

It's the Principles that Matter

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This paper is written from a Western, audience-centred perspective but, hopefully, has wider relevance.

Freeman Tilden, 'guru' to the USA Interpretation movement, wrote of his own definition of Interpretation: "... [it is] for the dictionary... a definition is too inclusive, or it fails to emphasize that which we believe is vital" (Tilden, 1977: 8). He instead highlighted six principles to act by. The same is true for museums. A definition can provide an important grounding. But, right now, museums do not need further grounding. Instead, in the world we currently inhabit, they need action-driven principles that help them to fly.

Let me illustrate this point through the current ICOM definition:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

What does this definition say about the impact museums can have on those who use them – why would it make anyone fight to keep them? How can such a definition relate museums to a contemporary society that is changing at web speed? And what is the role of the public in this definition anyhow, beyond liking what they are given or lumping it? This definition was written in a museum bubble. It was adopted in 2007, the year the iPhone first went on sale, when the digital revolution and resulting 'Age of Participation' were already triumphantly under way. Two years later the British cultural commentator Tom Fleming wrote:

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...

(Fleming, 2009: 1)

In the UK, rather than transformation, we have seen gradual but piecemeal change in museum actions. I have welcomed much of this, particularly the social inclusion agenda and the expectation that museums will work to broaden and diversify their audience base. But when looked at in the round, the demands made of museums are enormous.

What are museums for?

- Representative of the nation/region/city
- A cultural treasure house
- A leisure and tourism attraction
- A source of local pride in both tangible and intangible heritage
- A resource for informal and structured learning and builder of community capacity
- An income generator
- An agent for physical, economic, cultural and social regeneration.
- A memory store for all in the local community, relevant to and representative of the whole of society
- Accessible to all - intellectually, physically, socially, culturally, economically.
- A celebrant of cultural diversity and promoter of social inclusion, with a core purpose of improving people's lives
- A place of dialogue and toleration, and a community meeting place, committed to promoting civil engagement and community empowerment
- Proactive in developing, working with and managing pan-agency projects.
- An exemplar of quality service provision and value for money.

(expanded from Black, 2012: 5)

Today many museums seem torn in all directions and unable to define for themselves why they are here, let alone broadcast this to their potential audiences. And this is before truly facing up to the challenge of the digital revolution. Museums know they must re-define and adapt by establishing what is meant by museum practice for the 21st century – yet most remain vague, at best, about this. We need a rallying cry about what museums are for – a strong sense of purpose that they and all their publics can enthusiastically sign up to.

Principles

So, what principles do I feel can act as a rallying cry for museums and their users? I have followed Tilden and gone for six. I make no claim for them being definitive – simply one person's ideas for consideration.

Museum principles

1. The collections held by museums represent the physical and cultural memory of humankind and of the world we live in. Museums celebrate these and care for them on behalf of the whole of humanity.
2. The purpose of museums begins and ends with their relationship with their audiences – and must reflect the society the museums serve.
3. Museums are for everyone, in a partnership of equals sharing a journey of discovery.
4. Museums can set their collections free.
5. Museum organisations must become 21st century participatory entities.
6. Blank – a rallying cry for individual museums.

1. The collections held by museums represent the physical and cultural memory of humankind and of the world we live in. Museums celebrate these and care for them on behalf of the whole of humanity.

In the mid-nineteenth century, collections held in public and university museums underpinned the rise of the great disciplines of archaeology and palaeontology, anthropology, natural history and biology, geology, history, and art history - as a part of the evolutionary sequencing of the earth, of life, of humankind, of civilisation (Bennett, 1995: 95). Suddenly the earth itself was no longer around 6000 years old, as biblical scholars had it. Instead, thanks to geological archaeologists, limitless vistas of the past appeared (Bennett, 2004: 2). With the rejection of religious authority, humankind was free to define its own past (Nielsen, 2014: 95). And museum collections and exhibitions made prehistory visible to the public at large. Here, museums were incubators of new understanding that truly changed people's perceptions of the world.

