

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

AM Session:

1. Postcards

To enable participants to begin to get to know each other and start thinking together, the day opened with a session in which, in pairs, they chose from a selection of a postcards an image which represented the future of museums. A few of these choices were:

A postcard showing Richard Buckminster Fuller. Declan McGonagle explained that this card refers to turning an oil tanker, a metaphor often used about achieving change in museums. Buckminster Fuller proposed that to turn the tanker, you could create a string of smaller and smaller rudders, each propelling the other, ending up with a very small rudder which used very little energy. So the image is about a small action, conserving energy but having a huge impact. Anra Kennedy, paired with Declan, said that for her the card was also about how museums 'closed the circle': she had not known about Buckminster Fuller until Declan told her about him.

A postcard showing hoolaHooping nuns: Alec Coles felt that this represented democritization, sharing of skills and creating your own content for each other. Wendy Schulz, his pair, felt it was also about bringing a non-native element into your own culture, playing around with it and having fun.

A postcard of the London Underground map: Klaus Muller said this represented the network of communication lines which surrounds us, physical and digital: we are all part of a larger structure. François Matarasso, paired with Klaus, commented that it is also, like some museums, a design classic, out of date, and representing reality rather than factually describing it. Also it is a legacy we have to work with – if you wanted to design the Tube today, you wouldn't start from this map, but it is what we have inherited and so this - the museum as it is now - has to be our starting point. Andrew Missingham pointed out that it also made you think that the choices on the map were the only ones you had, forcing you to take certain pathways.

A postcard of a Claes Oldenburg toast-rack: John Holden commented that toast-racks are no longer used much and asked, if in 100 years no one knows what this is, who will give it meaning? This was a metaphor for the role of museums.

Rachel Kelnar summarized the ideas that had emerged from the postcards: the future of museums will be about making connections, introducing people to knowledge which is not immediately apparent, about objects which may be obsolescent, as well as to new notions of elegance, aesthetics and fun. The emergent meanings - that may be user-generated – could have huge impacts. But the future will be bumpy.

2. Café Conversations

The postcards session was followed by a series of café conversations in which participants sat at small tables to discuss two questions:

- 1) What questions would we have to answer in order to understand what our museums will/would/should be like?
- 2) What blindspots and mainstream assumptions exist which stop us building the museums of the future?

Some of the thoughts and themes coming out of this were:

Philosophy

Heritage only there if people can have meaning in it

Museums as validators of this creative process, culture in an authorised space

Civic institutions

Problem of sharing – because work never completed and museums hold on until the end. Shiny finished product vs process

Mindsets changing

Important to encourage people to use experts as a departure point, rather than abandonment.

Lack of clear vision as to what there for / mission

All museums are 'history' museums

Western construct

Authority, where does it come from? Has become hollowed out.

One size fits all won't be future

The assumption that museums matter

“I go to a library because I want to FIND something out. I feel going to a museum means being TOLD something.”

Sector

Public / peer / professional audiences

Disappearance of expert

Do we still have an institution? → Have to make decisions → Institutions avoiding conflict → need to be BRAVE enough, as we're so concerned about peer value
→ Fear of losing control

Control freakery

Expect too much of culture

Blind Spots:

- Tendency to do things right than do the right thing
- Difficulty in entering the sector
- Self-appointed experts
- We need the £ = or do you mean will?
- Dependency culture
- London-centric
- Peer acceptance and the desire for change
- Lack of will for change
- The cult of leader
- Lack of drive aspiration and ideas
- Critical approval
- Resource drain on traditional housekeeping
- The desire for peer approval
- Expensive buildings necessary
- Collections must be retained Discuss
- Vested interests

Role of the amateur: blind spot + fear of damage

Window of opportunity at moment - trusted social institution, using audiences → value of these trusted civil institutions at a time when politics, business etc turned away from

Opportunities for disruption are needed

Audiences

Younger, fewer will make assumptions that they can do this and won't necessarily think of themselves as creators

Enables feedback – opens up ways in which museums can talk

Visitors talking to visitors – beyond audience survey

Moment → connection → especially when shared

Importance of not being so arrogant that we can lead user use – 'virtual' audience will want to develop their own use.

