

## ARTICLE

# Engaging Audiences with Difficult Pasts: The Voices of '68 Project at the Ulster Museum, Belfast

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**Abstract** Can history museums influence the relationship between divided communities? This paper explores why an initially modest collaboration between the authors and the Ulster Museum on the non-violent Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement of 1968/69, eventually had substantial impact beyond the museum's walls. Having placed the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement within the context of both the international protests of 1968 and the specific environment of Northern Ireland, particularly the virtual civil war known as the Troubles, the paper turns to the role of museums in responding to the legacy of this past, and the evolving practice of the Ulster Museum, as background to the project. The latter began as a limited intervention within an existing display, based on oral histories and underpinned by the theory of 'agonism', proposing that divided communities must learn to live with difference. It eventually included exhibitions, workshops, school study days, curricular materials and online provision. It has directly influenced the Northern Ireland GCSE History Curriculum and been held up as an example of good practice within the province's peace process. The paper discusses why the project succeeded – location within a national museum; credibility with protagonists, academics, communities and audiences; starting small; a willingness to take risks and share control; multiple perspectives; and an acceptance that not everyone will be satisfied. With a version of the *Voices of '68* exhibition now installed in the Museum's permanent gallery, the next challenges are longitudinal studies on its impact and assessing the approach's relevance to other museums working in post-conflict societies.

## INTRODUCTION: THE SOCIAL ROLE OF THE MUSEUM

As contemporary museums move from a focus on objects and collections to one that is audience-centred, they are increasingly taking on a more active role in society (Janes 2009; Janes and Sandell 2019; Silverman 2010).<sup>1</sup> Seeing themselves as institutions which serve the public, many have come to accept 'an ethical and moral responsibility to take actions to make the world better [...] stronger, more just' (Anderson 2019,

p. 1). As such, they seek to use their unique qualities to make a meaningful difference to the lives of individuals, to communities, to society at large – to contribute to public understanding of issues that profoundly matter to this world. And museums can do this in ways that actively engage and involve contemporary audiences 'in shaping the way we see, think about and act towards others and the world around us' (Janes and Sandell 2019, p. xxvii). But, to do so, takes the museum beyond the safety of its walls and its so-called neutrality to work purposefully to bring about

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change – behaviour which not long ago would have been considered inappropriately political.

History museums have specific potential. Because the public at large recognise museums as trustworthy, authentic and credible (Britain Thinks 2013), history in a museum that challenges peoples' outlook can begin to counter myth and invention, nostalgia, the false, the romanticised, the unchallenging, the selective, the biased. Crucially, this ensures that the history museum can work with local communities to explore the relationship between the past and the present and can engage people meaningfully in debates about the future – and in this way act as a facilitator for the social and political development of those communities (Crooke 2007). This is particularly important where those communities are divided by a shared but conflictual past.

All communities have potentially toxic parcels of disputed history. These 'Difficult histories describe memories of pain, suffering, oppression and grief. . . [they are] emotive [. . .]' (Rose 2016, p.4). Evidence worldwide suggests that for communities to move forward, these issues have to be tackled. A crucial aspect of this is 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung' or 'coming to terms with the past' – once voted the most beautiful word in the German language. For the Akan people of Ghana, it is 'Sankofa', roughly 'to go forward, you must first go to the past' – you must be able to accommodate the past if you are to have a better future.

But can history museums really engage communities with difficult pasts in ways that, while not necessarily leading directly to change, at least encourage understanding? This paper is a response to that question, based on the example of a collaborative National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI) project on Northern Ireland's 1968 and the subsequent *Voices of '68* exhibitions held at the Ulster Museum, Belfast, and almost forty touring destinations in the UK,

Ireland, mainland Europe, and the USA during 2018–2019. The project set out to challenge assumptions about history as a seamless march forward and thus about the inevitability of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, restoring a sense of human agency. This, in turn, would open opportunities for creative dialogue that demonstrate how 'You cannot change the past, but with understanding you can sometimes draw the poison out of it' (Gebler 2007, p. 305).

### NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE LEGACY OF THE PAST

The people of Northern Ireland are divided between two traditions, those who wish to remain part of the United Kingdom (Unionists) and those who wish to be part of the Republic of Ireland (Nationalists).<sup>2</sup> These communities have been in conflict since before the Province was created in 1922, as part of the process by which the remainder of Ireland gained its independence from Britain (Foster 1988; Lee 1989). In the most devastating outbreak of violence, a virtual civil war between 1969 and 1998, now referred to as the 'Troubles', more than 3,600 people died, many thousands were injured, hundreds of thousands knew people who were killed or injured, and the entire population of the province was directly affected on a daily basis (Hennessey 1997; McKittrick and McVea 2001; Patterson 2007). Many scars remain, while many, many people are still trying to cope with the impact the Troubles had on their lives.<sup>3</sup> *Silent Testimony* – an exhibition at the Ulster Museum, Belfast, of portraits of people traumatised by the impact of the Troubles – revealed the extent of the emotional pain still felt by individuals.<sup>4</sup> Ongoing political and community divisions underscore the magnitude of work that lies ahead. The peace agreement of 1998 may have ended most of the violence, but the underpinning causes of the

conflict remain (Byrne 2014; Tonge 2013, p. 92–93; Clancy 2010).

