the changing nature of museums; Adams (2001) on the importance of visitor services; Durbin (1996), Anderson (1997), Hein (1998) and Hooper-Greenhill (2nd ed 1999) on museums as centres for informal learning; and Dodd & Sandell (1998) on museums and social inclusion. There was, however, nothing that I believed made the case for a holistic vision of a museum whose core sense of purpose was to actively engage and involve its audiences. The answer was to write it myself – not as a text book but as a proselytising manuscript that also happened to work in practice. An unexpected delay in my main consultancy project for the summer of 2004 gave me a two month opportunity. I wrote the first draft in that time, then sent it to Routledge. It was accepted within a week, and a final draft was completed for Christmas.

The Engaging Museum (2005) expressed a vision of the post-didactic museum, one which created learning environments in which visitors were actively engaged. Of course, the enhancement of knowledge was still a core objective, but with it hopefully came a deeper understanding resulting from direct participation, alongside a raft of other benefits ranging from the development of new skills to heightened levels of enjoyment (not surprisingly, aligned to then newly established generic learning outcomes). Most museums had spent most of their existence transmitting information to their supposedly passive audiences. My book gave formal recognition to what was a radical shift in museum behaviour – not alone of course, but more effective in being part of a wider movement. But it also made clear that exhibition

content and any associated programming was not enough. To be effective meant understanding and responding to the holistic nature of the museum experience:

- Providing the stimulus to visit in the first place - site image, quality of marketing and PR, word-of-mouth recommendation by previous visitors, prior personal experiences, supporting learning agendas, reflecting leisure trends, etc.
- Placing visitors in the 'right frame of mind' on site so that they wish to engage with collections and exhibitions - operational and service quality, sense of welcome and belonging.
- Providing the motivation and support to engage directly with the site and/or collection - quality of interpretation, learning provision and displays.

Black (2005: 75)

The book began, as I believe museums must, with an analysis of audiences, their needs, motivations and expectations. Museum visitor research is a relatively new activity and complexity of approach has taken time to develop. The bulk of museum visitor research is still carried out on a site-by-site basis and most lacks academic rigour. The information required covers who the audiences are, why they come, how they behave when in museum galleries and what their mechanisms are for learning in the museum. My approach was to establish an overview based around these issues and then develop a planned response targeted at enhancing opportunities for audience engagement. The book gave equal attention to the traditional museum audience of white, well-educated professionals and to the importance of reaching out to new audiences, including marginalised communities, and had a case study specifically looking at families.

 I then devoted two chapters to marketing and the importance of visitor services. I highlighted the poor quality of much museum operations management and emphasised how important these issues were in influencing the individual's or group's agenda – starting with whether they would want to visit at all. Effective marketing was essential:

- to persuade people that visiting museums will be a positive, enjoyable and relevant experience that will meet their needs and represent good use of their leisure time ('positioning the museum'); and
- to prepare visitors in advance so they are motivated to engage with collections and displays when they arrive ('Influencing the visitor agenda').

Black (2005: 77)

Meanwhile, visitor services remained a much neglected field. Although many museums – especially due to the impact of Heritage Lottery Fund grant aid – were busy transforming their physical product:

> There is still an additional lesson to be fully learned. If we truly seek to transform our museums, making them audience-centred, we must also transform the front-of-house staff who deliver so much of the service we provide.
>
> Black (2005: 97)

The following two chapters focused on informal and formal learning and, importantly, examined how the application of learning theory could influence approaches to museum display. I charted the growing importance of learning within the museum agenda to its recognition by most institutions as a core function and its close relationship with issues around access and social inclusion. I did not appreciate at the time that I was writing at the peak of a golden age for learning initiatives in museums, just before the financial crisis of 2007/8. However, I stand by my belief in the impact that museums can have on people's lives and, nine years on, museums can now highlight substantial evidence for this.

