

What makes museums special?

The 1st Kenneth Hudson Lecture on the occasion of the European Museums of the Year Award

The Glyptothek, Copenhagen 17th May 2003

Culture at the Crossroads

Superficially the world of museums seems buoyant; their growth continues world-wide, and they are usually built by an architectural star. The October 2001 issue of ARTnews in its global survey alone listed £2.8billion worth of new museums, refurbishments and extensions. And that figure even omitted a large number of UK novelties. Why is there this curious burst of new museums? In urban regeneration the use of culture is now a central part of the toolkit whether as in the building of cultural centres or in the form of activity programmes. Yet this rush of activity masks a deep sense of disquiet on the cultural front. What does this growth say about the situation of culture? What values are being asserted? Is it all a matter of image transformation and tourist attraction? Or are the new cathedrals of the post-industrial age? What is the source of this disquiet?

1. In many places there is a resource crisis.
2. Sponsorship is often going to other causes that seem more worthwhile
3. There is increased competition from the leisure industry which is getting more complex
4. There is a greater hunger for spectacle and people seem to want all embracing sensory experiences
5. New agendas are rising to the fore such as social inclusion and diversity, which breaks down the accepted canon of a unified culture.

One response is to go with the flow trends, another to fall back on past justifications of the worth of cultural institutions; some become simply more commercial and others focus on their institution becoming an instrument of social policy. Yet is not the challenge for cultural institutions to argue their case in their own terms so that they can distinguish themselves from schools, shops or themeparks? We have to ask what cultural institutions are for in a renewed spirit

and why we need these special places to reflect the ambitions and aspirations of a society.

The world is changing dramatically in ways that amount to a paradigm shift. In such situations responding in old routinized ways will not address current problems. Many fields, pre-eminently those within economics and politics, have been forced to rethink their purposes, goals, and procedures. Think of, for example, in the realm of politics the collapse of the absolute categories of right and left; or in economics the shift from an industrial to an information-based production system. The world of culture has as yet not "stood back" in a similar way and fully assessed the implications of these new conditions. Yet culture is buffeted by the same global forces of change which will affect what it does and how the institutions supporting culture operate. Some say we live in a pick and mix culture with a fear of judging what is good or bad. Yet we find no difficulty when we buy a commercial product or service from the mundane to the special. We focus on their characteristics of quality as a matter of course. If someone goes into a shop to buy sausages they feel perfectly comfortable about grading them according to price, perceived taste, ingredients, look and quality. The same is true when buying a piece of furniture like a bed or chair, we assess then the design, appropriateness for purpose and skill with which they have been put together. Equally we have no fear in recommending someone to read a good book.

For most of human history expressive culture and its mediators, the cultural institutions, have been aligned to the purpose and goals of their society. There is reason to believe that today the situation is different. In the era of the mass-based marketplace economy ruled by commercial patterns of consumption, many cultural institutions have an uneasy relationship with the underlying conditions of the era. The need for higher aspirations still exists and cultural institutions have played a primary role in mediating these, yet the market economy does not intrinsically invite an exploration of higher purposes and goals.

At the heart of the 19th century cultural institution lay the notion of the democratization of knowledge, whose purpose was to uplift and improve the broader public to suit the emerging conditions of the industrial era and the nation state.

The 19th century approach to culture had certain characteristics - an underlying philosophy or ethos built on hierarchies of knowledge and cultures, on categorizations and fixed boundaries. Essentially, the elites invited the citizenry to become educated to a prescribed view of the world and its cultural order.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the unified concept of culture linked to social purposes began to break down. A sharper division between "high" and "low" culture emerged. High culture became more self-referential, beginning first with end-of-century 19th century aestheticism and then transforming itself, in certain frameworks, to the avant-garde movement, which celebrates the artist as rebel and secular saint. Popular culture, bolstered by the rising power of mass society, emerged as an independent force fuelled by the needs and possibilities of commerce built on the new technologies of recording, film, and broadcasting.

Also separating itself out in the twentieth century has been the "instrumental" notion of culture according to which culture's principal value hinges on how it serves various strategies and political objectives of social improvement or development.