Dealing with the legacy of the Troubles is the principal challenge facing Northern Irish society, one of the most significant elements of the peace-building process, and a top priority for political parties within Northern Ireland, as well as for the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland governments (Potter 2016). However, despite this recognition and a number of initiatives, there is a continuing inability to influence feelings on the ground, reflecting an invisible chasm between the two communities that can seem unbridgeable. Several issues help explain the political deadlock in Northern Ireland that began with the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive at Stormont in January 2017. These include Brexit, the question of an Irish Language Act<sup>5</sup> and debates over LGBTQ, same-sex marriage and abortion rights (Fenton 2019; Savage 2019; Walker and Carrol 2019). However, it is arguably the unresolved debate around managing the legacy of the past that has proved most challenging and divisive.

One must be mindful of the specificities of this challenge within the Northern Irish context. The continued inclusion of the province in the U.K., alongside sensitive and delicate questions in relation to collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and British forces during the Troubles and who bears responsibility for the conflict go some way to explaining the extent of the difficulties faced. In addition, the perpetuation of paramilitary remembrance in a society where divisions remain so physically evident, not least in the continued use of ‘peace walls’, all against a background of insecurity due to Brexit and the absence of a functioning executive, are important considerations in explaining the strong politicisation of memory in Northern Ireland. A particularly revealing example of this has been the fractious debate around the redevelopment of the Long

Kesh/Maze prison site, where internees and convicted terrorists from both sides of the divide had been held during the conflict (Flynn 2011; McAtackney 2014; Neill 2017).

As a consequence of this specific context, debates about the past become filled with unresolved issues not only about the Troubles but the difficult relationship of Britain and Ireland over centuries. As time passes since the Troubles, and memory becomes more unreliable, what people think happened becomes more important than what actually did happen. The result is that the people of Northern Ireland have a shared past, but do not have a shared memory (Lundy and McGovern 2001). If the history of Northern Ireland is about its past, collective memory is about the continuing presence of that past in the present. Thus, any attempt to influence attitudes comes up against the separate collective memories of the two traditions, sustained through their rituals, ceremonies, traditions, commemorations, festivals, sites, memorials and institutions (Byrne 2014; Guelke 2014; Lawther 2014, p. 92–93). The result is the continuing dominance of partisan narratives held by the public, and in some cases encouraged by politicians (Historians and the Stormont House Agreement 2016).

## A ROLE FOR MUSEUMS

In his inaugural speech as President of South Africa on the 5th October 1994, Nelson Mandela said: “The time for the healing of the wounds has come. The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come. The time to build is upon us” (Mandela 1994). There is no Mandela in Northern Ireland, and no Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Instead, the challenge of bridging the chasm has resulted in a number of initiatives, driven as part of the political process, on dealing with the past.<sup>6</sup> A potent

example is the ‘Decade of Centenaries’ project, focused on a re-examination of events in Ireland between 1912–1922 (NI Direct 2019). Interpretation was to be based on agreed principles of educational focus, reflection, inclusivity, tolerance, respect, responsibility and interdependence. These, in turn, were to be underpinned by the concept of ‘ethical remembering’:

Ethical remembering is critical remembering. The succession of events during 1912–1922 changed Ireland in a dramatic way. It was a decade of change, but it was also a decade of horrific violence. [...] Ethical remembering is not about going back to the past in condemnation, nor to indulge in a blame game. Neither has any contribution to make to a desired and shared future. [...] Uncritical remembering is a failure to learn from history. Ethical remembering acknowledges the destructiveness of violence and its destructive legacy, and builds a different, demilitarised political future. Ethical remembering also underlines the need for hospitality, a generous openness to each other, to dialogue, hear each other and be prepared to walk through contested histories together (McMaster and Hetherington 2012, p. 7).

Museums, alongside other cultural organisations were charged by the government of Northern Ireland to deliver on the ‘Decade of Centenaries’ and, through this process, to explore ways of bringing divided communities together, to increase their understanding of each other. As Box 1 illustrates, this expectation of museum involvement in supporting community engagement is not new but rather has been recognised by politicians on all sides for some time, and, as time has passed since the 1998 peace agreement, the ambition for the forty-two accredited museums in Northern Ireland has grown to include both encouraging

**Box 1.** Museums given proactive role in community engagement in Northern Ireland

**1970s:** Schools and museums ‘oases of calm’, keeping violence at the door by not addressing it (Bigand 2017, 42).

**1980s/early 1990s:** Cultural heritage/mutual heritage included in Northern Ireland school curriculum 1992, after experimentation. Museums respond with educational programming exploring both the Unionist and Republican traditions (Bigand, 42).

**1992:** Tower Museum, Derry, the first museum to display the Troubles.

**From mid 1990s:** museum engagement with past through community relations (Bigand, 43).

**1995:** *A Review of Major Museums in N. Ireland* – “Museums have an important role to play in developing cross-community contact in neutral settings”– ‘safe spaces’ (Wilson 1995, 49).

**2005:** *A Shared Future* – museums as tools to “...encourage understanding of the complexity of our history” (Office for the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister 2005, 10).