In the chapter on informal learning, I returned to the old didactic museum:

> This is a highly passive approach, from the museum audience point of view. The curator teaches, the visitors learn. In principle, the curator breaks the information to be conveyed down into small, digestible pieces arranged in a logical order, and the visitors absorb these unquestioningly, in the order and manner intended.
>
> Black (2005: 130)

I made clear that such exhibitions never worked as the curator intended:

> ... we know from visitor observation that the vast majority of visitors do not follow the exhibition content step-by-step, detail-by-detail, in the systematic manner in which it has been laid out. Rather, they create their own personal, exploratory routes, missing out elements, stopping at what interests them and moving on when they are ready, not necessarily after taking in all the material presented at that particular point.
>
> Black (2005: 148)

Recognising that individual visitors were creating their own learning route allowed me to examine what I saw as the personalised museum experience. I see visitor learning as place-specific, voluntary, exploratory and spontaneous. It is a recreational activity: people visit when and with whom they want, set their own agendas and pace, focus on what they want in the order they want it, and leave when they choose. Given that they have voluntarily chosen to come, bringing their own motivations and agendas, the informal learning that takes place will be a unique combination of the unintentional with the active and self-directed. The extent to which it is active and self-directed depends less on museum provision than on individual and social group motivations, preconceptions and learning capabilities and, as museum visiting is commonly a social event, on the desire to share experiences with others. My alternative to the didactic museum was based on the museum as enabler, supporter and stimulator – the engaging museum.

After a chapter on ensuring effective use of museums by schools through enquiry-based learning, the final four chapters concentrated on the creation of 'the engaging museum', concentrating on:

- the range and variety of museum experience elements that go together to create a quality visit
- the encouragement of direct visitor engagement with objects

Black (2005: 268)

I made clear that I saw the engaging museum as one that built on past experience. The role of museums in the 21st century is as it has always been, to collect the cultural memory of humankind, and of the world we live in, and then to seek contemporary ways to engage audiences with those collections and thereby make sense of the world. This never meant throwing out all that was good about past approaches to display, but instead the keeping of the best combined with the introduction of effective new methods, proven through research – and ones that reflected the changing expectations of western society. As has always been the case, the quality of the overall experience would then influence whether the visitor will return or will recommend the museum to others (Black, 2005: 267).

The first of the four chapters represented my attempt to adapt and apply the principles of interpretation to a museum exhibition context. I followed this with chapters on master planning and concept development before chapter 10 summarised the overall concept, focusing once again on the holistic approach to the visitor experience:

> In the past, the core public function of the museum was the creation of displays and the provision of public access to them. The display was both the primary feature of the museum and also the primary means by which the museum sought to engage audiences with its collections. In the 21st century museum, display will form only part of the visitor experience and will represent only one of the means used to respond to audience requirements...
>
> Black (2005; 268)

As I state in the introduction, the book – after a slow start – has become a best seller, used worldwide. I have never claimed a single way forward. Rather:

> The reality lies in defining the most appropriate way forward in your particular circumstances, and recognising that times and society have changed.
>
> Black (2005: 271)

The sheer diversity of museums is one of their great strengths. People can select what in the book is most relevant to them.

4. Focus on the Future: museums in the 'Age of Participation'

In 2008, the nature of Barack Obama's social media driven presidential campaign convinced me that western society was in the midst of a period of rapid change. It did not take me long to then recognise that museums were failing to keep up and were at risk of irrelevance. New, particularly mobile, technology had the potential to transform the relationship between museums and their traditional users, making content and participation, onsite and online, more accessible. Yet it was also making museums have to work harder to attract audiences – if we cannot meet their needs, they will go elsewhere, starting with the internet. To bring them to the museum required a profoundly different, much more participatory experience – one that involved creating new and more meaningful opportunities for engagement.

New media was clearly only one driver – generational shift and demographic change were also having a profound impact on wider society. Taken together with the state of the global economy and growing global environmental issues, these developments have been transformational. Whilst the impact was incremental, cumulatively the scale and speed of change has been akin to a perfect storm. I was one of a number of commentators on this phenomenon worldwide. Whilst we may have disagreed on priorities, what we all agreed on was the **urgency** of the need for the organisations we were involved with to change in response.

