

Museums Change Lives

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The great American museum thinker and writer, Stephen Weil wrote that “if lacking in social value, museums will be useless”. He also wrote that museums must be a person’s “best and closest friend”;

he reminded us that “museums exist in the service of the public” and that museums must not become “bottom-line driven” or the purpose of the museum is lost.

Such thoughts would once have been viewed as radical and even eccentric, but are now accepted as wise by many people who work in museums all over the world.

Nonetheless, it would be complacent for museum directors like myself to assume that all people working in museums agree with these views, or that all museums, even those that are subsidised by the public through taxation, follow the teachings of Professor Weil,

because they do not.

Many who work in museums still adhere to a less ambitious view of the role of museums, one wherein the custody and care of collections is an end in itself, rather than a part of a process of public enlightenment and improvement, which is what Stephen Weil believed.

What the modern, socially relevant museum needs to do is to embed a corporate commitment to a particular set of roles that are different from the roles museums came to play for most of the 20th century.

This notion of corporate commitment without which social relevance will not be attained was captured neatly in a British Government publication entitled *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All*, published in May 2000, so now nearly 16 years old and largely forgotten as the political climate has changed, but powerful nonetheless:

If museums, galleries and archives are to make a real difference, their goal should be to act as vehicles for positive social change...they must become an agent of social regeneration and a vehicle for broad social change...

Every member of staff and governing body of museums, galleries and archives has a role to play in achieving greater social inclusion. Poor

staff attitudes and prejudices can be a major barrier to inclusion, and success in implementing a social inclusion policy relies on the commitment of staff...many organisations will need to bring about internal cultural change...

(Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All, Department for Culture Media and Sport, London, May 2000)

This publication included within it the ***Purpose and Beliefs of Tyne and Wear Museums*** (TWM, the organisation of which I was then Director), which stated that the Mission of TWM was

To help people determine their place in the world, and understand their identities, so enhancing their self-respect and their respect for others.

Among the Beliefs of TWM were the following:

***We make a positive difference to people's lives
We inspire and challenge people to explore their world and open up new horizons.
We act as an agent of social and economic regeneration.***

One respondent to this publication (who claimed to have worked in the British Museum) wrote that its very title was:

***...Politically Correct stupidity. These...organisations have nothing to do with social change; they exist
(a) to collect precious objects/pictures/documents from the past
(b) to conserve and preserve them for future generations
(c) to enable scholars to study them and publish information, and
(d) to display and exhibit them for the benefit of such members of the public who are sufficiently civilised to be capable of appreciating history, art and scholarship. By definition this excluded lunatics, drunks, druggies, vandals and thieves, of whatever socio-economic group, age, skin colour or sexual perversion.***

(Letter addressed to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 6 August 2000)

The respondent was so outraged by Tyne and Wear Museums' Statement of Beliefs that she suggested TWM was a "**weird religious cult**" rather than a museum: "**They seem to have forgotten the genuine purpose of a museum...**".

This woman was not, I think, a disciple of Stephen Weil...

Which brings to mind someone else who, I think, was not a fan of the Weil Way either – one Richard Dorment, one time eminent Art critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, who, the very week before being presented with his award as British Art Critic of the Year by the judges of the Hawthornden Prize for art criticism, wrote of our new display at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle:

Poor in design and vacuous in content, Art on Tyneside proved to be the most abysmal museum installation I've ever encountered. But it was clear from comments in the visitors' book that with some sectors of the public, Art on Tyneside has been popular. I suppose one must accept this. If some visitors are so unimaginative that they need such half-baked gimmicks to make history come alive, then by all means let them have them. But not in an art museum...

It is the policy of the Laing to make Art More Accessible to the People" reads a large notice at the entrance to the museum, signed by a Mr Barney Rice.

Yes, but accessible to which people?

Ay, there's the rub, accessible to which people?

Barney Rice, by the way, was the elected Councillor for the poverty-stricken Walkergate ward in Newcastle, and Chairman of the Tyne and Wear Joint Museums Committee. What I think Councillor Rice was looking for, in return for the taxpayers' money that was spent on the Laing Art Gallery, was that the gallery should actually try to give some benefit to the public at large, such as the many children in his ward who were given breakfast at school because they were never given any at home (as opposed to the kind of metropolitan elitist snobs represented by Richard Dormant).