**2011:** *Northern Ireland Museums Policy* – “Museums can make a very important contribution to a shared and better future for all based on equity, diversity, interdependence and mutual respect” (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure 2011, 6).

**2014 Stormont House Agreement:** commitment to bringing in academic expertise to help create an Oral History Archive and an Historical Timeline of the conflict (NIO 2014).

understanding (2005) and contributing to a shared and better future (2011).

What this means in practice is that, over the last 20 years, Northern Irish museums have moved from being places in which to escape from the Troubles to places where it is safe for both communities to explore and discuss Northern Ireland's past together (Crooke 2007, p. 95–108). The actions of the Ulster Museum reflect this, both in terms of the progress made but also the difficulties faced along the way (Reynolds and Blair 2018, p. 17–18). Prior to the 1998 peace agreement, and much like almost all of Northern Ireland's museum sector, apart from the Tower Museum in Derry/Londonderry, the Ulster Museum steered clear of any engagement with the contested past (Crooke 2001). However, since then, there has been a steady shift in focus that has dovetailed with the emerging political and public consensus around the need to engage with the past in order to build a shared future (Hamber and Kelly 2016, p. 24–44).

However, this shift has not been without its difficulties. The first Ulster Museum foray into directly dealing with the Troubles was a 2003 temporary exhibition entitled *Conflict: The Irish at War*. Despite the critical success of this venture, it was closed in 2006 as the museum underwent a major refurbishment. The newly-reopened Ulster Museum of 2009 included, for the first time, a dedicated gallery on the Troubles. However, the largely consensual view was that it represented a tame, uninspired effort, lacking the courage required to help facilitate necessary dialogue between communities (Meredith 2009). Since then, the Museum's Art department mounted two major exhibitions that were indicative of what can be achieved with a much more considered approach. *The Art of the Troubles* in 2014 included the work of fifty artists, from Northern Ireland and beyond.

*Silent Testimony*, mounted in 2015 and again in 2018, and mentioned above, consisted of eighteen large-scale portraits by artist Colin Davidson of people affected by the Troubles. Davidson began by approaching the WAVE Trauma Centre, an organisation formed to support people suffering loss as a result of the Troubles. WAVE put him in touch with the eighteen individuals he painted. The success of these two projects and the need to respond to the failings of the existing Troubles gallery saw the latter undergo a major overhaul. The History department completed a major collecting initiative – *Collecting the Troubles and Beyond* – and launched the museum's new Troubles Gallery in 2018 with the support of an academic panel and following workshops involving community organisations (Gannon 2018). This new gallery has been widely praised as a significant departure from its predecessor and as a 'brave move by Ulster Museum after a previous insipid effort' (Meredith 2018). The Museum now has twenty years of experience in engaging with difficult history, including exploring how other museums, in places like Beirut and Sarajevo, have approached the issue. It is precisely this context that provided the grounds for its project on Northern Ireland's 1968.

### **THE VOICES OF '68 PROJECT**

'1968' has come to symbolise a period when a wave of revolt swept the globe. From the USA to China, passing through the east and west of Europe, protest movements that shared striking commonalities took hold (Gildea, Mark, and Warring 2013; Klimke and Scharloth 2008; Vinen 2018). Whilst at the time there was a sense amongst activists that they were part of something that extended well beyond their national borders, it is the wealth of retrospective research since then that has helped forge an

increasingly prominent and consensual narrative around the transnationalism of 1968 (Dramé and Lamarre 2009; Crane and Mueller 2008; de Groot 2008; Farik 2008; Førlund 2008; Katsiaficas 1987; Cauté 1988; Fraser 1988; Jameson 1984). Recent trends in '1968 studies' have seen the optics broadened to take into consideration what can be described as 'peripheral 1968s' (Blum 2018; Burleigh 2017; Draper 2018; Gueye 2018; Zancarini-Fournel 2016, 778–865). However, the story of Northern Ireland's 1968 has struggled to find its place.

Between October 1968 and February 1969, Northern Ireland experienced a considerable period of protest and revolt over the issue of civil rights that bore many of the hallmarks one typically associates with '1968' (Prince 2007). Yet, until recently, the role of protest in Northern Ireland in 1968 has been largely ignored in transnational narratives of this period (Cauté 1988; Cornils and Waters 2010; Dreyfus-Armand 2008; Fink, Gassert and Junker 1998). Reynolds' 2015 study entitled *Sous les pavés...the Troubles. Northern Ireland, France and the European Collective Memory of 1968*, through a comparison between the 'paradigmatic' French events of *mai 68* and those of Northern Ireland, set out the case for the inclusion of the troubled province in any discussion of the global events of 1968 (Reynolds 2015). It explained also how the divergent post-68 aftermath in Northern Ireland that led to the onset of the Troubles had effectively buried the memory of this period of non-violent revolt, leading to its marginalisation from the transnational story. In its conclusion however, the study pointed to how the new, peace-time situation of Northern Ireland provided the context for a reassessment of the memory of 1968. This study became the bedrock for a collaboration between Reynolds and William Blair (Director of Collections) of NMNI.

