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Museums and tourism: time to make friends

Introduction

This chapter discusses the potential to further develop the partnership between the fields of museums and heritage tourism in England, making it more than a marriage of convenience. There is a long-standing, symbiotic relationship between the two fields but, for much of the time, it has been an uneasy and fragmented one. The problem starts at the centre of UK government, with heritage and tourism coming under separate state departments. Meanwhile, trained separately and with a different ethos, many museum staff view tourist bodies as seeking to commodify the past and interested purely in profit – '.... the past is treated as a commodity to be bought and sold as part of the contemporary tourist industry....' - while many tourism personnel see museums (and other heritage destinations) as amateurs in their operation and, particularly, in the management of visitors.[1]

However, severe reductions in public subsidy since the financial crisis of 2007/8 have placed publicly funded museums and heritage sites in England under immense pressure to increase visitor numbers and grow income from them, including expanding corporate usage and developing their role as tourist destinations – while the very act of attracting tourist audiences has helped to legitimise the museums in the eyes of their political masters. In addition, increasing museum focus on audiences has led to a coming together with tourism bodies around a shared need to better understand the motivations and expectations of their users and respond innovatively to these.

Many UK museums, including national museums in London and sites in classic tourist destinations, such as the Roman Baths Museum in Bath or the Bronte Parsonage Museum in Haworth, work hard in collaboration with tourism bodies to ensure that they meet

the perceived needs of the tourists (both international and national) who make up a large percentage of their audiences. While museums in established tourist regions like Cornwall, the Peak District, the Lake District and Yorkshire have long been active members of partnerships developing tourism in their areas, this has now expanded to every region of the country. Even the UK Museums Association (the 'trade body' for museum professionals) has got in on the act, devoting the March 2015 issue of its online publication *Museum Practice* to museums and tourism.[2]

But all is not sweetness and light, with conflict in particular over the use of scarce resources to support tourism rather than museum work with local residents. For example, VisitEngland recorded a 4% increase in visitor numbers to museums in 2014[3]. However, much of this increase can be placed at the door of growing overseas tourism to London. Four of the top five and six of the top ten visitor attractions in England (and, for that matter, in the UK) are national museums in London – and these museums have become markedly entrepreneurial: '…, working together to improve destination marketing and the visitor experience'[4]. They work closely with VisitBritain and London and Partners, and put considerable effort into raising their profile abroad through touring exhibitions, links to international media, etc. This has helped boost visits to London national museums by foreign tourists by almost 40% since 2008/9, while visits from within the UK have increased by just 3% during this same period[5].

Box 1: National Museums in London: visitor data 2013-14

Museum	**Total visitors 2014**	**% from overseas**
British Museum	6,695,213	58%

National Gallery	6,416,724	61%
Tate Modern	5,785,427	50% for group
Natural History Museum	5,388,295	48%
Science Museum	3,356,072	27% for group
V&A South Kensington	3,180,450	47%
National Portrait Gallery	2,062,502	40%
National Maritime Museum	1,516,258	46% for National Museums Greenwich
Tate Britain	1,357,878	Part of Tate group
Imperial War Museum London	914,774	37%

Sources: Association of Large Visitor Attractions2015[6] and DCMS 2015[7]

The percentages for overseas visitors at Tate, the Science Museum and Imperial War Museum shown in Box 1 will be underestimates as they represent groups of museums which include sites located outside London. And we also know that recent substantial rises in visits by international tourists to the National Gallery and Tate Modern in London masked a steep decline in visits to these institutions by UK nationals.[8] As one element of public funding for national museums, the culture budget subsidizes the nationals by c£130m a year specifically

to provide free admission and thus encourage increased access by UK citizens. [9] In practice, it is subsidizing London tourism at a time when culture budgets across the regions are being slashed. And this destruction of regional budgets for culture is taking place against a backdrop of spend on culture by Arts Council England and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport at £69 per head in London and £4.58 in the rest of England - with these figures becoming even more extreme when lottery funding is taken into account.[10]

Despite such issues, museums and the heritage tourism industry need each other. I believe the best way to ensure long-term partnerships is to embed their relationship in a clear understanding of the fundamental interests that the two fields share, over and above getting visitors out of London. The remainder of this chapter concentrates on core areas where shared research would be of major benefit: the changing nature of audiences; audience attitudes to the museum experience; the leisure imperative; the complexity of motivation; the continuing role of learning; and what the future might hold.

