

## The navigators of what really matters

### Overture

Museums are special. It took me a long time to encapsulate my view of their overall essence. At their best they are:

- Places of anchorage: Museums slow things down. Vital in a speeding world the museum can be a haven of calm, a refuge, a place for reflection. You feel safe.
- Places of connection: Done well museums simplify the complex by showing the patterns of our past and possible routes to our futures.
- Places of possibility: By sparking curiosity museums trigger the exploratory instinct and so open our imagination from which creativity, invention and innovation can emerge.
- Places of learning: By using objects and stories around them museums grab attention, help create concentration, so encouraging conscious and unconscious learning.
- Places of inspiration: There is a visionary dimension since most displays or exhibition themes embed and embody ideals and aspirations that people, cultures and civilizations make and continue to make.

Rarely do all these attributes come together in one single museum or one exhibition or event. Yet seen collectively with an eagle eye view the potential power of museums seeps through.

Great museums have a mix of qualities. They are both ordinary and extraordinary. They are familiar, warm and sheltered so you relax and feel at home. Yet they can surprise and reveal the unexpected.

Ranging my mind across recent experiences there was the powerful Alexander McQueen exhibition at the Met in New York. A fashion designer using fashion to make bigger statements about the world: Nature and our origins, primitivism, patriotism, crossing cultures and the idea that workmanship and craft skill are paramount. Fashion suddenly achieves depth.

The "Banksy versus Bristol Museum" is another. Banksy, the graffiti artist has never shown in a museum, yet he managed to surprise and subvert. The first exhibition part powerfully reflects his social

commentary: Our sense of entitlement, craving for recognition, the absurdity of some of our institutions, our pomposity, injustice, the tragedy of war. Then there is an unexpected trail snaking through, subverting and adding to the traditional displays. Banksy is a master of juxtaposition. This makes you think and look afresh. Among the stuffed animals, there is a muzzled lamb. Who is this lamb going to bite or is this the end of innocence? People inspecting the fossils find a tiny woman pushing a pram hidden among them; or there is a mouse with a back-pack who had clambered into a natural history case. There were animated sculptures, including some breathing sausages that could make you a vegetarian in an instance, or a copy of a typical 19<sup>th</sup> century painting showing a rural idyll with a clapped out car at the centre.

A third example is Olafur Eliasson's Weather Project where he put a giant sun and mirrored ceiling in Tate Modern. The drama of the vast setting forced you to think about the fundamental forces of nature. Hundreds of young and old rolled around on the ground making shapes they could see reflected in the roof. The experience was transcendent.

People who rarely if ever visited a museum came and many came back for other events. This reminds us how museums continually need to be alert and inventive in luring, engaging and reengaging their audiences.

Yet there are many straight forward single story museums that can be equally powerful especially when injustice is involved. Cape Town's small District 6 Museum is one. In 1966 the apartheid government declared the area 'white' and forcibly removed 60,000 people to the barren Cape Plains destroying the fabric of their community life. The museum works with their memories. The most heart wrenching aspect is a great map of former streets on the floor where former residents slowly piece by piece are reconstructing where everyone lived. Similarly the Holocaust Museum in Washington is powerful. It raises a question. Is there a difference between the real and fake? Is the authentic and potent Auschwitz more evocative than the museum? Whilst you do not get the powerful sense of the original this careful reconstruction allows Washington to develop a richer, more inclusive, chronological narrative tying different components of the holocaust experience together which Auschwitz as the original does not. They are equally 'good' and even authentic in their own way.

The balance between content and container is key. Rarely do iconic buildings follow this through into the content. New Zealand's national museum Te Papa does. Its name which translates as 'Our

place' resonates with symbolic meaning behind which lies a powerful expression of the country's bicultural nature. 'Recognizing the *mana* (authority) and significance of each of the two mainstreams of traditions and cultural heritage - Maoris and Pakehas – so providing the means for each to contribute to the nation's identity... A place where truth is no longer taken for granted, but is understood to be the sum of many histories, many versions, many voices.'<sup>1</sup> This sensibility is partly built into the physical fabric. A long, noble, reflection-inducing staircase proceeds past outward-looking bays towards the top, where a dramatic promontory projects out towards the drama of sea and sky, before we reach the *marae atea* (the traditional Maori meeting place) the symbolic home for all New Zealanders. This requires little explanation and is instinctively understood.