Globalisation = technology

Physical audience Virtual audience

Local audience re-discovered

Relevancy → how make museums relevant to lives of visitors? → make their own story

Museum driven by beauty not working hard enough

Technology / Virtual

Virtual will be the starting point of the future.

Technology still very obvious needs to become part of invisible

Virtual audience / VISITORS that are brought to your museum

Future Questions

Museum → Future → Museum → Future..... paradox

Who do we need to ask?

What future are we talking about?

Do we assume everyone should experience culture? Yes, but it's the right assumption

Who wants museums?

Where will the competition come from?

What do we need?

What are we doing? Why? What do museums stop doing? What can't museums do?

Temporary – what is the temporary museum?

How much can museums afford not to change?

What are the corporate governance structures which will be needed for the future?

To what extent can large public institutions really move towards a democracy of practice?

What is for ever and what is ephemeral?

Is there a space for museums in a much more 'culturally' (not specifically ethnically) diverse population?

How long do they take to change? Glacial

PM Session:

In this session, participants discussed in pairs whether there was a question they wanted to think about further. The following questions emerged from this:

- How can we ensure that we're not just talking to ourselves (impressing our peers rather than talking to the people we're there for)? This led to further questions about the role of museum professionals today: to whom should they be relevant?
- Should we focus more on young people – could there be rooms open to only over 14s?
- Where will our competitors come from?
- If we assume museums will still have a physical presence, what will they look like in 2058? What will the brief to the architect be?

- What is the relationship between creativity, culture and heritage, and how can we make it more interesting and dynamic?
- Does it matter that sometimes digital technology makes virtual objects seem more real than the objects themselves (eg. the illuminated manuscripts featured in the British Library's **Turning the Pages**). Is the experience of being able to interact with these virtual objects richer than that of viewing them in the museum in glass cases?

François Matarasso commented that everybody seemed to be agreed on the need for change; the question now is to come up with practical suggestions, which enabled disruption at the same time as supporting and valuing continuity – a huge burden but also a huge strength. Others agreed that we are never going to be allowed to 'burn the collections and the building'. We are where we are – we've got to start from the Tube map. There is a lot of broad consensus and a lot of infrastructure, but what can we do in the next five years to begin to implement the new ideas?

Declan McGonagle agreed that there was no question that in the next 5-10 years the existing matrix would be changed; the question therefore is what can we project onto it? There will be no equivalent resource of any other model, so we need to think about how to energise the existing one.

Klaus Muller agreed that the on-site structure would not change, but what is being funded are new digital structures and change can come from these. It is already happening in some institutions.

François Matarasso agreed, citing the Tate's website with 18 million visitors a year, many more than the museum. This is something they are achieving with existing resources and they are providing a whole different kind of service and experience to a different audience. How can we do that across the spectrum?

Nicola Jennings said while these new websites are attracting more and more visitors, the content in them is often very limited. It is all only in its infancy.

Klaus Muller replied that our notions of quality derive from onsite structures and are different in the virtual world. There must be a reason why more and more people come to the websites. Maybe they are not looking for 'quality time' but for information, instant connections and communication, rather than to linger as we do in onsite structures.

Anra Kennedy pointed out that we don't know whether the 18 million people visiting the Tate website were frustrated and had a terrible visit or not.

Wendy Schulz said we need to be careful about web statistics. The important thing is not how many visitors come, but how many stay more than 5 minutes and whether their experience was good. Also, even 'digital natives' balance web

time with social time (and she noted how in the morning people had agreed on the importance of museums as social spaces.)

Andrew Missingham expressed frustration about the ideas of quality and engagement that were emerging from this discussion. It doesn't take more than five minutes for someone who know what they are doing on a website to get what they need. So we need to look at our assumptions about quality.