Audiences: the 'new consumer'

> ... all our traditional arts organisations were developed in very different times, for audiences very different from those we address now.[11]

It is in the public dimension – their users – that museums and tourism bodies have most in common. And, despite growing diversity, the 'traditional' audience across the developed world, for both heritage tourism and museums, is identical: white, middle class, well-educated professionals, their families and their friends. The term 'traditional', however, is increasingly meaningless as the audiences it refers to, for both museums and heritage tourism generally, are in the midst of rapid change. In my book *Transforming Museums in the 21st Century*, I argued that museums must transform themselves if they are to remain relevant to twenty-first century audiences. I spoke of new media, generational shift and demographic

change having a profound impact on wider society, and specifically on the expectations of museum visitors. Whilst the impact was incremental, cumulatively the scale and speed of change has been akin to a perfect storm.

My core concern was that these societal changes would lead to a decline in attendance at museums and galleries. In English terms, this has been a hard case to make, as the government's *Taking Part* survey showed a steady increase from 42% of the population in 2006/7 to 52% in 2013 visiting a museum and gallery at least once a year. [12] This contrasts with the USA, where the *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts 2012* charted a decline in art museum attendance from 26% of the population in 2002 to 21% in 2012.[13] The European Union's *Special Eurobarometer 399: Cultural Access and Participation* reported that, since 2007, there had been a general decline in participation in most cultural activities, including only 37% of European citizens visiting museums or galleries, down from 41%.[14]

The impact of tourism figures, including visitors from overseas, is clearly an important factor for museum and gallery attendance, and represents one hole in my 2012 discussion of attendance levels. Another concerns the influence of the Heritage Lottery Fund, in terms of substantial increases in attendance at larger regional museums where there has been major capital funding. In contrast, small museums and those larger institutions that have been starved of investment, or where the investment took place some time ago, appear to have suffered declines, although detailed data is difficult to acquire.

However, an even bigger hole in my discussion of the changing nature of audiences was a failure to consider the wider transformation of 'traditional' museum visitors into the new, or post-modern, consumer. Tourism bodies and academics such as Sharpley had become increasingly aware of this phenomenon by the mid-1980s, focusing on the need to develop new tourism products. [15] They spoke of a developing emphasis on choice and variety, of seeking new experiences, and of growing levels of sophistication driven by a highly

informed, well-educated, media-savvy and extensively travelled audience – all underpinned by rising income, the primary driver of modern western society.

Poon defined the characteristics of the new tourist consumer as being more experienced; undergoing changing lifestyles and changing values; and having more flexibility.[16] Middleton, commenting on museum futures, spoke of the British population, in common with other developed nations, becoming more affluent, better educated, more healthy, older and with a particular shift in the number and attitudes of the over 50s. They were also more leisured and travelled; and more computer literate, heterogeneous and culturally diverse. He suggested all of this added up to a group of consumers who were more diverse, demanding, quality conscious and sophisticated.[17] Yeoman discussed an emboldened consumer-citizen, a more demanding, sophisticated and informed actor with intensified expectations of, for instance, quality innovation and premium choices in every market; of efficient and ever more personalised customer service.[18] Meanwhile, research in the UK, the USA and the European Union spoke consistently of the increasingly fragmented leisure time of this audience, due not least to the work commitments of dual income homes and an accelerating pace of life.[19]As a result, the key reason the new consumers gave for not visiting museums and galleries was that they did not have the time (e.g. Aust & Vine, 2007, NEA 2015). [20] And the chief reasons they gave for visiting museums were social and recreational. As early as 1986 Roger Miles, writing about visitors to the Natural History Museum in London, contrasted the museum's attitude to its visitors with that of the visitors themselves:

> *The 'Scholarly' Perception.* This is based on funding the Museum as a place of learning rather than of leisure. The Museum is concerned with education, which is seen as a strait-laced matter involving principally the memorising of facts that are obtained by examining the objects on show and by reading their captions.
> *The 'Visitor' Perception.* In the eyes of the lay public a visit to the British Museum (Natural History) is a social event... Three quarters of the visitors come with family or with friends... They perceive the museum as a place of entertainment, and no firm distinction is to be drawn between recreation and education.[21]

Numerous studies since have confirmed the priority given to the museum visit as a social occasion. For example, *When Going gets Tough* (2015) reported that 73% of Americans put socializing with friends or family as their top reason for attending any arts event or exhibition.[22] And what this means for expectations of the museum or heritage tourism visit is that much more attention should be given to the development of high quality social, recreational and participatory (including new media) experiences – matching the lifestyles of the new consumers. Underpinning this, museums and heritage sites need to re-envisage themselves as leisure and social destinations – and recognise that, as such, they must be able to compete with other forms of leisure provision.