Following the publication of *Sous les pavés...The Troubles*, Reynolds contacted Blair to discuss how the events of Northern Ireland's 1968 were represented in the modern history galleries of NMNI's premier site, Belfast's Ulster Museum. From this point on the project evolved in four distinct phases. Stage one entailed a minor intervention in the existing treatment of this period. With the objective of broadening visitors' perspectives, a number of quotations were added that attempted to relate the protests in the province to the international context of the time. The success of this initial collaboration then led to the second stage and a complete overhaul of the section dealing with Northern Ireland's 1968. This provided a key opportunity to replace the single curatorial voice with multiple perspectives on the events. Ten protagonists interviewed for Reynolds' original study – and representing a broad range of opinions and experiences – agreed to take part in video-recorded interviews.<sup>7</sup> Edited clips of these testimonies, together with a range of key objects and images of the period were curated into a new treatment. The display included an interactive table enabling visitors to hear the reflections of important protagonists on significant moments. Extended versions of these testimonies were also made available online.<sup>8</sup> As part of this second stage, the project team was approached by representatives of the local schools' curriculum authority (CCEA) with a request to organise a study day on 1968 for GCSE students (national examinations taken at age 16). Following the first study-day, and in response to teachers' feedback, a set of bespoke, online resources, specifically tailored to the needs of the curriculum, was created and made available to all local schools.<sup>9</sup> The third stage of the project was developed to coincide with the 50th anniversary in 2018. A new temporary exhibition entitled *Voices of '68* was curated,

drawing on the testimonies of 30 interviewees and continuing to reflect the full range of perspectives on the events. It was hosted in the Ulster Museum between 5 September - 15 October 2018, to mark the 50th anniversary.<sup>10</sup> This stage culminated in a three-day event that included the fourth in the series of GCSE study days, a day-long conference led by ten interviewees from the project, and a final day dedicated to the role of women in the 1968 events and beyond.<sup>11</sup> In addition, a mobile version of the exhibition was conceived. Three copies were produced and travelled to almost 40 destinations in the UK, Ireland, mainland Europe and the USA, in most cases, accompanied by a dedicated launch event or seminar.<sup>12</sup> A digital version of the exhibition was also created and made available online for visitors to engage with before, during and after their visit, also making it possible to engage a global audience.<sup>13</sup> Finally, following the consideration of feedback and an external evaluation, the fourth stage of the collaboration saw an adapted version of *Voices of '68* incorporated into the permanent modern history gallery in August 2019, replacing the existing content dedicated to the question of Northern Ireland's 1968.

## ACADEMIC UNDERPINNING

From the outset, there was a strong commitment by the Ulster Museum team to replicate the methodological centrepiece of Reynolds' study – the focus on oral history. The original study was grounded in a collection of over 40 oral history interviews with both French and Northern Irish protagonists.<sup>14</sup> This reflected the fact that in the field of '1968 studies', oral history has been amongst the most prevalent of methodological approaches with a wide range of research projects and publications focussed on capturing the testimonies of those

who experienced this period (for example, Abidor 2018; Dormoy-Rajramanan 2018; Fillieule and Bérout 2018; Gildea, Mark, and Warring 2013; Reynolds 2011).

In the case of Northern Ireland more generally, there has been increasing recognition of the effectiveness and potential of the oral history approach in dealing with the issues raised by the challenges of the past. The inclusion of 'story-telling' as one of the five key themes of work of the influential 'Healing Through Remembering' initiative is just one example.<sup>15</sup> The 2014 Stormont House Agreement made specific recommendations around the creation of an oral history archive (OHA) as one potential mechanism to help the province come to terms with its difficult past (NIO 2014). The potential of such an approach has also been recognised in the academic world:

In the absence of a formal truth and information recovery commission, academic and community oral history and 'storytelling' projects have provided an important outlet for victims and survivors. [...] Providing opportunities to hear other voices can ultimately contribute to the complex work of reconciliation (Historians and the Stormont House Agreement 2016)

A 2019 summary of the responses to a public consultation on 'Addressing the Legacy of the Past' underscores the support for such an approach amongst the general public:

Many commented that storytelling represented an opportunity to acknowledge the pain, suffering and unique experiences of those who had not before had the opportunity to be heard. In addition, some believed the OHA process could be of therapeutic benefit to victims and survivors, giving them the opportunity to record their experiences for the benefit of generations

to come. Most respondents were broadly supportive of the OHA and welcomed the fact that it was highly inclusive (NIO 2019).

It was this recognised general and specific potency that informed the decision to build the various iterations of the 1968 project around the oral history approach and it has been a key element in its positive development, effectiveness and impact. But oral history alone does not fully explain the broadly positive reception of the project. From an academic perspective, it is the combination of this recognised methodological approach with the innovative theoretical underpinning of 'Agonism' that sets this project apart and has resulted in a genuine impact on how this period is remembered. This drew particularly on the work of Anna Cento-Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen in their article *On Agonistic Memory* (2016).