Now, many of us may find these comments laughably horrible, but they indicate what those of us who want to modernise museums are up against, and we must never forget that not everyone wants to join us on this journey. Not everyone wants to be a guest at the inclusive party.

That's why we need to be clear and determined in our public commitment to being agents for social good.

At this point I want to share with you the current Mission and Values of National Museums Liverpool, the museum service of which I have been Director since 2001:

Mission:

To be the world's leading example of an inclusive museum service

Values:

- 1. We are an inclusive and democratic museum service; we aim to maximise social impact and educational benefit for all - museums change lives.***
- 2. We believe that museums are fundamentally educational in purpose.***

3. ***We believe that museums are places for ideas and dialogue, that use collections to inspire people; we do not shy away from controversy.***
4. ***We believe in the power of museums to help promote good and active citizenship, and to act as agents of social change: we believe in the concept of, and campaign for, social justice.***

Strategy Statement:

Liverpool's cultural offer, including its museums, is without parallel in any regional city. But National Museums Liverpool operates in a city region which continues to struggle with a host of social and economic problems.

NML operates in this hugely challenging environment, and we carry a very great responsibility in terms of delivering first class museums that, as part of a wider pattern of cultural and educational provision, can enhance wellbeing, confidence and social connectedness. In a period of public spending reductions this responsibility grows even greater, and NML can help mitigate the social consequences of adverse economic conditions.

In July 2013, so not quite 3 years ago, the British Museums Association, of which I currently have the honour to be President, published a document entitled ***Museums Change Lives***, which outlines the MA's vision for the impact of museums (*Museums Change Lives: the MA's Vision for the Impact of Museums, Museums Association, London, July 2013*).

This is a policy guidance from the world's oldest and most influential professional museum association, that urges museums to behave in certain ways that go far beyond that of collecting and conserving, and it is having a profound impact globally.

Among a host of important observations about museums, the document states that:

- ***Every museum is different, but all can find ways of maximising their social impact.***
- ***Active museum participation changes museums for the better.***
- ***Museums foster questioning, debate and critical thinking.***
- ***Social justice is at the heart of the impact of museums.***
- ***Museums are not neutral spaces.***

You will, I think, see the influence that our approach at National Museums Liverpool has had on this key document.

Museums Change Lives cites three Principles that relate to museums. The first of these is:

Museums enhance wellbeing (*Everyone is entitled to an excellent museum experience that meets their needs*)

I would cite as an example of this the work we are undertaking in National Museums Liverpool (NML) with older people who are suffering or otherwise living with dementia, the great scourge of old age. As more and more people are living longer in all nations, the issues raised by dementia are becoming more and more significant, not least in the sheer scale of the economic costs of addressing the condition.

Personally, I know of no-one who is untouched by the issue.

NML's dementia project is entitled *House of Memories*, and it is about the role museums can play in the training of people who care for those who are living with dementia. Two of the programmes that we run at NML under the umbrella of House of memories are *When I was Little* and *Meet Me at the Museum*.

When I was Little is a means of encouraging dialogue between younger and older people. It is easy for older people who suffer from dementia to begin to lose a sense of their own worth, as they lose touch with the present reality and find that they can be come detached from the things that preoccupy other, younger people around them. One thinks of social media, for example.

This may be the greatest tragedy of dementia. *When I was Little* provides the opportunity for older people to engage younger ones in dialogue about things they remember from when *they* were children, using the museum and its collections as a prompt.

Meet Me at the Museum is a scheme wherein older people can revisit periods from their past, periods when they may have felt more in control, perhaps even when they were happiest. While not everyone is lucky enough to lead a happy life, often we find that older people enjoy immersing themselves in a time past. As with *When I was Little*, the museum is the perfect place, as a dealer in memory, to help provide a service like this that is tailored for older people.

Ultimately, the *House of Memories* project is designed to help change people's lives for the better, and it seems to me that this is valuable, and is **exactly the kind of work only museums can do**. NML is about to create a new Department – not one which reflects the collections we hold, but one called Community Health and Wellbeing – a department the focus of which is on the **impacts** of museum work, on the outcomes, not on the inputs.

The Second Principle in *Museums Change Lives* is:

Museums create better places (*Active public participation changes museums for the better*)

The notion of active public participation is often misunderstood. It does not mean museum staff handing over the keys to the display cases to everyone who fancies having a go. It does mean the museum being open-minded about the range of exhibits it might show, and activities it might organise, and having a dialogue with people outside the museum structure that can lead in all sorts of interesting directions.