Museums are essentially about life and I am adopting a slightly serious tone so far. Yet, of course, there are museums of the ordinary and day to day, various industries, the quirky, the collections of the obsessives that need to be housed. I have been to several bread museums or those of literary figures, textile, coal, steel, the military, toys, urban planning and even a gulasch and sex museum as well as the museum of barbed wire and bad art. Yet it is only when I think of them together as a panoply of possibilities that their bigger message becomes clearer.

Why does all this matter? Let's take a step back and look at the larger context within which the museum must operate.

### **Setting the scene**

Everyone and everything is caught up in a maelstrom of change. This has dramatic cultural consequences for who we are and where we are going. Cultural institutions and especially museums, at their best, can help guide and navigate us within these stormy waters. This dynamic is invigorating for some and scary for others. To name some instances of powerful transformation: think of the new dynamics of wealth creation and how the economy works; consider the impact of Asia's rise and relative decline of the West especially for our self-perception and cultural confidence; look at how we communicate including through social media and the rise of parallel physical and virtual worlds; assess the nature of our social bonding with fracturing communities; ponder how the inexorable rise of cities affects our overall well-being and whether their search for new global roles benefits us all; weigh up how the market economy can deliver the necessary balance between entrepreneurial vigour and social inclusion; does the rise of hypermobility and diversity create opportunity or threat so raising the question of how we live

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<sup>1</sup> [www.tepapa.govt.nz/](http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/)

together; will pumping up desires that will never be fulfilled through shopping lead to dissatisfied souls; and what will the impact of challenges to accepted world views and traditional forms and canons of knowledge be. Overriding everything are the dangers of climate change and the need to rethink how we calculate what has value and worth, how we behave and how we need to change lifestyles.

Embedded within this market economy and our social dynamic are notions of flexibility, fluidity, portability, permeability, transparency, interactivity, simultaneity and engagement. Infusing the system is an interest above all in process and experience; it favours the immediate over the long term; gratification over fulfilment; inventiveness over convention; openness over privileged access. Some of these trends are good, others less so. This has consequences, including how we organize, lead and manage cities, organizations and ourselves. Finally, crucially, consider how this affects our search for meaning, purpose and coherence.

### **Navigating complexity**

Taken together some say we are living through a paradigm shift. Certainties evaporate, they melt away. Old ways of doing things are challenged. Periods of history involving mass transformation, like the Industrial Revolution or the past fifty years, can produce confusion; a sense of liberation combined with a feeling of being swept along by events. Normally it takes a while for new ethical stances to take root or to establish a new and coherent world view. Today changes are happening so fast we feel we can never catch up with little time to absorb, understand and reflect then to act with some sense of clarity and judgement.

In spite of the unpredictables, you can interrogate and assess the complex cultural, economic, technological and social dynamics which shape possibilities, determine the direction of change and its possible routes. Yet, we need help and museums are there to assist, not in a hectoring, self-referential way, but in ways that reflect their personality and style. Excellent museums communicate with grounded knowledge, they guide with a light informed touch, they reflect broad cultural understanding and the ability to look at the world long term from a 360% degree perspective. Significantly museums can help us understand the difference between the trivial and deep, the passing fad and the profound or between trends that are linear or cyclical. Timescales of change differ from quickly shifting fashions of little consequence to slow moving or even glacial ones yet full of impact and unfolding with increased force like the ageing population. The question is where the continuities and discontinuities will fall. It is necessary to go below the surface to

discover undercurrents and tectonic shifts in the economic and socio-political sub-strata that shape trends and drivers in the first place. Unravelling the layers of change, each occurring at differential rates, means taking apart, bringing to light, understanding and then analysing many enfolded and interconnected issues.

Who can unscramble this nested complexity cutting across many disciplines, fields of knowledge and insight which might impact on me, us and the wider world? It is unlikely to be schools, universities or other learning or even entertainment institutions. They can assess fragments, yet are usually too discipline focused without ranging across the vast fields of necessary insight. On occasion a play, a book, a film or contemporary art exhibition can do it. The museum in its guise of public educator is very well placed.

