Museums worldwide are becoming more politically-aware and more interested in human rights. This causes tensions because the traditional museum self-perception is of being apolitical (“neutral”) and non-controversial. So, modern museums have to have people working in them, at all levels, who are not afraid of controversy, and who are able to withstand pressures from outside and from within museums to avoid difficult, contemporary issues.

There is no more important issue in the world than that of human rights – their abuse, and their protection. And there is no more important cultural institution in the world than the museum. So museums that examine human rights are of huge importance, socially, intellectually, educationally and politically.

While every museum is different from every other, the old but lingering idea of museums being ‘neutral’ places that deal only in the distant past, or in the sometimes elitist and incomprehensible world of art, is now outdated. No longer do all museums take refuge in dealing with safely remote histories; many today engage with the recent past and in the contemporary world, where controversies rage and moral courage is essential.

Museum neutrality isn’t merely the avoidance of as position, disguised as neutrality. The world is full of faux neutral museums. It is to me far less disturbing for a museum to adopt an overt, campaigning position rather than to deceive the public by pretending to adopt no position at all.

Human rights have to be fought for – rarely are they won without resistance. And this is where museums come in.

There are human rights museums all over the world; some are in Western democracies where there is considerable freedom of speech, and some are in countries where the quest for human rights can be much more basic, and where freedom of speech is limited. What these museums have in common is a sense of social responsibility. The modern museum takes its social responsibility very seriously, and is, increasingly, expected by the public to do so. These museums campaign for human rights; they do not sit idly while abuses and inequality rage all around them.
There are many types of human rights museum. Human rights can cover a host of issues, the one thing these issues all have in common being that they always relate to inequalities or discrimination of some kind – in education, welfare, economics, health, politics, employment, opportunity, wealth distribution; arising out of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, social background, physical or mental ability, age (1).

As we concluded at the workshop entitled Interpretation and communication: how to tell difficult stories, led by Ying Ying Lai at this conference on 22 September, human rights as a museum topic is difficult, and full of pain, emotion and contention; and as Mari Østaug Moystad said in her address Latjo drom – a good road, but also a rocky one?, on 23 September, “conflict is inevitable”.

Here are a few international examples of the growth of political awareness, the pain and the emotion and the controversy, excited by looking at human rights in museums:

In Vilnius in Lithuania can be found the Museum of Genocide Victims, a museum created as a commentary on foreign subjugation, where a sense of anger at the Soviet occupation leaves little room for any concept of reconciliation:

It was very important for Lithuania, which re-established its independence in 1990, to reconstruct its authentic history, to find out and to inform the public about the sufferings it endured during the years of occupation…Since the first days of independence, there was a plan to set up a museum…It is symbolic…that the museum opened in the building which used to house the KGB/NKVD/MGB…Its purpose is to collect, keep and present historic documents about forms of physical and spiritual genocide against the Lithuanian people, and the ways and the extent of the resistance against the Soviet regime (2).
It will be interesting to watch the dynamics around these museums in light of the advent of a newly-assertive Russian Federation.

In the newly-renamed (and magnificent) National Museum of the History of Ukraine in World War II, in Kiev, it is fascinating to see the changes of emphasis that have been brought about as a result of the current conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. The Museum was formerly known as the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, but the name change came about when the Ukrainian parliament outlawed the use of the Soviet term “Great Patriotic War” as part of a process of “decommunisation”. If ever there was an example of the politicised museum, then this is it.

Outside the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in World War II, Kiev, Ukraine

In Derry in Northern Ireland is the Museum of Free Derry, which describes itself as “an archive focussing on the civil rights era of the 1960s and the Freed Derry/early troubles era of the 1970s”. Any museum that deals with the Troubles in Northern Ireland will be characterised by anger, sadness and other extreme emotions. The same emotions will be aroused by the exhibitions in the Ulster Museum in Belfast.

In the USA, visiting the Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC, can be a deeply emotional experience, as can a visit to the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow, Poland, which also analyses the excesses of the Nazis during the 1930s and 1940s.
In Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, you can find Galerija 11/07/95, which looks at the Srebenica Massacre (Srebenica Genocide) during the Bosnian War. There is a strong sense of condemnation that typifies post-conflict museums, which are so closely related to human rights museums, in that they arise out of a sense of injustice and wrongdoing, and in that they are steeped in controversy and pain. Pain, in fact, was a recurrent theme in this conference.


In the conference, among the many key points raised is that of the role of emotion in human rights museums. This was raised by a number of speakers, notably Sarah Rusholme and Andrea Milligan, who said that “the emotional connection is stronger than conceptual connections”, and that “emotions are entwined with learning”; who spoke of “emotions as an entry into critical thinking” (3).

An equally important insight into the workings of the human rights museum is the notion of power and authority. Who decides what is said? Whose history is being presented?

In conclusion, there is nothing passive about the human rights museum at work. The key attribute of the human rights museum is the taking of positive action. The human rights museum will challenge the status quo, will evoke strong emotions, and in so doing, despite the complexities and challenges this behaviour brings, will connect with an ever-growing public.

Notes
3. Sarah Rusholme and Andrea Milligan, Citizenship education across Wellington’s nationally-significant institutions.