The agonistic mode of remembering, as defined by Cento Bull and Hansen, draws directly on the work of Chantal Mouffe in her seminal studies on cultural identity and its impact on politics (Mouffe 2000; 2005). Their proposed alternative memory mode picks up and applies Mouffe's critique of cosmopolitanism as an inadequate alternative to antagonism that in fact only serves to encourage it, thus necessitating an agonistic approach. Mouffe argues that antagonism needs to be kept 'at bay by providing the institutions, practices, and language games thanks to which antagonism can, so to speak, be sublimated and transformed into "agonism"' (Mouffe 2012, p. 632). Instead of avoiding the difficulties of contestation and debate via cosmopolitanism in the hope of creating some form of consensus, differences, multiple perspectives and friction should be encouraged, creating instead a sort of 'conflictual consensus' (Mouffe 2012, p. 633). Drawing on the example of the European project, '[s]uch

an agonistic Europe would clearly have to acknowledge the multiplicity of diversity of collective identities existing in its midst and to give due weight to their affective dimension' (Mouffe 2012, p. 634). In his 2008 analysis of memory, myth and critical history, Duncan Bell also called for an alternative framework based on the notion of agonism to avoid the creation of 'institutions, procedures and attitudes that entrench collective identities' (2008, p. 149). He argues that '[t]he point is to come to a mutual understanding of difference in the spirit of agonic negotiation' (p. 160). Cento Bull and Hansen extend Bell's theory and map Mouffe's work into memory studies proposing an agonistic mode of remembering to counter the hitherto dominant modes.

Several factors set the agonistic mode of remembering apart. Instead of searching for a consensual narrative of the past, it contends that such an objective is impossible and indeed undesirable. In its place, recognition of the existence of divergent perspectives is encouraged. In addition, it proposes that such multiperspectivity should extend to all sides involved, with no single narrative taking precedence over another. Explicitly self-reflexive, it encourages greater contextual grounding of the past in order to help enhance shared understandings from across divides. Finally, there is an emphasis on the importance of allowing space and time for passions to be aired in order to acknowledge and understand (and even help deal with) the full range of political passions which have contributed to past and present struggles.<sup>16</sup>

In applying such an agonistic approach, the NMNI project's initial objective of recalibrating the story of this period in terms of the question of 1968's transnationalism converged with the necessity of a much more thorough fleshing out of the contextual backdrop. Such an alternative



line of enquiry in recounting the story of Northern Ireland's 1968 unquestionably facilitated the participation of a broad range of divergent perspectives from across the inter and intra-communal divides of Northern Irish society.<sup>17</sup> The great care and attention afforded to ensuring a balanced and inclusive presentation of the material across the project's multi-faceted approach centred around the stated objective of open-endedness and a refusal to privilege any one narrative over another. Such 'narrative hospitality', combined with the methodological approach of oral history and the use of videoed testimonies, provided the necessary grounds for emotions and passions to shine through.

The depth and breadth of perspectives were further added to as the project progressed. The feedback of interviewees, visitors, teachers, pupils and even the results of commissioned evaluations not only fed into the iterative process across the various stages of the project development.<sup>18</sup> Such reflections were also included in the gallery space. This co-productive, participatory element was central to the project approach and helped ensure that the multi-layered outputs were able to strike the right chord across the various demands and expectations of the complex and divided Northern Irish society.

## BEYOND THE MUSEUM'S WALLS

As Hanna Crowdy (Head of Curatorial at NMNI) explained, reaching beyond the Ulster Museum's walls is central to its broader public mission:

[T]here are a lot of different audiences out there and we need to be adaptable about how we cater for those. We in the museum cannot be complacent about what we do and, whilst it is great to have activity within the museum, we

need to increase our profile beyond traditional museum venues (Crowdy 2019).

Taking the travelling exhibition to nearly forty destinations around the UK, Ireland, mainland Europe and the USA, including non-museum venues<sup>19</sup> – and holding conferences, discussions or seminars at most – was a recognition that the effectiveness of the project benefited from seeking out non-museum visitors, exemplified in this testimony extract from July Mullaney (Culture and Education officer Irish World Heritage Centre, Manchester (exhibition host destination)):

As we service a population of mixed publics, it is our sense that it contributes generally to opportunities for those publics to access forums for learning in a larger context where public knowledge and engagement with Irish and NI history is often not serviced well in the general (schools) curriculum in the UK, for example. Brexit and the variety of uninformed views it has generated thus far about NI history, shared by senior serving ministers and politicians in the UK, would certainly lend one to the view that anything that seeks to broaden and deepen general public understanding and engagement with NI is to be welcomed and supported (Mullaney 2019).

Equally, Greene, representing Harvard University as host institution, recognised the importance of the connections to the American Civil Rights movement and also with the Irish Communities in the US (Greene 2019).

Technology helped expand the reach of the exhibition even further. Providing extended versions of the edited video testimonies on the NMNI YouTube channel enabled museum users to deepen their research before and after a

visit and allowed those unable to visit the museum to access aspects of the project’s material. The use of Augmented Reality to display the video testimonies in the travelling exhibition both increased the exhibition’s mobility and added an extra element of attractiveness (particularly amongst a younger audience). The creation of a digital version of the exhibition provided further opportunities to broaden the geographical reach, enabling international exposure for the exhibition and project.

Finally, from the outset, there was an emphasis on developing close connections with local schools, reflecting the strongly held belief of the project team that securing a brighter future for Northern Ireland depends on influencing the attitudes of young people. As discussed above, because Northern Ireland’s recent history is now studied on the GCSE curriculum, the project included study days – involving in the region of 750 pupils from across communities – and the creation of online resources that have provided one of the strongest elements of the project’s reach and impact.