Today, these three strands of culture -- the avant-garde, the popular, and that concerned with social development -- together with the continuing idea of the traditional culture of refinement, are in tumultuous interplay, causing a confusion of aims for those working in the cultural field.

Characteristic as well of this era is boundary blurring, the recreation and redefinition of identities, hybridization, the rejection of tradition, the empowerment of the young, the emphasis on individual satisfaction, the reach of globalization and the centrality of the new information technology.

Embedded within this market economy and helping to make it work are the 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.

Commerce has recognized that consuming on its own increasingly provides insufficient meaning and satisfaction. It has sought to wrap the transaction of

buying and selling into a broader experience to give it greater purpose. Experience is the new mantra and a union of everyday consumption and spectacle. The process is turning retailing into a part of the entertainment industry often blurring the boundaries between shopping, learning and the experience of culture. In this process shops can develop museum like features, such as the Discovery Store or Hard Rock Café, with its display of original artefacts, and, vice versa, museums can become more like extensions of entertainment venues, such as the new collection of museum spaces in Las Vegas.

Given these transformations we need to ask some basic questions concerning cultural institutions again rather than letting conversations be dominated by issues of technique and technology or arguing for museums in terms of their economic, tourism or image impact. Below we list a few without going into detail.

1. Is there something unique about the category of insight we call cultural?

What qualities distinguish cultural experiences from others? What is the difference if any between a sports and a cultural event or between culture and entertainment? Is it a matter of levels of insight which we cluster within art forms? Do we need specific places and spaces within which to gain cultural insight? Is there a difference between culture and entertainment, art and hobby or craft, between sensation and insight, between amusement and education, between serving private profit and public need?

2. What do we mean by *serious* music, *artfilm*, *serious* theater, *fine* art, *permanent* value? Does serious mean classical music – always. And is classical music always good. Is there good pop music and bad classical?
3. Is there a fundamental difference between private and public culture?
4. Is there something called cultural authority or is that an old-fashioned idea and what is cultural leadership?
5. What marks a cultural institution today – disinterested purpose? Judgement making? In that case is a portal like Google a cultural institution?

6. Is there a difference between the real and fake? Is the authentic Auschwitz more evocative than the Holocaust museum in Washington, which we could consider to be fake? 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' or even authentic in their own way. And there are many more questions.....

Museums at their worst

Are disengaged and detached from stakeholders and networks in their city or area and beyond. They are not embedded in their communities whether local or international.

They are uninterested in the broader concerns of society; they are largely self-referential and do not see the world through other peoples eyes.

They tend to talk to themselves and their peer groups, thus living in an inward-looking world - hermetically sealed and isolated.

They have a 'no' attitude to the world as when the public carpark might say 'staff only', rather than being a 'yes' institution. A 'yes' institution is inviting.

They speak in their specialist language so making communication, conversation and exchange difficult.

They focus on the tried and tested, so tending to operate in their comfort zone in a complacent way unaware of the world moving by.

They can assume that the world owes them a living and that they do not need to re-argue their case and cause in 21st century terms.....but let's not be morbid and move on.

Museums at their best can:

Tell us who we are, where we have come from and where we might be going. In so doing they show us the routes that reconnect us to our roots. They do this through storytelling; a story that fits us, our community, our city, our country, our cultures and even our worlds 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 to see the world in a new way 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 the recent Aztec exhibition is an instance of the latter.

Some museums too allow us to contribute our personal stories in an act of co-creation so that we feel we have become a shaper, maker and creator of the resulting museum.

By triggering imagination museums entice us to explore so providing opportunities for testing out, for chance encounter, for discovery and also inventing things afresh. At their core museums and galleries are involved in an exchange of ideas where we as the visitor come to grips with displays. In effect we converse either with ourselves or more publicly about what our culture or those of others is so we think about what we value and what our values are. The recent Madame de Pompadour – Images of Mistress exhibition at the National Gallery is an example as is the Bodyworks exhibition presented in a non-museum space.