An example of this in Liverpool is *Made Up – the Liverpool Look*, an exhibition curated by teenage girls in the Museum of Liverpool, which brought to the museum a very fun look at fashion, using ‘Barbie’ dolls. This exhibition utilises the idea of using makeup, but is also a play on words, because to be “made up”, as many of you will know, is a Liverpool way of saying you are very happy about something.

Museum curators simply could not have shown the insight into current fashion that the young women who created *Made Up* were able to do. Moreover, we often agonise about how to get teenagers interested in museums – well here is an example of how to do it – let the teenagers try themselves, and see what happens!

The Third Principle of *Museums Change Lives* is, I think, the most important of all:

Museums inspire people and ideas (*Museums foster questioning, debate and critical thinking*)

I believe this is where the modern museum differs most from its traditional predecessor, and in no field is this more evident than in that of human rights.

There is a traditional museum belief that museums should be ‘neutral’. I disagree with this fundamentally; no museum is actually ‘neutral’, ever, and it is a huge deceit to claim that it is.

All museum messages are the creation of the people who work at the museum, and while many of these people genuinely strive to present ‘balanced’ views about the world, in fact every comment they make is an opinion that could be opposed; every object they choose to display is loaded with meaning; every decision to omit something from display could be disputed.

Museum people who claim they present neutral views about the world are either being disingenuous or naïve in the extreme.

Either way, it is to the discredit of museums that many still like to portray themselves as without bias, as apolitical. They are, in truth, the opposite – **all museums are full of bias, and all museums are political.**

The difference between a museum like Liverpool’s International Slavery Museum (ISM), which overtly *admits* that it campaigns against racism and discrimination, and a museum that claims to be ‘neutral’, is that the ISM is being honest about its role in society. It has come clean about the fact that it is run by people who have opinions about the world.

When museum people claim that museums ought to be neutral, what they are really saying is that they should be left to their own devices, and suffer no 'interference' from other interests, such as business, or elected politicians, or lobby groups, or simply by people who do not see things 'our way'.

"Leave the decisions to us", they are saying, "we can be trusted to be neutral":

what nonsense!

Why can't they be open about the fact that control of museum content by one group of people is in essence no different from, no more nor less dangerous than, control by another group?

Well, at present, the ISM is controlled by people who are open about wanting to fight racism and argue for human rights, so we will seize the moment and do all we can to achieve these things, and hope that our successors will be motivated to do the same. We will not go out of our way to avoid controversy and **we will not try to find some spurious neutral ground where racists are accorded the same empathy as victims of racism.**

Here are some examples of the work we do in the ISM. Currently showing is ***Broken Lives: Slavery in Modern India***, which is about the plight of Dalits, formerly known as "untouchables". Up to half of the victims of modern slavery in the world are in India, and most of these are Dalits (the word means, 'broken', 'crushed' or 'oppressed').

Many Dalits live in extreme poverty and are vulnerable to human trafficking, bonded labour and other forms of exploitation.

Another recent exhibition was about the excesses of Belgian colonialism in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Belgian Congo as it was known from 1908 to 1960. The exhibition, ***Brutal Exposure***, revealed some of the truths of European colonisation of the African continent, many of which some modern Europeans still appear to wish to deny.

Other ISM exhibitions include ***Home Alone***, which was about domestic servitude; ***White Gold***, about the iniquities of the cotton industry, ***42 Women of Sierra Leone***, about the former British colony, the title of which referred to the life expectancy of women born in modern Sierra Leone (which today is slightly higher but is still the lowest in the world, thanks partly to having the world's worst maternal mortality ratio); and ***Missing***, about prostitution in the UK.

These are important issues for museums to discuss: our work should not solely be about attractive artworks, beloved historical curiosities and dinosaurs.

An exhibition which showed recently at the Museum of Liverpool was entitled ***April Ashley: Portrait of a Lady***, which looked at the life of April Ashley, born George Jamieson in Liverpool in 1935, and in 1960 the first person in the UK to undergo gender reassignment. This is what one journalist wrote about Ashley and the exhibition:

Feeling she was a woman in a man's body, she was beaten for being different as a child, then subjected to brutal psychiatric treatment as an adult. What makes April Ashley an "icon", as the show calls her? Her courage in acting as a surgical and social "guinea pig" is just part of it. She is being celebrated as a transsexual hero.