We can still do this! One reflection of this continuing potential can be found in the intangible holdings developed by museums in recent years – not least the personal accounts of life experiences that have transformed our understanding of the importance of the contributions made by all in society – every individual life matters, not just the elite.

Yet outstanding collections, studied by curators who are experts in their field, are not enough in themselves. We have all visited dead museums that hide behind the worthiness of their collections. Collections matter, but what matters more is what we do with them. This leads to the second principle.

2. The purpose of museums begins and ends with their relationship with their audiences – and must reflect the society the museums serve.

I want to focus here on core Western audiences - the well-educated professional classes - and the speed at which they are changing. The past saw extensive educational opportunities; increased wealth and the leisure time to spend it; the merging of high and popular culture; the democratisation of travel; and the spread of television and the Internet. Today we can add globalisation, generational shift, the impact of new media, demographic change, and the drain of austerity - as power and initiative switch to the wired up Millennial generation and 'Digital Natives'.

Museums must ensure the continuing relevance of their collections to core audiences in this fast-changing environment. This will require a profoundly different, much more participatory, museum experience – one that involves creating new and more meaningful opportunities for engagement, offering a remarkable opportunity to engage users in ways undreamt of by our predecessors. But it will also involve sharing authority with our users.

A museum focused on protecting its own authority will fail 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 this does not deny the role of the museum in developing and transmitting knowledge and does not mean

curatorial absence. Audiences will continue to want to hear the authoritative voice of the museum. What they increasingly will not do is accept museums as single-voiced and authoritarian – they will expect to reflect on and respond to that voice (Stein 2011).

However, museums cannot restrict themselves to professional, highly educated audiences. A key ambition must be to broaden the audience base. A more participatory experience will engage broader audiences anyhow, but there is much more to be done. Hence the third principle.

3. Museums are for everyone, in a partnership of equals sharing a journey of discovery.

One of the most entrenched problems for Western museums is how to sustainably engage a broader and more diverse audience. This has become more urgent as a result of demographic change. Museums, committed to partnership with their communities, will break the stranglehold of their physical sites and restricted opening hours and reach outwards, beyond their walls, housed collections, 'safe' history and core audiences. As such, museums can work with their communities to develop partnerships that promote dialogue, build community capacity and support civil engagement.

As one example, can a museum use the past to help its local communities understand the present and play an active role in influencing their own futures? As a historian, my chief interest has been in the way the nature of the history presented in museums has been transformed in recent times – from the single authoritative voice to the recognition that there is no single 'truth' and that the audience is actively involved in its own meaning-making. This is truly the democratisation of the past - ensuring that those previously silenced, spoken for or marginalised can reclaim ownership of their own, and their communities', pasts, and see their life experiences represented, and their voices heard. Involving both content co-produced with communities and the sharing of authority with wider audiences, this makes for messy history – very different to the single authoritative voice. But it also makes for relevant history.

And we can speak equally of the democratisation of creativity in ways museums have harnessed the benefits of the digital revolution to nurture creativity in on-site and on-line users. Museums have wonderful potential in helping both individuals and communities learn how to be creative, a key 21st century skill. This is a vital role that museums can play for children as school curricula increasingly abandon the Arts.

But, in this digital revolution we are living through, it is not enough to develop museum environments that engage visitors. Our collections belong to the world. It is time to cease being gatekeepers and release them. How can museums meaningfully enhance access to their collections, in a participatory environment where many people already take material online and actively share, sort, classify, collaboratively re-think, re-classify, re-publish and re-use it as they see fit? – a question for the fourth principle.