There are issues museums should address. You say museum and think analyser and interpreter of 'the past', you think 'collector', 'preserver'. It is looking more backwards than forwards. 'Museum' does not trigger the idea of 'future', or spelling out implications of deep and shallow trends.

In the confusion many feel we desperately need some institution to give understanding, direction, greater certainties, yet avoid prejudice, and to help judgement making. In the past religion, ritual, tradition and embedded habit provided succour and anchorage. For museums anchorage often meant having an object focus. Understandably, we collect because, ideally, we can touch and hold. Past realities seep through the object into the now. Yet there is more for museums to contribute than solely through interpreting objects themselves or the idea embedded within them.

### **Orchestrating the important**

The museum can be an orchestrator of what really matters. To reach this full potential museums will change even more than they already have. Over time the museum broadened its appearance, its scope, its attitudes and way of communicating. Once you entered like a supplicant through a hallowed entrance of Grecian columns and then received knowledge ordered according to a defined canon or taxonomy. Now you are more likely to enter transparent glass buildings with open concourses reflecting physically our more democratic age. You will discover a diversity of views and interpretation and be made to think. Once museums were more internally focused, they now look outwards both to visitors and the outside world. They are more active than passive. The experts once largely focused on communicating to their peer groups are now more publically visible.

This chimes well with the need for museums to blend the past, the now and the future. Objects remain important, but it is the ideas embodied within them that count. In that sense the museum is an ideas forum. This might shift their focus even more to creating discussion, debate and argument about where we should be going. This highlights the museum's role to spell out urgent dilemmas and choices.

But there are higher purposes too. The popularity, in part, of the museum and other cultural institutions is that they are like the 'cathedrals of the post-industrial age' blending exploration, sense and meaning making.

Yet we need to be careful of overloading the museum. Once seen as sleepy and erudite we now want it to explain the world, to regenerate declining areas, help the image of a city, attract tourists, create wealth and job opportunities, foster social balance, create cultural confidence. Yes, they can help, but not on their own.

### **Storytelling and experience**

How do museums do their job? They tell us who we are, where we have come from and where we might be going. They show us routes that reconnect us to our roots. They do this through storytelling; stories that fits us, our community, our city, our country, our cultures into a bigger human and natural history showing us connections, bridges and threads that can enrich our understanding. Museums and galleries confront us with some things that are familiar and comforting and at other times they challenge us to look afresh at the world or to experience things that require imagination to grasp. A local history exhibition is an example of one, a contemporary art show of another and an exhibition of an unknown culture a third.

The best museums also provide opportunities for us to contribute our personal stories in an act of co-creation. We then feel we are shapers, makers and creators of the resulting museum.

By triggering imagination museums entice us to explore so providing opportunities for testing out, for chance encounter, for discovery or inventing. At their core museums and galleries are involved in ideas exchange where we the visitor come to grips with displays. In effect we converse with ourselves or our culture or those of others. This makes us think about what we value and our values.

By placing us, the visitor, at the crossroads of what went before with what could be and others have thought museums become platforms for dialogue, discourse and debate revealing the multi-layered textures that make up any society. In these processes of creating, questioning and anchoring identity, of imagining, re-imagining and discovery the artefact is usually the catalyst. Fragments of significance are put into a shape, pattern or theme so enabling us to generate wider meaning. Museum professionals help guide this endeavour.

When all these elements come together well we have a deeper experience – now the mantra of our age. An experience that has breadth – in that it broadens horizons; that has depth – in that it brings out the significant and encapsulates as clear insight previously scattered or unconnected thoughts; on occasion these even feel like personal revelations; and lastly experience becomes deep when it uplifts, in that it generates aspiration through inspiration. A thin experience, by contrast, feels as if it operates in a shallow register. It is pre-chewed or pre-digested leaving little room for co-creating or participating.

So museums come alive when they activate their resources, assets or riches. Objects lying dormant, especially for the uninitiated, rarely speak for themselves and so are unable to show their relevance. This highlights the need for interpretation where curators like impresarios help impact on museum guests.