The Museum Experience

The classic curatorial definition of the museum experience focuses on the visitor's direct engagement with objects or artworks in the collections. They speak of the 'real thing' – the objective authenticity of the collections – as the central draw for visitors. In an idealised museum world, the immediacy of this engagement would lead to a deep and meaningful learning experience for the visitor – a unique experience that cannot be replicated elsewhere.[23]

Falk and Dierking's seminal text *The Museum Experience* was the first major museum publication to explore the experience from the visitor's point of view, placing engagement with objects within the visitor's personal, social and physical contexts and developing their 'interactive experience model' as 'a framework for making sense of both the common strands and the unique complexities of the museum experience, the similarities and differences among museums and among visitors'.[24] They recognised that 'Each museum visitor's personal context is unique...'; that 'Visits to museums occur within a social context...'; and that 'The Museum is a physical setting that visitors, usually freely, *choose* to enter'. Their

model was based on the recognition that '... the interaction of these [contexts] creates the visitor's experience'.

However, the continuing definition of the visitor experience, by museum professionals, as largely learning-driven led museums to develop and apply measurable learning objectives for the visitor. Linked to central government funding in the New Labour era, museums were expected to develop these objectives, and the means of evaluating them, to justify continued grant aid. Learning was defined as 'a process of active engagement with experience'[25], and five user-centred 'Generic Learning Outcomes' were established to evaluate against: knowledge and understanding; skills; attitudes; enjoyment, inspiration and creativity; and action, behaviour and progression. A series of outcomes was listed under each field (see www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk).[26]

This evaluative approach has proven a useful tool to support the evaluation of the impact of formal learning sessions and programmed activities. It has been much less effective in evaluating the informal learning of casual museum visitors. The trouble is that visitors do not explore museum displays in the focused manner that some curators expect:

> [...] 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.[27]

As Rounds points out, this can lead to curatorial judgements of visitors as non-diligent, unfocused, unsystematic, random and haphazard meanderers.[28] There is an alternative explanation – and one that seems much more likely, given that we recognise traditional visitors as well-educated professionals – which is that they are choosing how they use their museum visit, and are doing so from the premise that they are on a leisure outing. Such informal, non-captive, social audiences have always been wonderfully anarchic. They come when they want, set their own agendas, do what they want and leave when they want. Their

museum experience is voluntary, exploratory, spontaneous, and often unintentional. But the end result is that, either individually or in their family and social groups, they effectively have always created their own, personalised museum experience, including discovery, but firmly leisure-based.

The Leisure Imperative

What do we mean by the contemporary museum as a leisure destination? Stephen points to Shaw's description of the qualities of a leisure experience: 'These include, among others, such phenomena as enjoyment, freedom, relaxation, personal growth and social interaction—qualities which can readily be derived, it should be noted, in a museum environment.'[29]

He highlights the ancillary spaces and activities now seen as essential in larger museums: the quality restaurant and shop, the theatre with lectures, film, and live performance, the evening openings and activities, the external plaza for promenading and events – and points to the Pompidou Centre, established in 1977, open late into the evening, 'filled with life, food and drink' and with an animated external plaza in which to meet as the precursor of this model.[30]

Quality, not price, is the key. Destinations must now match the lifestyle expectations of the new consumers. It is no surprise that Tate Modern was an immediate success and that the Great Court at the British Museum has become a 'place to meet' – or that Chris Dercon, Director of Tate Modern, when he announced a £215m extension in 2011, said: 'The museum is not just about viewing and judging objects but mental and bodily exercises - we want to provide a new form of social space for interactions'.[31] And we can see the impact of this approach in regional art galleries like Hepworth Wakefield, Nottingham Contemporary and Turner Art Centre Margate.

Motivation

How do we analyse the impact of multiple motivational factors on the museum visit? With socializing as a primary motivation, but learning or personal development an important element and the physical context including its authenticity also an influence, the museum experience is complex and multi-dimensional,[32] but with a potentially enduring impact – much as Sharpley and Stone[33] or Page[34] recognise the contemporary heritage tourism experience. Being multi-dimensional, however, makes it extremely difficult to define motivation, because this will be both multiple and unique to the individual or group. Yet, as motivation is directly linked to the strategies that visitors apply on site, museums need some form of segmentation by motivation to allow them to plan the most effective way of supporting the visit. The National Trust has broken its audience down into seven broad segments as a basis for its interpretation, outlined in Box 2 below:

Box 2: National Trust for England visitor profiling

Out and About: Spontaneous people who prefer chance encounters to making firm plans and love to share their experiences with friends.

