

The Role of Human Rights Museums

Federation of International Human Rights Museums – FIHRM Inaugural conference: Museums fighting for human rights (2010)

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I want to consider the changing role of museums, and in particular to look at the growth of their social responsibility. This has been manifested in a number of ways, worldwide: museums have become more relevant to more people as they have broadened their approach to dealing with history.

Stories and ideas

Museums no longer look purely to collections for inspiration when relating histories – they now look much more to people, and to people's stories, and to ideas.

Emotion

Museums have become more emotive, and even emotional, which means that they are better able to communicate ideas.

Cultural diversity

Museums are no longer monocultural, concentrating on the histories of dominant social groups, of the privileged – they embrace the histories of minority or oppressed groups, oppressed and alienated and excluded because of their class, or their ethnicity, or their gender or their sexuality. Museums have begun to embrace the notion of “cultural diversity”.

Of course, we should remind ourselves that this does not mean all is well in the world of museums. The forces of reaction are strong and deeply engrained in their resistance to any challenges to the existing order, an order that demands that museums should be neutral in their outlook and interpretation, as though such a thing is possible, let alone desirable.

We have to remember that the museum world remains one where all sorts of outmoded ideas live on. Those who, for example, revere museums as unique and special *purely* because they look after collections of objects, rather than because they are also places where ideas can be explored, stories told, and emotions expressed, may struggle with the idea of museums joining in the fight for human rights, respect and equality.

So let us consider “cultural diversity” in museums.

This remains a complex and controversial field for museums. There is no easy consensus on how museums should tackle cultural diversity issues, and there are, increasingly, areas of museum work where traditional museum thinking is being challenged quite fundamentally.

“All human beings are born with equal and inalienable rights and fundamental freedoms” says the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. A noble sentiment, but we all know that for many people this is just empty rhetoric.

Nonetheless, “diversity” has become a keynote word in democracies in the developed world, as the notion grows ever stronger that we should indeed all have equal rights and entitlements, regardless of our origins, beliefs, gender or background.

More than this, the idea of “diversity” has taken on a positive and extrovert character, rather than merely a defensive one. There is not just a *hope* of equality and equal rights, but an *expectation*, and a *demand*. People today will fight for equal rights and respect, and reject discrimination in all its forms, and they will do this in a celebratory way – they will *celebrate* diversity and difference, because these are good things, not things to be ashamed of or hidden away.

Museums are – or should be – mirrors of society. True, there are times when museums need or choose to explore arcane or esoteric highways and byways, and indulge in academic or artistic and creative flourishes and fantasies, but essentially they, and we, are constructs of the societies in which we live, and those of us who are fortunate enough to live in democracies should respect this.

In the context of a discussion of museums and diversity, therefore, I suggest that museums, through their role as accessible and responsive educational organisations, should put diversity issues *centre stage*, and I want us to think about ways in which this might be made to happen.

We could consider diversity in museums in three parts.

The first of these, *representation*, could also be referred to as “presence” or “voice”. This is not limited to what we see in exhibitions, but includes workforce issues, language, behaviour, ethics, whole organisational personality. Such issues are of especial importance for museums that have a commitment to diversity.

Secondly, we have the *educational* role of museums, with particular respect to diversity. There are museums all over the world that I could cite in this context, which between them illustrate some of the many issues museums find themselves confronting when entering the field of diversity, most notably the human rights aspects.

Thirdly, we have action. Here I would cite the example we have in Liverpool, the *International Slavery Museum*, which first opened to the public in August 2007, and in the three years since then been visited by more than 1 million people.

The first thing you should note about the Slavery Museum is that it is a *campaigning museum*. It campaigns on behalf of human rights, and while its origins are in Liverpool’s role in the transatlantic slave trade – a phenomenon of the 18th and 19th centuries – the museum’s role encompasses many other aspects of human rights. We decided this was appropriate because we felt that there would be public interest in and demand for the museum to deal with

contemporary issues of slavery. It is, of course, a small step from slavery to a variety of other human rights abuses, such as child labour or sex trafficking. So, the Slavery Museum will always be rooted in the transatlantic slave trade and its legacies, but it has a broader role than that.

I often refer to the International Slavery Museum as the Museum as Freedom Fighter – a socially responsible museum which takes an ideological stance. This is not a museum that takes a neutral stance to issues of cultural diversity.

Injustice permeates this type of museum, because it explores areas where human rights are under assault. This type of museum seeks to transform visitors by opening up new lines of thought, by revealing often hidden truths, by demonstrating human immorality and suggesting, implicitly or explicitly, that there has to be an alternative.

This museum enables us to question racism and intolerance. We intend that the Slavery Museum should have significant social outcomes, challenging ignorance and misunderstanding, and causing visitors to reflect anew on their identity and their history.

We want visitors to the Slavery Museum to leave in a determined and campaigning mood, in a mood to take action, in a mood to do something about such iniquities. The Museum has to be brave enough to show an example, to show resistance to modern forms of slavery, and to racism and human rights abuse in all their forms. So we will endure the overtly racist attacks we see on the Museum on right wing websites, and the subtly racist attacks we see in the press and elsewhere, and we will express a view when we think something is wrong.

When I was a museum student in the 1980s it would have been unthinkable that a museum should campaign in this way. If museums are to be trusted by the public then they should remain neutral, I was told. Well, I don't agree.

Nor did the 150 or so international delegates to the INTERCOM meeting in Torreon, Mexico in November 2009, when they acclaimed the following Declaration:

INTERCOM Declaration of Museum Responsibility to Promote Human Rights:

INTERCOM believes that it is a fundamental responsibility of museums, wherever possible, to be active in promoting diversity and human rights, respect and equality for people of all origins, beliefs and background.