This urgent need to change drove the research for and writing of *Transforming Museums in the 21st Century* and has dominated my work since. I had first written that 'museums must change or die' in *The Engaging Museum* (Black, 2005: 267). Now it became the primary focus of my new book, and the title of the introduction (Black, 2012: 1).

The problem was that *Transforming Museums* was published during the continuing aftermath of the 2007/8 financial crisis. From 2010 - 2013, local authorities in England and Wales faced budget cuts of approaching 20%. Estimates for 2014-18 suggest further cuts of 30% - 40% are likely. These cuts have fallen heavily on non-

statutory services, such as museums. As museum managers have focused on survival in response to sustained cuts and associated policy change, most have failed to see that much more was involved than battening down the hatches. Local authorities could impose such severe cuts on museums because there was no major public outcry against them. This would suggest an urgent need for every museum to re-connect with its publics. In the period when I was writing *Transforming Museums,* its publication and the many papers and workshops I have given since, I have been trying to persuade museum managers that the changes museums need to make would be required even if there was not a financial crisis. My attempts to make this case have been made even more difficult by an apparent continuing rise in visitor numbers to English museums, for example with VisitEngland's annual attractions survey showing an increase of 4% in 2013.

However, I continue to stick to my argument that, while museums must find ways to cope with the disruptive change brought on by economic crisis, they need a transformation in how they are managed and operate, in what they offer to their users, and in their relationship with the communities they serve if they are to remain relevant in the face of rapid change in society at large. This means a complete re-think in the attitudes of the museum profession itself, if museums are to truly re-position themselves within society. I acknowledge that many museums appear not to have noticed this - they are comfortable in dealing with the past but seem to find the present and future much more difficult. It is profoundly depressing that the chief response by most UK museums to funding cuts has been to reduce their public offer and decimate the teams who engaged directly with the public. This is a return to the past when what museums actually need is ever closer involvement with their audiences.

There is clearly a tension here – what realistic choice does a museum manager have when faced with public sector cuts on the scale currently being imposed? Yet all the available evidence suggests the future of museums depends on a much more dynamic relationship with their audiences. In making the easy cuts to save museums for the present, managers are potentially denying them a realistic future. This goes beyond public content to impact on the whole manner in which a museum operates. I elicited the following comment from Tim Reeve, Chief Operating officer of the

Victoria & Albert Museum, for an article in the V&A Annual Review 2013 - 2014: 'Museums must get away from the more rigid and old-fashioned operating models, and be structurally much more dynamic and open to change on a regular basis, as society itself continues to change' (Black 2014: 68). This is the real way museums need to move forward. The way collections are managed and their stories prioritised, the staff structure and the operational model of most museums belong to an age long past, and tied to this often comes responsibility for the expensive maintenance of historic buildings that do not meet modern requirements. To prosper, museums must break out of these shackles.

Meanwhile, many of those museum professionals, academics and commentators who <u>have</u> recognised the need for change and sought to plot the future role of museums in 21st century society have focussed on social responsibility, with museums cast as agents of social change and promoters of health and well-being. This can be seen, for example, in the UK Museums Association's *Museums Change Lives* initiative (2013), in the Alberta Museums Association's *Sustainability Report and Recommendations* (2012)*,* in Alison Bodley's *History to Health* (2012) report for Arts Council England, in the UK *Happy Museum* project and in the writings of luminaries like Richard Sandell (e.g. 2012), Lois Silverman (e.g. 2010) and Robert R. Janes (e.g. 2009). *The Social Value of Museums* is also the theme for the 2015 annual conference of the American Alliance of Museums.

Whilst recognising the important social role museums can play, I have travelled a different route. My fear remains that the next generation of the traditional audiences for museums will find new ways beyond the museum walls to gain what the present generation currently seek from museums. My priority has, therefore, been to devise ways in which museums can successfully both retain and expand use of their sites by their primary audiences. In *Transforming Museums*, when looking at the changing nature of 'traditional' museum audiences, I spoke of how 'many people today increasingly refuse to be passive recipients of whatever governments, companies or cultural institutions like museums offer but instead seek to be active members of what Scott McNealy, then chairman of Sun Microsystems, declared to be "the Age of Participation"' (Black 2012: 3; McNealy, 2005: no page number).