4. Museums can set their collections free.

Within the online world, we see the rise of what has come to be called 'participatory culture' (Jenkins et al, 2006: xi). Here we have people taking part creatively, contributing, supporting each other, feeling a sense of belonging – and believing in the importance of their contributions. And this has a direct impact on how people are engaging with culture:

Contemporary notions of creativity, shaped by Web 2.0, center on shared construction of cultural identity and an ethos of participatory experience... This shift is about more than just technology. People are thinking about the experience of culture differently than in the past, placing value on a more immersive and interactive experience than is possible through mere observation... (Brown & Novak-Leonard, 2011, reprinted 2014)

As one example, in 2012, Martijn Pronk, head of publications at the Rijksmuseum, and his team launched Rijksstudio, giving free online access to initially 125,000 high resolution images from the museum collections, now much more – to be used as anyone saw fit. In 2015, he spoke of the two key areas where users have responded. First came those who created their own online 'Rijksmuseum Collection' by selecting their favourite images. By 2014, around 150,000 people had already created their own Rijksstudio online. Of this use, Pronk said:

The success of Rijksstudio is that it adapts the museum proposition to regular online behavior using known technical solutions. Many people like to view nice images online, collect them, download and share them. Anytime and anywhere. Rijksstudio is easy to use... (Pronk, 2015).

But beyond this, the museum also invited the creative sector to use the images for free. Here, Pronk said:

We have placed much of the collection in the public domain. It is out of our control. So even if we wouldn't like a certain design there's not much we could do. We knew this when we set the collection free (Pronk, 2015)

But the museum went beyond providing free access to the images to actively embrace the designers and publicise their work. In 2014 it instigated an annual award for the best products, marketed as 'create your own masterpiece'.

Everything I have written so far seems highly idealistic and, frankly, things rarely happen just because you dream of them. The museum experience will only change if museum organisations change. The principles I define must not only be a rallying cry but also a call to action, hence principle five.

5. Museum organisations must become 21st century participatory entities.

The world is changing, our audiences and their expectations are changing, our funding regimes are changing. Most museums now require root and branch transformation if they are to remain relevant to 21st century audiences – both change in organisational structure and change in their attitude to and relationship with their audiences.

This does not happen easily. It must lead eventually to a re-structuring of the museum's leadership and operational framework to actively support an audience-centred environment, including participatory practice. It requires institutional commitment, a managerial receptiveness to experimentation, a capacity to drive change for the long term and the support of all those working for or volunteering with the organisation involved. These attributes are rare in the museum field. A report on innovation in Australian museums sums up the problem:

While the study identified many examples of innovative practice... initiatives tend to be isolated, episodic and difficult to sustain in the long term...Only a few... organisations have made fundamental changes to their planning, structures and operations to place innovation... at the core rather than as add-on activities (Mansfield et al, 2014: xi).

Change is possible – and essential if the museum is to develop as an audience-centred institution - but needs effective leadership. The sad fact is that, for many museums, the drive to change will only come when senior management recognise that the alternative is extinction, and by then it will be too late. Their audiences and funding will have gone elsewhere.

On a happier note, I turn now to principle six, the most important of all.

6. Blank for the individual museum to complete

One of the great joys of the museum world is that every museum is unique. Each one has its own collections to thrill, own stories to tell and own communities to engage. I leave the sixth principle to each museum, to create its own rallying cry. But there is a more difficult side to this. To develop that cry, each individual museum must answer Stephen Weil's question: 'What difference does it make that you are here?' (Weil, 1999).

Conclusion

At the conference, I was convinced of the necessity of a definition approved by ICOM, alongside a Code of Ethics, for incorporation in legislation worldwide. However, a definition focused on legal argument can never stir the emotions or drive the museum world forward as one body.

Of course, there are a multitude of types of museums and by no means all follow the European tradition, but this is a cause for celebration not for concern. What holds us together is much stronger than what separates us. We have a common mission to actively enhance the lives of the diverse communities we serve through engagement with our collections. We are also in a constant state of flux, responding to continuing change in those communities.

My six principles attempt to reflect a museum world in 2017, bonded and rooted in the communities it serves – a reality for some museums, a vision to aim for amongst others. In practice we operate in an age like no other with opportunities to inspire and involve our users that our predecessors could not even have dreamt of. It is surely time for ICOM to rise above the administrative definition, rally the troops and provide a vision for museum professionals and audiences to aspire to. I humbly submit my set of six principles as that rallying cry.

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