Young Experience Seekers: People who are open to challenge, in a physical or horizon-broadening sense; they make and take opportunities in their journey of personal discovery.

Curious Minds: Active thinkers, always questioning and making connections between the things they learn. They have a wide range of interests and take positive steps to create a continual flow of intellectual stimuli in their lives.

Live Life to the Full: Self-driven intellectuals, confident of their own preferences and opinions and highly independent in their planning and decision making; these people are always on the go.

Explorer Families: Families that actively learn together, the adults will get as much out of their experience as the children. To fit in the interests of all family members planning, sharing and negotiation are essential.

Kids First Families: Families who put the needs of the children first and look for a fun environment where children are stimulated and adults can relax; they're looking for a guaranteed good time.

Home and Family: Broad groups of friends and family who gather together for special occasions. They seek passive enjoyment of an experience to suit all tastes and ages.

National Trust (2004)[35]

The word 'tourist' does not appear here. Unlike most local authority museums, who tend to lump tourists together as a broad heading, the National Trust understands that day trippers and tourists are its life-blood, and that their motivations are broadly similar to local visitors. In reality, all of these segments would be recognisable to tourism professionals.[36]

The Trust's segmentation contrasts positively with McKercher and du Cros and their five types of cultural tourists, outlined in Box 3 below, as it assigns a more active role to visitors in defining and pursuing their own museum experiences.

Box 3: Five types of cultural tourists

1. The *purposeful cultural tourist* – cultural tourism the primary motive
2. The *sightseeing cultural tourist* – cultural tourism still a major reason, but the experience is more shallow
3. The *serendipitous cultural tourist* – does not travel for cultural tourism reasons but ends up having a deep cultural tourism experience
4. The *casual cultural tourist* – cultural tourism a weak motive and the resulting experience shallow
5. The *incidental cultural tourist* – does not travel for cultural tourism purposes, but engages in some activities and has shallow experiences.

McKercher and du Cros[37]

The Future

If leisure is the primary motivation, what role is there for learning in the 21st century museum? McPherson speaks of a move from a predominantly educative leisure and recreation role towards pleasure management[38], while Packer suggests the museum may be more fittingly an 'educational leisure setting' than an 'informal learning setting'.[39] However, these suggestions again ascribe a predominantly passive role to the visitor. If we instead acknowledge that visitors have their own agendas and actively seek to implement them, we will see that the first five of the National Trust's segments and at least the purposeful cultural tourist from McKercher and du Cros will still expect a positive, largely self-directed learning experience. The role of the museum – as it always has been – is to support these visitors by developing contemporary ways to engage audiences with its collections and thereby make sense of the world. And in our 'new visitor-consumer'/post-modern world, the role of the museum is no longer to tell people stuff – they can find out on Google anyhow. Rather it is to

create an engaging environment where visitors can develop their understanding through social activity - relaxation, conversation, social interaction, participation, collaboration, contribution:

> Too often, the future is seen as indecipherable or unpredictable, so decisions are based on a tacit assumption that the conditions of the future will be the same as the past. Ironically, the one thing we can *guarantee* is that our world is changing and the future is certain to bring with it different business conditions, market opportunities, competitive threats and consumer desires.[40]

> We are witnessing a complete renovation of our cultural infrastructure. Those 'bricks and mortar' culture houses, citadels of experience, towers of inspiration, that for so long have stood steadfast as symbols of cultural continuity and comfort, while the streets around them have whizzed and clattered to multiple disruptive transformations, are being turned inside out [...] this wholesale renovation is born out of an urgent requirement to change or die, and it is just beginning.[41]

Here we have two very different quotes, one business-like from a professor of tourism futures, the other much more emotive prose from a commentator on arts and culture in the UK. Both speak of the urgent need for change.