The fascination of April Ashley is surely that she raised all the issues around transgender life that are still debated today more than 50 years ago. In a way that was insouciantly subversive, she passed as a woman and was celebrated as an object of heterosexual male desire: she was a lingerie model for Vogue until a friend revealed her secret to the newspapers, for £5.

She was born into a world where boys who acted like girls were beaten and reviled and scorned. She lived into – and helped create – a world where everyone has the right to the life they need to live. Isn't that, quite simply, liberating?

www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2013/sep/26/april-ashley

A web comment on the article above reads:

We were very fortunate to be at the opening...if someone had told me back in 1974... that one day I would be attending such an event, an exhibition at a National museum all about people like us, I would have had a major breakdown. A fabulous exhibition in the most amazing museum I have ever seen...

Another example of an exhibition that fosters debate that I saw in a museum recently was in the National Historical Museum in Tirana, Albania, entitled **Stop Corruption**. This was an exhibition of pictures by Albanian schoolchildren who were asked to depict corruption in their experience; they looked at finance, politics and education, among other subjects.

This was a very powerful condemnation of modern Albanian society by those most fearless and outspoken people – teenagers!

Museums Change Lives states that "Every museum should have the ambition to change people's lives", and because of this not everything can flow from collections and their care. Nobody, certainly not I, denies that collections are important; but they are not necessarily needed in a museum that wishes to help change the world through the power of IDEAS – it is the ideas themselves that are critical and paramount.

We must not allow the absence of collections to excuse museums from fulfilling a social justice function and helping put right some of the ills in society through debate about, for example, child poverty, racism or homophobia, or the subjugation of

women – all areas where museum collections may fall well short of inspirational power.

Museums Change Lives cites “ten actions that will help your museum improve its social impact”. Of these, two are, I feel, especially important, and both are key to how we work at NML; one is

Make a clear commitment to improve your museum’s social impact. Regard it as core business. Museums already make decisions in terms of decades about their collections and buildings; have long-term strategic goals for your impact too.

A museum should do this through its Mission, Values and Strategic Plan.

The second key action in *Museums Change Lives* is:

Seek out and connect with suitable partners. For most museums these are likely to be local charities, social enterprises or public-sector organisations dedicated to having a beneficial social impact. There may be people in local universities with similar aims. Don’t be surprised if potential partners haven’t previously considered working with museums. Be ready to convince them that your museum can support their agendas and help them achieve their aims.

NML has worked with very many partners in this part of the world; they include **Claire House**, the children’s hospice; **Homotopia**, the LGBT activist organisation; **Wicked Fish**, a theatre company featuring actors with learning difficulties; **Hurricane Films**, who worked with us on what I believe are three of the best films in any museum in the world, in the Museum of Liverpool; and **Hope University** itself, an institution that shares with NML a commitment to social justice.

Indeed, we work with partners the world over, such as **Anti-Slavery International** and the **Dalit Freedom Network**. All such partners bring insight and inspiration to our museum work.

I would cite two international networks of like-minded museums and partners. The first is the **Social Justice Alliance for Museums** (www.sjam.org) which any individual or organisation can join (it’s free); and the **Federation of International Human Rights Museums** (www.fihrm.org) of which membership is also free. Such networks and partnerships are really important.

Referring to such partnerships, I once was reminded by a Taiwanese politician, of a quote attributed to the most famous of all people from Liverpool, John Lennon:

***A dream you dream alone is only a dream
A dream you dream together is reality***

If you agree that museums can and should change lives, and if you accept that cultural institutions have a role in the democratisation of society, then you will wish to note the **Taipei Declaration 2014**, which is supported by the International Council of

Museums Management Committee, known as INTERCOM and by the Federation of International Human Rights Museums:

Museums make a central contribution to the democratisation of nations by encouraging free debate and confronting authoritarian versions of the truth.

Of course, museums can only hope to achieve any of this if they are actually operational, and in the current austerity regime we are witnessing museum closure and other problems right across the UK. The current edition of the ***Museums Journal*** (the bible for museum people in the UK and in many other parts of the world) carries an article entitled “**Communities Counting the Cost of Museum Closures**”

Quotes from this article:

As more and more cultural institutions around the UK fall victim to local authority cuts, the heavy cost of museum closure is starting to be fully realised.