François Matarasso said that we shouldn't overestimate the issue of quality of experience. The crucial thing is to get away from these notions of hierarchies of experience between virtual space and actual space. Instead we should try to understand virtual space as a territory on which it is possible to build new kinds of museums that we are only just beginning to imagine. Websites now are as clumsy as early films. It is about understanding how these different spaces can connect, what their different purposes might be.

Sam Jones pointed out that it was important not to forget the part that can be played by television, that still reaches huge audiences.

John Holden took up the idea of early films, commenting that in Hollywood in 1905 anyone could make a film but over the next 20 years it closed down. Similarly today, anyone can create a museum online and perhaps we all should!

Nicola Jennings commented that the reason it closed down was that it required increasing expertise and this was a good thing in the sense that it produced great movies. Now when you go to a website you have to wade through a lot of uninteresting postings. This is surely not an 'empowering' experience.

Klaus Muller challenged the assumption that onsite structures were the only social spaces. In fact, Facebook is a huge social network. Museums haven't tapped into this yet.

Wendy Schulz commented that this was true, but people also use Facebook to organize face-to-face meetings.

Klaus Muller warned against seeing the two worlds, virtual and actual, as mutually exclusive. When we think about the brief for the architect building the museum in 2058, we need to think virtual structures too.

John Holden's Summing Up

At the end of the afternoon, John Holden summed up the discussion with the following points:

- Were we really looking at the Long Now? Or even the future? We seemed to be addressing current issues.
- Were we, as a group, typical or atypical of thinking in the sector? If we were, as I imagine, more advanced in think through the issues, what did this say about the sector, and what could we do about it?
- What was surprising about the discussion?
 - We spent time looking at what museums are and should be, but surprisingly little on what they are not (defining against 'the other' is a common tactic in discussion about purpose).
 - We spoke very little about the private sector, even though it is likely to become more important in museum life - in terms of increasing numbers of private museums; the difficulty of recruiting curators who will be lured into working for dealers, fairs or private collectors; the question of competition - who will compete for visitor time and attention, and in what ways?
 - we spent almost all our time on talking theory rather than practice
- Why were we having this discussion at all? (Does the Long Now reflect millennial tension?). The cultural model is shifting from a hierarchical, closed, patriarchal pyramid, to a more open, diverse, democratic, network model. In the old model, quality and worth were asserted by experts at the top of the pyramid, and the very existence of the museum as traditionally conceived is threatened if that expertise, and the 'natural right' of museums to arbitrate is brought into question.
- Our discussion was very important. As culture increasingly takes over from religion and politics as the space in which identity is forged, positions taken, disputes worked through, and meaning generated, the role of cultural institutions and the behaviour of cultural professionals comes into question
- At the same time as culture is becoming more important in society, many factors are changing people's cultural attitudes and practices. better education, cheap technology, social diversity and consumerism are creating a culture where, unlike in the late C20th the public cannot be thought of as more or less passive cultural consumers. They/we are now increasingly cultural producers, cultural commentators, assertive voices, eclectic consumers.
- All of this adds up to a need to renegotiate the institutional/individual relationship and the balance of power.
- We should hold a series of workshops to follow on from this discussion that would address to discuss the practicalities of that changing relationship. To start, we need to look for models that will accommodate

- the tensions between, *and* find the middle space between, *and* encompass the validity and actuality of the following set of binaries:
- In the physical realm - between built environment/material world and the virtual world
 - In cognitive space between the fortress of knowledge and the fun factory
 - between the scholarly and the social
 - between authority of tradition and the anarchy of the marketplace
 - local and global
 - object and process
- There is a window of opportunity for museums which might open further. Museums are already trusted, and they may get more trusted as financial shocks erode confidence in governments and corporations still further.
 - Success will depend on notions of equal relationship, with mutually generated meanings and social norms. The museum can act as guide, facilitator and friend.
 - Could museums be the 'trim rudder' for wider change - a point to renegotiate the trouble relationship between the public sector and the private individual?