This Declaration slightly took me by surprise, because it arose spontaneously after I gave a paper at the conference entitled *The Diverse Museum*. And yet, it confirmed something we had come to believe at National Museums Liverpool, which is that there is a worldwide appetite for thinking such as this.

At NML we had already conceived of the idea of FIHRM, because we felt very strongly that the fight for human rights is a global one, and that we wanted to

do something to promote international co-operation in fighting for human rights through the powerful entity that is the museum.

We also felt a certain responsibility, in that we are a relatively well-funded British national museum, and whichever way you look at it, Britain and the British Empire is responsible for many of the human rights problems in many parts of the world.. One needs only cite India, Australia and New Zealand, never mind many African countries and others around the world. Such are the fruits of Empire, like it or not.

And so, what about FIHRM, the Federation of International Human Rights Museums? Here are some extracts from the FIHRM manifesto:

In 2010 National Museums Liverpool (NML) will coordinate the establishment of a new international museum initiative called the Federation for International Human Rights Museums (FIHRM).

The Federation will enable museums which deal with sensitive and thought provoking subjects such as transatlantic slavery, the Holocaust and human rights issues to work together and share new thinking and initiatives in a supportive environment. The inaugural conference will be held at the International Slavery Museum on 15-16 September 2010.

NML hopes that some of the world's leading museums and institutions within these fields will support the initiative and that this will encourage museums with fewer resources to join together in this international collaboration.

The Federation is about sharing and working together, but it is also about being proactive - looking at the ways institutions challenge contemporary forms of racism, discrimination and human rights abuses. We believe that these issues are best confronted collectively rather than individually.

The inaugural conference in Liverpool will be an opportunity for interested museums and institutions to have input into the

development of FIHRM as well as focusing on some of the most urgent issues and debates which fall within its remit.

FIHRM Council has been set up to provide drive and leadership to FIHRM, to ensure that the fledgling body gets off to a good start. The membership of the Council consists at present of representatives from National Museums Liverpool, the Galicia Jewish Museum, the National Museum of the American Indian, Te Papa - the National Museum of New Zealand, and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. While Stuart Murray, President and CEO of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, was unable to attend this conference in person, he sent me a letter, from which this is an extract:

On behalf of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, we salute you for establishing the Federation of International Human Rights Museums and for organizing the inaugural conference in Liverpool in 2010.

It is our fervent hope, that when we all work together, we will, indeed, be agents of change throughout the world – laying a foundation of respect for people everywhere through learning, dialogue and, most importantly, action.

The necessity and enormity of the task before us hit home in a powerful way this summer when Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, chose a special stone from Runnymede, the site of the signing in 1215 of the Magna Carta by King John, to be the foundational cornerstone for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. The inscription reads, “May this museum serve as a beacon of peace and hope for all the people of the world”. It’s a call to action we take very seriously and intend to carry out as we move toward our official opening in 2013.

David, it is truly my sincerest disappointment that I could not attend this inaugural meeting. However, I am pleased that we were able to have strong representation from the Canadian Museum for Human Rights to participate in the conference. I applaud you and bid you and your team every success. We look forward, with great anticipation, to the outcomes of this Federation to the benefit of humankind.

Securing bursaries to enable museum professionals to attend who are unable to do so due to lack of funding will also be a core aim of FIHRM. It is crucial that FIHRM hears and represents the voices of museums that may not have the financial resources of some museums in the West. For this conference we have been able to provide a number of bursaries to delegates from Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Lithuania, Malawi, St Kitts and Nevis, and South Africa, as well as partial bursaries to a number of other delegates. Thanks are due to Hope University (Liverpool), Hope Street Hotel (Liverpool) and Deloitte for their assistance with this.

In all the conference has attracted 95 delegates, from nineteen countries from six continents, and 65 organisations - remarkable statistics for the inaugural meeting of an international museum organisation.

The conference has been organised into four themes:

- **Museums as Active Campaigners**

Is it the duty of museums to actively engage current issues, not only in an academic or curatorial sense but at a grassroots, campaigning level? Can museums really make a difference? Current practices and examples will be particularly relevant. There will be four sessions:

- Creating a voice for human rights
- Memorialisation and contemporary human rights
- Diversity, social justice and education in human rights museums
- Making a difference: campaigning museums

- **Children, Young People and Human Rights**

How can museums use history to inspire children and young people to connect with their past and understand their place in society today? What are the most effective teaching styles to explore difficult and challenging histories? Are museums the best environments to promote successful learning in history and citizenship?

- **Active Communities**

How can communities become active citizens through museum programmes and educational initiatives? When do museum visitors change from being passive visitors to active campaigners? Can museums be the catalyst for communities to make a difference to local, national and international campaigns?

- **Exhibiting Sensitive Histories**

What have we learnt from developing exhibitions and permanent collections around subjects that have at times been regarded as unrepresentable? What are the ethical and moral dimensions which museums must negotiate when focusing on these issues?

I think there are some questions that we need to try to answer during this conference. They do not so much concern philosophy, because your very presence at the conference confirms that you believe in the importance of museums fighting for human rights. They concern practicalities.

How should FIHRM proceed?

How can we win support from international bodies, including money for our work?

How can we help our colleagues in poorer countries?

How best can we maintain international dialogue?

I wish to record conference's thanks to the NML staff who organised this event, Francoise McClafferty, Sarah Jones, Alison Crawford, Claire Benjamin, Paul Khan, Richard Benjamin, Carol Rogers, Amy de Joia, Tracey McGeagh,

Angela Robinson and Dickie Felton. I wish you all a successful conference, and I hope that this is the first of many discussions about this extremely important subject.