As with *The Engaging Museum, Transforming Museums* therefore began by focusing on audiences. To ensure continuing relevance in the current fast-changing societal environment, the starting point for museums should be to get to know their existing audiences much better, develop a much more sophisticated understanding of their needs and motivations and then create museum content and programming to exceed these. This is not a chore but, rather, a remarkable opportunity to convert museum audiences from one-off visitors into regular users. It is also not just a numbers issue: it is through regular engagement with museum content that meaningful learning takes place. If we believe in the power of museums as learning institutions and the ability of cultural learning to change lives, a primary focus should be on making the museum experience something that people come back to time and again.

In *Transforming Museums,* I placed much more emphasis than in my previous publications on the motivations behind museum visits, highlighting the social nature of the visit and promoting museums as centres for social learning. Tying motivation into the concept of the 'Age of Participation' led me to explore the importance of active user involvement, promoting participative exhibits and stimulating user generated contributions. Mostly, I focused on the age-old technology of conversation and explored ways of stimulating this, and associated reflection. I wrote of:

> ... the mental image I have of the user's voice sitting at the heart of the engaging museum – the buzz of conversation and discussion amongst museum audiences as they encounter and respond to the objects and other content within the museum, as they interact with each other and as they contribute to content. In such a museum, staff will recognise the museum visit as a conversation between the collections, the users and the museum rather than viewing users as empty vessels to be filled with didactic content.
>
> Black (2012: 143)

However, I also recognised the impact of new technology. I discussed how museums operate in a world where at least their younger audiences already take material online and actively share, sort, classify, collaboratively re-think, re-classify, re-publish and re-use it as they see fit. We need to apply their expectations to our museums and also recognise the expertise that many visitors can bring.

This in turn brings us to the hairy old issue of the need for museums to share authority for content. Not surprisingly, museums have always been highly protective of their reputations while individual curators, like most professionals, are not readily willing to abandon their cognitive authority. Both these factors can lead to a failure to free up the museum visit to give users more control of their own outcomes, opportunities to contribute directly to content and the potential to influence the nature and ethos of the organisation itself. Yet none of this denies the role of the museum in developing and transmitting knowledge. It is largely a paper problem, not a real one. Audiences will continue to want to hear the authoritative voice of the museum. What they increasingly will not do is accept museums as authoritarian – they will expect to have the opportunity to reflect on and respond to that voice.

However, in focusing on traditional audiences, I also recognised the potential importance of museums as social welfare institutions and the need to reach out to marginalised communities. In chapter 8 I turned to new audiences, building on what I had previously written in *The Engaging Museum*, and focusing on the role museums could play in enhancing the participation of marginalised communities within wider society. I wrote of the enormous potential that new audiences offered. A museum, committed to partnership with its communities, will break the stranglehold of its physical site and restricted opening hours and reach outwards, beyond its walls, housed collections, 'safe' history and traditional audiences (Black, 2012: 217). As such, museums can become 'third places', non-threatening environments in which they can work with their communities to develop partnerships that promote dialogue, build community capacity and support civil engagement. I had set out principles underpinning the museum's potential role as a catalyst for civil engagement in an earlier article (Black 2010). This had received considerable attention in the USA, and has been reproduced in an edited volume used by many museum studies programmes there and in Canada (Anderson 2012). I expanded considerably on it in *Transforming Museums*, in particular using a framework of civil dialogue goals developed by the *Animating Democracy* project of Americans for the Arts (Korza et al 2005) to focus on case studies of museums working in this field worldwide (Black, 2012: pp224-237).