By placing us, the visitor, at the crossroads of what has gone before with what could be and what 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 and re-imagining and of discovery the object or artefact, ideally real, is the catalyst. Objects especially when placed well in context and interpreted with subtle focus spark the exploratory trigger in our minds and of course technique and technology can help. Context is key for those not in the know. Only so are the fragments of significance put into a shape, pattern or theme so enabling us to generate some wider meaning. Museum professionals help guide us through this endeavour.

When all these elements come together well we have a deeper experience – and the word experience is now a 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 has height or uplift – in that it generates aspiration through inspiration. A thin experience, by contrast, feels as if it operates in a shallow register. What is offered is too pre-chewed or pre-digested leaving little room for co-creating or participating even if that participation is a conversation with ourselves. Sometimes too experiences feel like a spectacle that can rest like a sediment in our memory when communication devices are chosen well and aptly applied. The entrance at New Zealand’s national museum Te Papa in Wellington induces such a sense and at a more reduced level the experience of the Wildwalk in @Bristol.

So a museum comes alive when it activates its 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. What objects a museum has is one thing and how it communicates another. The caring curatorial role expands using knowledge to explain, to edit and select, to interpret and even to act as an impresario by helping us put the pieces together in a way that impacts on museum guests.

In fact the museum communicates with every fibre of its being – its artefacts, its setting and the way it projects to the outside world. What it feels like and looks like sends out innumerable messages and its values are especially etched into its physical fabric as well as its programming. Thus our older museums often speak more to a former age; an 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. And the physical elevations themselves spoke in a more grandiose style, often going back to a classical age with their Corinthian columns, reflecting a different kind of confidence and attitude. Yet good contemporary design has often helped museums to combine old structure to new ways of engaging an audience – see the airy staircase in the National Portrait Gallery or the Great Court in the British Museum. Today we attempt to live in a more transparent and democratic age. Consequently more buildings reflect a greater lightness of touch in the materials they use – glass, light-weight steel or tented structures, or in the way audiences are invited in. Again the best of the old and the new can communicate iconically so that we grasp the totality of what a museum is about in an instant. At times this might induce a sense of drama as does the Eden Centre or Holocaust Museum at others a more sedate, yet slowly penetrating feeling of revelation as does the Imperial War Museum North in Salford and some even achieve this through clutter or sensory overload as does

the Soane Museum. There is not one rule for all. Indeed this could never be the case. 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. From the Gulasch Museum in Vienna to the Mechanical Toy Museum in Northleach and at the extreme there are too the many 'museums of me' - our personal collections or more weighty subjects like war or peace or science. Yet each in their own way can be a centre of excellence, but rarely are these possibilities completely exploited either in educational terms or more broadly to give advice in emerging crises or even for commercial gain.

Do museums actually need a building to project their essence? Sometimes yes and sometimes no. A group of artefacts presented with thought can work in most settings. This is important as we need to let the core of what a museum is - their objects - spread their tentacles into as many crevices as possible. Museums and galleries need both to attract people in as well as reach out as for many there remains a fear of crossing the threshold. On the other hand when the building, the artefacts and the setting chime in unison each reinforcing the other there is a power - a power that makes 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, the architecture and the setting each enrich the other in an escalating way. The same can be said for the Imperial War Museum North where the building is an intrinsic part of the overall message. In its own way too the permanent Epstein exhibition at Walsall Art Gallery fits its container - if the exhibits were elsewhere there would still be impact, but not quite at the same level. This places strong responsibility on the architect to avoid pure urban showmanship so as to project 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 and these must lie with those who work in museums. More and more we need to become good storytellers. Indeed the vast network of museums suggest there are many stories still to be told and they can be told in many ways. Each may have something original to say - many grounded deeply in their locality whilst others may stretch horizons far more widely. But like a lattice work the overall network represents an under-considered strength showing distinctiveness, diversity and difference.