We have two English case studies for changing institutions in the immediate future. The first – Tate Modern and other related galleries, with their increased focus on the social/leisure/consumer side of the visit - was discussed above. The second is the National Trust for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the largest voluntary conservation organisation in the world. It cares for over 300 historic houses and gardens, and 600,000 acres of countryside including 700 miles of coastline. More than 150 of its sites are accredited museums, making the National Trust also the largest museum authority in the UK. It has over 17 million visits to its pay-to-enter sites each year, and over 50 million to its countryside. More than 60,000 volunteers help its work.[42]

During the 'noughties' the Trust carried out a major review of the way its membership was going and of visitor patterns to its houses, and decided it had to change to meet the needs of future users. In 2010 it launched its new *'2020 Vision'*, with the sub-theme of *'Going*

Local'.[43] The central challenge it set itself was to have 5 million members by 2020 – in 2010 it had 2.5 million, already the largest such figure for a heritage charity in the world. 'Going Local' focused on the ability of individual properties to attract return visitors, rather than one-offs, and so persuade more people to remain members of the Trust when they had visited all their local sites. To support this new vision, the Trust re-structured its national and regional management and gave more power to individual properties. It also placed a new emphasis on audience enjoyment, while recognising that not all audiences were the same. Using five years of visitor research, it re-segmented its visitors by motivation, as discussed above, and then set each property the challenge of targeting their offer at three specific segments. What has been really fascinating has been their '*bringing the property to life'* theme for the interpretation of individual properties, based around spirit of place and the visitor experience, and the strategic way in which they have used a series of interpretive techniques. Crucially, the Trust recognised that delivery of the vision would require a sustained effort over a long time frame (2010-2020), but by late 2014 they had already achieved over 4 million members. The message is that, if the National Trust can turn itself around, anyone can. It requires research, a clear and shared sense of purpose and vision, strategic planning, the commitment of all involved and time.

Yet, the Trust's planning still seems geared to the current, as if the future will largely continue to repeat the present. In particular, their mainstay adult audience, the 'Curious Minds', is mostly seen as over 50 years old but still intellectually active, and bears a remarkable similarity to the 'baby boomer' generation. The last of the baby boomers passed the age of 50 in 2014, and will reach the traditional UK retirement age of 65 in 2029. Their availability in retirement, relative wealth, educational status and mobility will continue to have a profound impact on demand, and thus on the nature of museum and tourism provision, for the foreseeable future.

But, what happens when we reach a stage beyond what can be readily predicted from current trends? Given that major museum developments regularly take ten or more years to complete and then, of course, remain in situ for substantial periods after that, museums (and heritage tourism) should already be planning for 2030. Will the rising middle classes within the UK's diverse communities want the same heritage experience as the baby boomers or something very different? Will the generations who have followed after the baby boomers find new ways beyond museum walls to gain something distinct from what the baby boomers currently seek? Will the museum and tourism fields be able to predict and develop new products to meet differing demands?

All the available evidence suggests the future of museums, and potentially of heritage tourism, depends on maintaining an authentic experience but developing a much more dynamic relationship with users - with greater freedom of choice, customisation and individual service, opportunities for participation and the widespread use of wearable technology rather than hand-held devices.[44] Museums already operate in a world where at least younger users believe museum collections are cooperatively owned, and take material online to actively share, sort, classify, collaboratively re-think, re-classify, re-publish and re-use as they see fit – and also expect the opportunity to contribute to content. To bring them on board requires a profoundly different, much more participatory experience – one that involves creating new and more meaningful opportunities for engagement and open opportunities to contribute and perhaps co-produce.

This matches the future directions proposed for heritage tourism. Moscardo references the work of psychologist Ellen Langer on mindfulness and proposes that the most appropriate goal of interpretation is to encourage visitors to be mindful. [45] Sharpley and Stone suggest 'we have now moved into the era of the co-production of tourist experiences [...] in which tourists play a more active role in creating their desired experiences'.[46] Prat and Aspiunza

speak of the present as a period when 'the tourist no longer has a passive role [...] the opportunity for co-creating and living meaningful tourist experiences'.[47] This all suggests a continuing search for the novel and the innovative supported by super-abundant choice, the ability to customise your experience to meet your personal needs, opportunities for active participation, the ever-expanding use of new technology and an underpinning of authenticity – all within a framework that reflects the lifestyles of those involved. Will museums be able to rise to this challenge?

Like the tourism industry, museums are now in the people business and must face up to the need for continuing change, to reflect the speed with which their audiences are changing, or lose relevance and die. This stark choice would still be there even if the current financial crisis had not occurred. Some of the change required is already being faced and responded to by the heritage tourism industry. Given that heritage tourism relies on museums and heritage sites to provide much of the core content that the tourist product can be built around, it is in everyone's interest to learn and work together – and everyone will benefit from shared research. Now is a perfect time to make this happen.

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