My work did not stop with *Transforming Museums* but instead expanded exponentially. The book struck a chord with museum professionals and I have since been invited to give a wide range of keynote papers. Preparing these, and taking part in discussions after giving the papers, has seen my ideas continue to develop. In particular, I have more fully recognised the range of ways in which users can engage with museums, and also the importance of developing pathways to support people as they become more deeply involved. One result has been my proposal for a multiple-platform museum offer, published in 2014, and outlined in figure 4.1 below. A multiple-platform museum, as well as meeting the growing expectations of traditional audiences, also ensures scope for the representation, inclusion and multiple perspectives of others.

Figure 4.1 A multiple-platform museum experience

Personalise: Audience adapts to personal needs
Enjoy: Watch, listen, read
Engage: More pro-actively involved, talk about the experience
Participate: Use participative exhibits
Take part in programmes
Contribute: User-generated content (on-site, online)
Crowd-sourcing (including community and niche-sourcing)
Co-create/co-curate: Associated particularly with community engagement

Like *The Engaging Museum, Transforming Museums* was a moment in time – a point where I sought to write down my ideas and support them with an overview of as broad a range of other authors' work and of relevant case studies as possible. I am delighted that it is selling as well as *The Engaging Museum* but frustrated by the failure of my profession to recognise fully the precariousness of their position and the urgency with which they need to initiate change. Rather than developing dynamic, creative responses to what are largely positive pressures for change from people who want to be more deeply involved, there is a deep uncertainty. They know they must define and adapt to their future roles by establishing what is meant by museum practice for the 21st century – yet most remain vague, at best, about this. They cannot afford to be.

5. Conclusion

This introductory chapter has been written to meet the submission requirements of a PhD by published works. I have sought to explore the significance of the submitted works and also to show the interrelationship between them as a coherent body of work. When you write for a practitioner audience, it can be difficult to prove impact – practitioners rarely publish, so citations can be hard to find. I feel fortunate in the variety of material I can point to, but frustrated that I can rarely highlight examples of my specific planning approaches being used by others in their exhibition development – the one exception being for the Art Prize award-winning re-display of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (Parsons 2014). The reality is that I always expected people to select the elements of my work that were most relevant to them.

I have not, of course, attempted to give a full account of my work. That would be impossible within the word count available. Whilst this introduction has focused on enhancing the informal learning experience in museums for the traditional, well educated, professional audience who make up the bulk of museum visitors, I have also worked to transform schools use of museums and to encourage more marginalised users to cross the museum threshold. I am committed to the museum's wider roles in society: as a representation of the cultural memory of humankind; as a social institution that can give strength to communities and support civil engagement; as a source of inspiration; and as part of that societal infrastructure that is simply there as a public good. It matters to me personally as well as professionally. As a teenager from the Shankhill Road in Belfast, the Ulster Museum truly took me out of myself. I want to give others the same opportunity that I had.

I have also developed new concerns, firstly with what I am currently calling the 'mainstream non-visitor'. By this I mean those who are not socially excluded or otherwise marginalised within mainstream society, but who state that they are basically not interested in museums. At an informed guess, well over 30% of western populations fall into this category. Engaging these audiences with what museums have to offer – and at a time of continuing budget cuts - is an enormous challenge. Yet it is a topic that seems to attract little attention amongst museum professionals – it is a veritable black hole in terms of audience development initiatives, and may well

be a class issue (see, for example, Bennett et al, 2009). It is not that I believe that working class people are not interested in their heritage – that is a nonsense. Rather, that they are sourcing their heritage away from museums – certainly within family and community and perhaps elsewhere. The question is what museums can do to work with them. I potentially need to expand my multiple-level model to incorporate this – a reflection of the fact that this introductory chapter does not record something that is over, but simply reflects a stage in the continuing development of my work.

My other concern lies with whether we actually need many of our museum buildings and permanent displays anymore. What happens if the museum breaks out of its isolation as a specific type of cultural institution and instead partners others? There is already so much inspirational work happening beyond the museum walls – and the mobile phone remains a natural model for transformation from single use to multiple purpose. This is likely to be a major focus within my next book.

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