**AUDIENCE RESPONSE**

Venue testimonials, feedback by teachers and pupils, and comments left by gallery visitors have all emphasised the effectiveness of the project. Reflecting the view of the majority of those involved, the head of history at one school wrote:

I am always keen to learn more about the topics I teach. ‘Voices of ‘68’ has changed my approach to how I teach the events of 1968/1969 in NI. [...] ‘Voices of 68’ really is essential viewing for all students on NI in the 1960s (Toner 2019).

Such a testimony underscores how the project has inflected the teacher’s own

understanding and how he intends to approach the teaching of this topic. Examples from students’ testimonies echoed the generally positive feedback of their teachers, as demonstrated in the following extract from one student’s reflections on the project:

[...] it’s just so shocking how that’s our history and like we get to be a part of that, we get to look back at our history that’s so mind-blowing, that was our history. [...] I was completely blank coming into today but I’m so glad that I’ve got the opportunity to come because it’s benefitted my knowledge of our country’s history so much. [...] I’m just glad that I’ve achieved this knowledge and know that I can speak about it and I can retain this and speak to my future generation and my future family and they can know about this stuff because it’s sort of just intriguing to know about.<sup>20</sup>

The above pupil’s recognition of the gaps in his understanding of this critical moment and his enthusiasm at having improved his knowledge, together with the potential impact in terms of the inter-generational transmission of knowledge, speaks volumes as to the effectiveness of the approach deployed. More general feedback on the exhibitions has included negative comments that, given the centrality of the agonistic approach, are to be expected. For example:

I feel that it was very insensitive to include DUP [Democratic Unionist Party] members criticising the events that history agrees were valid and necessary events. Gregory Campbell equating his family being poor with the systematic oppression of Catholics was particularly offensive; Too heavy on the extreme Loyalist/ Unionist side. Gregory Campbell? Nelson McCausland?<sup>21</sup>

Despite the fact that such negative comments were few and far between, they nevertheless underscore the potential for difficulties of the agonistic approach. Being confronted by perspectives that are so very different to one's own understanding is unavoidably uncomfortable and, in some cases, may risk further entrenching divisions. However, based on the overwhelming evidence received, a more-rounded engagement with the multi-faceted elements of the project and an awareness of its constructive objectives certainly help allay any such fears and encourage a willingness to accept challenging narratives of the past. Other testimonies, such as that below from David Robinson (Good Relations Officer at Belfast City Council), pointed to the important and positive benefits of the multi-perspectival approach.

The project was a great engagement tool to facilitate learning and information on a significant moment in our recent history. The project has demonstrated that as a society, we can engage in difficult events that are within our lived memory. The exhibition was a great tool to do this, mainly because it contained a range of different viewpoints and perspectives (Robinson 2019).

## **IMPACT**

The audience responses discussed above highlight the positive impact of the project on individuals, communities and the education sector. Feedback received underscored how most visitors trusted the museum and believed it had sought to make a balanced presentation. But this is only part of the story. The fact that the collaborative project, with a pivotal national institution such as NMNI, has expanded and developed in a positive manner across the four

stages outlined above is in itself evidence of the recognised effectiveness of this venture. The importance of the project methodology to NMNI's ongoing development is reflected in the following quote from Kathryn Thompson, CEO and Director of NMNI:

This project was based on collecting oral histories and using those testimonies to pose question and therefore help people explore different perspectives and we think that this is what has been really important to us and the methodology which has been developed is something we would like to look at repeating for potentially other years or other key events (Thompson 2019).

Close collaboration between the museum and academics was central to this, involving not only Reynolds but a panel of academic advisers, bridging the gap between rigorous, independent academic research and the public-facing nature of the museum. This was an important experience for all involved. Whilst academic historians continue to seek to present accounts of the past that are plausible and testable by other historians, history museums are developing a different sort of history, one embedded in the lived experiences of the communities they serve and driven by community memories. The museum had to define a credible balance, and this involved sharing authority.

The credibility of the project also sustained the involvement of the original protagonists. Not only did they offer up their time for interviews, they have also been centrally involved helping the development of the iterative process; they have participated in the plethora of wrap-around events organised; and have even contributed objects for potential inclusion in the museum display. The success of the project's engagement with schools is particularly

significant. Again, museum credibility is important, making possible the collaboration with those developing school curriculum materials.

The project has had direct political impact in terms of the example it has set for the ongoing and critical debate on the management of Northern Ireland's difficult past. As discussed above, this issue has been a central concern of politicians in Belfast, London and Dublin, leading to a number of important initiatives. One such initiative was the creation of the Flags, Identity, Culture & Tradition Commission (FICT) set up with the remit of producing a report on strategies to manage the difficult issues preventing progress in the Peace Process, one of which is the challenge of managing the past. The FICT commission's report will cite the project as an example of good practice in relation to this difficult question. Furthermore, like all important institutions, NMNI submitted its response to the aforementioned 2018 public consultation on 'Addressing the legacy of the Past', placing the 1968 project front and centre as an example of how the museums service can contribute in a constructive manner to assisting this vital element of the Peace Process. Drawing directly on the example of the 1968 project, the NMNI submission argues:

Rather it is more important that multiple perspectives are represented, and groups of people or communities see their narrative included which in turn enhances their capacity for narrative hospitality towards alternative perspectives. We would argue therefore that a more discerning and critical approach is included in structuring the Oral History Archive, that rather than acting only as a repository, people could record their experiences in a more meaningful way and invest in something that has wider application. This would present much greater opportunities for effective dialogue (NMNI).