When we take an eagle eye view we see there is a special 'museumness' about museums:

- A place of anchorage, which is why so often in a world that speeds ahead of us we see museums as refuges or places of reflection
- A place of connection so enabling understanding of our pasts and possible futures
- A place of possibility by letting us scour the resources of the past and memories to stimulate us to twist them to the contemporary condition
- A place of inspiration to remind us of the visions, ideals and aspirations we have made for ourselves and continue to make
- A place of learning ...as when these things come together we know more about ourselves, our surroundings, what things work or don't work and how things could be made better

Yet to harness this multi-faceted potential there needs to be renewed clarity, confidence and commitment. Clarity in knowing what one is and clarity in cutting through the information clutter. Confidence to believe in the simplicity of the museum's mission. And committed to be strategically principled about the big aims, yet tactically flexible to communicate these according to emerging needs and desires.

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? We need to know. 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 a dialogue – often intensely personal - and its use value is more complex especially when confronting the new. 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. Crucially the insights of recent learning theory with their emphasis on harnessing multiple intelligences, their focus on self-regulation, the lightly guided giving of direction and possibilities of reflection fit like a glove to what museums can offer.

And let's not forget expertise especially when appropriately applied, used with discretion and an open mind. Many of the new museums are containers without content – the expertise to tell the story is lacking. That is why the Imperial War Museum works and others to remain nameless do not. Yet to interpret well what a museum can offer requires good orchestration and pacing devices so that visitors can enter at different levels and go deeper as desired. It may be that a curator does not have all these skills, but in a team they may be available.

Leadership and authority

This brings us to cultural institutions and leadership. An institution is anything that is systematic, has a process, a code of rules, a memory and a plan. As such it embodies and establishes unifying values, ideals, goals and procedures through which it seeks to build legitimacy and respect for its purposes. A cultural institution whatever its subject focus or geographical location is concerned qualities such as identity, memory and creativity. By reflecting on culture it harnesses memory, creates identity and by negotiating and arguing about values it fosters creativity. Culture is society's lodestar, reminding it of its purposes and goals. A cultural institution is its mediating mechanism.

But what sort of leadership does it need now? Formerly a person who understood the cultural was seen as a leader and education put stress on cultural knowledge. Yet the focus on instrumental reasoning has shifted leadership from cultural

authority to economic, administrative and management authority and their judgements - attributes that can be applied to any domain. These forms of knowledge are also process rather than content driven. Unless culture creates a confident argument for itself based on its own judgements, criteria and indicators about what it thinks is good or bad its institutions will be run by people whose authority comes from outside the cultural domain.

Every era needs its own specific form of leadership to match prevailing conditions. In moments of crisis or dramatic change though transformational leadership is required and less the skills of the co-ordinator or manager. Cultural leaders will need to move from being merely strategists to being visionaries. Whilst strategists command and demand visionaries excite and entice. They will need to move from being commanders of institutions to being able to tell a story about the bigger picture and where their institution fits in so moving from being institutional engineers to change agents. Thus cultural leaders should provide answers concerning personal, social and moral choices – and through their programming gain legitimacy. The story should interweave what their institution could be and how to get there. It also needs constant renewal through interplay between their constituency and wider circumstances. The cultural leader will anticipate trends, appreciating feedback and will encourage debate about problems and possibilities. What are the qualities of leadership required from cultural leaders now? There are ordinary, innovative and visionary leaders. The first simply reflect the desires or needs of the group they lead. An innovative leader questions circumstances to draw out the latent needs, bringing fresh insight to new areas. Visionary leaders by contrast harness the power of completely new ideas getting beyond the ding-dong of day-to-day debate. One task of cultural leaders is to build cultural leadership elsewhere so we have the chance to put a cultural perspective on life centre-stage.

Charles Landry 22nd May 2003

Some of the arguments in this talk are elaborated in:

'Culture at the Crossroads: Culture and Cultural Institutions at the beginning of the 21st century' By Marc Pachter & Charles Landry 120 pages £9.00 Pub. date 2002 ISBN 1 873667 13 2 and

'The Creative City: A toolkit for urban innovators', by Charles Landry, 300 pages, Pub. date 2000 ISBN 1 85383 613 3

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