### **Communicating with every fibre**

The museum communicates with every fibre of its being – its building, its artefacts, its setting and the way it projects to the outside world. What it feels and looks like sends out innumerable messages with its values etched into its physical fabric as well as its programming. Our older museums often speak to a former age of deference where the expert told the inexpert what to know and how to know it and where you – the humble citizen – were to be elevated by the museum experience. The physical elevations spoke in a more grandiose style, often going back to classical times with their Corinthian columns, reflecting a different kind of confidence and attitude. Yet good contemporary design has often helped museums to combine tradition and innovation. See the new insertions like the airy staircase in the National Portrait Gallery or the Great Court in the British Museum. Their lightness of touch feels more able to foster enlightenment.

The best of the old and new can communicate iconically so we can instantly grasp the totality of what museums are about. At times a sense of drama is induced as does the Eden Centre's vast glass

domes inserted in an old clay quarry in Cornwall or the Miho Museum's mountain setting near Osaka or the Ruhr Museum near Essen whose fire like orange escalator takes you into what once Europe's largest colliery that fuelled Germany's industrial might. At other times a more sedate, yet slowly penetrating feeling of revelation is appropriate as with STAM Ghent's city museum. Some even achieve their iconic power through clutter or sensory overload like London's Soane Museum. There is not one rule for all. The sheer diversity of museums and galleries is immense. Think of any subject, personality or specialism and there is likely to be a museum for it and there are probably too the many 'museums of me' - our personal collections. Each in their own way can be a centre of excellence.

Do museums need a building to project their essence and 'museumness'? Yes and sometimes no. A group of artefacts presented with thought, a thematic thread and good story can work in most settings. Indeed an unusual setting often has more power as it makes you look at things afresh: So even a park, a shopping centre or an exhibition threading through a street can work. It is important to allow museums to spread their tentacles into every crevice given the still existing fear of crossing the museum threshold. Yet when the building, the artefacts and the setting chime in unison each reinforcing the other the sum of the parts feel more than each element. The Louisiana Museum near Copenhagen is perhaps one of the best examples where the art, architecture and setting each enrich the other in an escalating way. This places strong responsibility on architects to avoid pure urban showmanship in projecting in built form what the collection represents.

The challenge for museums and galleries is to harness their physical assets – artefacts, pictures or documents – with their imaginative resources which lie with museum workers. Yet to harness this multi-faceted potential there needs to be clarity, confidence and commitment. Clarity about the potential of museums, confidence to believe in the simplicity of the museum's mission, and committed to being strategically principled about the big aims, yet tactically flexible to communicate these according to emerging needs and desires.

### **The specialness of museums**

A museum like many institutions has key ingredients – a setting, stuff or objects and people who work there. So what is the difference say between a museum and a shop, a school or a sports centre? Like in a museum we can look at things in a shop, we can browse, a quintessential part of the museum experience. The key differences seem to be in motivation, purpose and display. A shop is

focused on buying – an instant gratification whereas in a museum the gratification may take time and its results may be unexpected. In a shop the display is orchestrated so you are more likely to buy, whereas in a museum it is so that you understand. A shop tends to pre-chew its offer. What you see is what you get. In a museum you communicate with what you see, you have dialogue, often intensely personal, and its use value is more complex. In a museum you have a sense of legacy, of where things come from, whereas in most shops you are constrained by fashion. Although an antique shop at its best can feel museum-like. In sum a museum is an antidote to consumerism.

A sports centre is also a centre of engagement and a particular setting. You test yourself, you seek to improve, but does it help you understand your surroundings or contexts. In contrast to museums it does not trigger all the registers of intelligence focusing largely on the physical so neglecting the spiritual or cultural.

Conscious or unconscious learning lies at the heart of museums, but even more so in schools. What's the difference? A school is timetabled, more strictly ordered and structured often in a linear fashion, you get assessed, it is explicit what its targets are. It teaches you in an instructional mode. Museums are freer. You the museum guest manage yourself, you can take time, you can be there when you choose. It is an antidote to formal learning, but you might need a guide perhaps an audio guide. Crucially the insights of recent learning theory suggest harnessing multiple intelligences, focusing on self-regulation or lightly guiding fit like a glove to what museums can offer.

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