Each new casualty gives the sector a greater insight into the consequences of closing the doors on established institutions that are deeply embedded in their communities and house irreplaceable heritage.

Lancashire is one of the worst-hit areas...

Referring to the threat of imminent closure by Lancashire County Council of Queen Street Mill near Burnley and Helmshore Mills Textile Museum, a former employee at Helmshore said:

I don't know how you can teach your children about an area when there is none of its history left...We are losing the area's entire heritage. There were about 3,000 mills in the east Lancashire area during the mid-1800s, and now we just have these two working ones left. If they go, then that heritage is completely lost forever.

Other serious problems were cited in the article at Durham (where the Durham Light Infantry Museum is due to close on 1 April); Kirklees Museums in Yorkshire; the DH Lawrence Heritage Centre in Nottinghamshire; the Haig Pit Mining Museum in Whitehaven, and Bede's World in Jarrow (which closed last month, but which I am told may now have been rescued). Snibston Discovery Museum in Leicestershire closed last July and was demolished within the past two weeks. None of these museums, you will note, is sited in an area of low deprivation.

The now infamous sale of an ancient Egyptian statue of Sekhemka the scribe by Northampton Borough Council in July 2014 has not yet been followed by a raft of further sell-offs of museum collections...But the nation is sleepwalking into a situation where our irreplaceable cultural heritage is in deep trouble.

In Liverpool we have suffered cuts in our budget from government of about 25%, and as a result we have lost about 140 jobs. We are reintroducing admission charges for some exhibitions and for entry to our Planetarium; and we will soon introduce charges for schools to use our museums.

Time will tell whether these actions have an adverse effect on use of museums by low income families, but my guess is that they will.

In conclusion, we should never underestimate the power of museums to impact upon people through education, but museums need not to be, in the words of Stephen Weil, “bottom-line driven”, any more than our health or education provision should be “bottom-line driven”.

If we want to see more attacks on decency and democracy such as that delivered upon Liverpool last week by the North West Infidels, then by all means let us keep closing museums and ignoring their power to change lives.

Just in case you think this is a northern problem, or a problem for bigger museums, I would like to finish by quoting from a blog I read recently, by someone calling herself “tinctureofmuseum”.

The blog is entitled **Loving and losing the small museum – the Museum of Fire, Edinburgh**

I see news of museum closure more and more...I force myself not to get too involved, I have not written on museum cuts since my series of posts on the destruction of my local museum in Bromley...there is a little hole in my heart where Bromley Museum used to be. There are just memories there now. It is where my volunteering all began and I still miss it. My whole family does, no more half term and summer fun, no more enjoying the Priory building, no more working with local families.

I met the curator and education officer a few weeks ago, both made redundant in the closure. We sat in the splendour of the V&A café, we could barely speak of Bromley Museum, too raw, too much sadness there.

But for this blog I write not for Bromley but for the Museum of Fire in Edinburgh. A beautiful, small, quirky, volunteer run museum and under threat of closure. Again my heart is breaking. We visited Edinburgh in 2013, a big thing for us, the first time the whole family (all five of us) had flown in a plane. It may seem a simple thing to many people but when you have a daughter with autism every new experience is fraught with complications..

The writer goes on to describe how the family were admitted to the Museum of Fire by a woman who had a key, despite its being closed when they arrived.

She probably shouldn't have done it, she may have even said “Don't tell anyone”. But she did and I am bloody glad because it was a beautiful,

well cared for lovely museum...we need museums like this, the small, unusual and quirky...For us, the big museums are often out of reach, too busy, too crowded, too noisy. My daughter struggles, but the small, quiet and quirky? Well they are perfect. If we keep going the way we are with museum cuts that (big museums) is all we will have left...Our heritage, our history, our quirky collecting natures are being eroded and erased by the need to make financial savings, to economise, to pare down and re-shape...We shall be the poorer for the loss of the small museum...

I look at my kids, one collects ponies, large and small, mainly plastic and furry, not real ones thank goodness. I remember when my other daughter collected Moshi Monsters, I constantly find them around the house, General Fuzuki and Lady Goo Goo.

It is in our nature to collect, to keep and to share. It is what we do and yet we seem content to let our story houses, our heritage and history slip away. Contents sold, split and collections lost....next time it might be your favourite small museum that is in line for the axe...

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Related information:

www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk

www.intercom.museum

www.sjam.org

www.fihrm.org

www.museumsassociation.org