## WHAT NEXT?

### **(Long-Term) Impact on the One-off Museum Visitor**

As noted above, the responses to the exhibition, conferences, study days, curricular materials and online content have been highly positive and this is reflected in the recorded visitor contributions. In particular, reflecting a key ambition of the project, the impact on school pupils and on the teaching of the period could well make a long-term difference to the situation on Northern Ireland. But what of the long-term impact, if any, on the one-off museum visitor? Bergevin highlights the lack of research about impact on this key audience. The few longitudinal studies that have been carried out have tended to focus on learning outcomes rather than attitudinal change and it is, to say the least, challenging to assign causation to a brief visit. Crucially, her key conclusion is that, whatever the impact on the day, without subsequent reinforcing experiences, visitors revert to pre-visit levels of commitment within a few weeks (Bergevin 2019, 356).

Such a limitation converges with broader discussions around the necessity of going beyond short-term evaluations and the importance of assessing long-term impacts. Crossick and Kaszynska highlight the increasingly prominent role of museums in helping post-conflict societies build bridges and move on from their divisive pasts (2016, p. 66–70). However, their report also urges caution in relation to the predominance of short-term evaluative practices that risk missing the potentially 'double-edged sword' impact of such ventures. Whilst generally backed by very positive short-term assessments (as is the case with the NMNI 1968 project), they argue that without a longer-

term perspective, such projects could in fact be responsible for the consolidation or entrenchment of inter-communal divisions. In order to establish and respond to this, long-term evaluations must also take place in order to convince of the ‘sustained effectiveness’ of such projects (p. 70). With the *Voices of '68* exhibition’s 2019 incorporation into the permanent modern history gallery at Ulster Museum, research funding has been obtained to carry out an impact study, including longitudinal analysis. Such an evaluation process will be grounded in the participatory characteristic that has been a defining feature of the project’s methodological approach from the outset. Given the prominent role of the range of contributors and users (interviewees, school pupils, museum visitors, educational bodies, etc) in helping shape the iterative development of the project, they will also be the most potent audience for an assessment of long-term impact. Such participatory evaluation practice will complement, and overcome the shortcomings of, the short-term summative approach by leaving space for a more rounded and considered reflection on the ‘longer-term character of change’ (Crossick and Kaszynska, p. 128).

### **A Place for Dialogue and Critical Reflection**

Can personal stories about Northern Ireland’s ’68 and the subsequent impact of the Troubles help to foster new understandings? Will they be part of a journey towards a deep healing process or achieve no more than a temporary catharsis? Is there an achievable balance between the intensely personal nature of individual memory and the wider context that history seeks to provide?

Multiple, conflicting points of view will always exist and clash, not just in Northern Ireland. Differing versions of the past will

constantly compete for control of the present. To move forward, we need environments that can engage people with the points of view of others and encourage reflection and perhaps understanding. Because museums are trusted by the public at large, they can act as such ‘safe spaces’ in which difficult conversations can be had and difficult histories can be remembered. Dierdre MacBride of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council describes the environment required as:

[...] a safe and open space in which dialogue and understanding [...] can occur [...] a space in which reflection and possibly reconciliation can emerge even while we are dealing with hurtful living memory’ (NMNI 2018).

The ability to act as a centre for such dialogue is at the heart of Ulster Museum’s capacity to play an active role within contemporary society. The museum has created a comfortable seating area within its Troubles Gallery, with the potential to develop it into a Reflection Zone where visitors can explore the period in more depth and also contribute their thoughts and personal experiences. This will be subject to audience research and piloting. It could make an important difference, particularly if it stimulates contributions by visitors that encourage a three-way conversation between visitors and the museum and with visitors responding to the contributions of other visitors.

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

What began as a piece of academic research and then a small-scale museum intervention has developed into something much greater – something that is having a direct influence on how the legacy of a violent and divided past can

be handled, and proves that museums can really make a difference on a grand scale. A number of the project's characteristics are identifiable to help summarise the reasons for its effectiveness and provide potential lessons beyond the specific case of Northern Ireland's 1968. This project has demonstrated the necessity of support from the museum director and of a willingness to take risks in terms of the multi-perspectivist approach, the need to go beyond the walls of the museum and to enter into dynamic partnerships with a range of bodies. A museum project like this, which seeks an impact on wider society is not without difficulties and not everyone will be satisfied. However, such a courageous and 'controlled loss of control' evidently bears fruit. Successful projects can indeed start small and build progressively across an iterative process and the museum space is clearly one that is suited to such projects, particularly in contexts such as that of Northern Ireland where independent institutions are credited with a strong level of public trust. Finally, and looking forward, the issue of evaluating impact and the necessity to take a long-term perspective so as to fully make sense of a project's footprint is an essential consideration. One cannot help but imagine that, if effective in the very difficult context of the 'troubled province', such an emergent blueprint may well offer lessons for other post-conflict societies also wrestling the problematic legacy of the past.

END

## NOTES

1. Debates on just what the role of museums should be are far from straightforward. This was reflected in the controversy around ICOM's proposed new definition of museums, rejected by the ICOM Assembly in Tokyo, in September 2019. C.f. for example; <https://www.museumssociation.org/museums-journal/comment/02092019-whats-in-a-name>; <https://icom.museum/en/news/the-extraordinary-general-conference- postpones-the-vote-on-a-new-museum-definition/>.
2. The authors recognise that this description is overly-simplistic and that the inter and intra community tensions and divisions in Northern Ireland are much more fragmented and complex. Furthermore, one should highlight the existence of a section of the population that finds itself somewhere between the two ends of the binary paradigm and is both neutral and makes up a significant and increasingly influential percentage of the population. However, the stereotypical dichotomy serves as an important and useful starting point for making sense of the challenges at hand.
3. N. Ireland has catastrophic levels of mental ill health. There is transgenerational trauma - more people have committed suicide in the province in the years since the Troubles (now over 4,400) than died during them. See Action Mental Health (2018) *Mental Health in Northern Ireland*, press release, 20th February 2018.
4. The following BBC Radio 4 documentary discusses the significance of this exhibition as part of the broader project on the redevelopment of the Troubles gallery at the Ulster Museum: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0001b0h>
5. A major stumbling block for the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive, the Irish Language Act is a central demand of Sinn Fein which seeks to have the Irish language given equal status to that of English.
6. Such initiatives include, the 2014 Stormont House Agreement (NIO 2014), the formation of the Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) commission in 2016 (Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) 2016), and the 2018 Northern Ireland Office public consultation on 'Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past' (NIO 2018).
7. The following people were interviewed for this stage: Paul Arthur; Paul Bew, Gregory Campbell, Ivan Cooper, Austin Currie, Denis

- Haughey, Erskine Holmes, Aiden McKinney, Maurice Mills and Brid Ruddy.
8. [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL\\_UgxDN1Li8\\_14DIIIWFXXKaQSEX2SVNM](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL_UgxDN1Li8_14DIIIWFXXKaQSEX2SVNM)
  9. <https://www.nmni.com/learn/1968-history-resource/Home.aspx>
  10. <https://www.nmni.com/news/voices-of-68-exhibition>
  11. <https://www.nmni.com/whats-on/voices-68;>  
<https://www.nmni.com/whats-on/1968-and-beyond>
  12. For example, <https://news.liverpool.ac.uk/2018/12/05/panel-discussion-and-exhibition-marking-50-years-of-civil-rights-in-northern-ireland/>; <http://lutonirishforum.org/voices-of-68-exhibition-cultural-seminar/>; <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/voices-of-68-exhibition-launch-tickets-53512171345>; [https://events.bc.edu/event/voices\\_of\\_68\\_exhibit#.XNGaMy-ZOCQ](https://events.bc.edu/event/voices_of_68_exhibit#.XNGaMy-ZOCQ)
  13. <https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/voices-of-68/id1401984783?ls=1&mt=11>. This digital version of the exhibition has been on display in various venues internationally including; Harvard University; The British School Rome; Florida State University.
  14. For full list of interviewees see Reynolds 2015, pp. 203-204.
  15. 'Healing Through Remembering' describes itself as 'an independent initiative made up of a diverse membership with different political perspectives working on a common goal of how to deal with the legacy of the past as it relates to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland.' For more information see <https://healingthroughremembering.org>.
  16. For a more thorough analysis of this theoretical underpinning and its applicability to the case of Northern Ireland's contested past see Reynolds 2019.
  17. The following people were interviewed as part of the project: Paul Arthur; Paul Bew; Gregory Campbell; Ivan Cooper; Anthony Coughlan; Austin Currie; Anne Devlin; Michael Farrel; Mervyn Gibson; Denis Haughey; Erskine Holmes; Anne Hope; Judith Jennings; Bernadette McAliskey; Nelson McAusland; Eddie McCamley; Eamonn McCann; Chris McGimpsey; Dymrna McGlade; Aiden McKinney; Maurice Mills; Geordie Morrow; Mike Nesbitt; Hubert Nichol; Henry Patterson; Brid Rodgers; Brid Ruddy; Carol Tweedale; Eileen Weir; Fergus Woods.
  18. 'Evaluation of 1968 research and interpretation re Collecting the Troubles and Beyond at the Ulster Museum.' carried out by *Social Research Centre*. 28 December 2016.
  19. The exhibition has been hosted in the following destinations: Ballymena Library; Derry Central Library; Newry Library; Dungannon Library; Derry, Guildhall; Belfast City Hall; Ulster University (Magee Campus); Nottingham Trent University; Irish Cultural Centre, London Hammersmith; Luton Irish Centre; Victoria Gallery & Museum, Liverpool; University of Bath: November; World Heritage Centre, Manchester; Cardiff University; Cork County Library; Cork City Library; Dublin City Library; Galway, NUIG; Kerry Library; Mayo County Library; Arklow Library; Tipperary County Library; Boston College, USA.
  20. Anonymous pupil feedback from GCSE study days.
  21. Visitor feedback on 'Voices of 68' exhibition.

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