Do Museums Change Lives?

9th Stephen Weil Memorial Lecture

2014 Joint INTERCOM/FIHRM Conference - Taipei, Taiwan

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4 May 2014

At the opening of this conference, Dr Kuang-Nan Huang, National Policy Advisor to the President of the Republic of China (Taiwan) paraphrased the great American museum thinker and writer, Stephen Weil, in whose honour this annual lecture is given, when he said that “if lacking in social value, museums will be useless”. He also said that museums must be a person’s “best and closest friend”, and 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 (welcome speech to conference, 1 May, 2014)

I quote Dr Huang because I find it fascinating that such thought, which would once have been viewed as radical and even eccentric, are now accepted as wise by many people who work in museums all over the world. Personally, I am hugely encouraged that someone as eminent as Dr Huang holds such views about museums and their social importance, and is prepared to voice these thoughts at an international convention as important as this one, the annual conference of INTERCOM and of the Federation of International Human Rights Museums (FIHRM).

Nonetheless, it would be complacent for museum directors like Dr Huang and myself to assume that all people working in museums agree with these views, or that all museums people 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, Dr Huang and myself all believe.

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
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...But they clearly cannot be expected to take on this role at once, and the organisational processes will have to be developed over a period of time. This journey towards social inclusion will have a number of stages:

**First Stage:** Access – becoming inclusive and accessible organisations.

**Second Stage:** Audience development – reaching out to new audiences and creating events or exhibitions that are relevant to them

**Third Stage:** Museums, galleries and archives as agents of 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 claims to have worked in a British national museum) wrote that its very title was:

*Politically Correct stupidity. These three 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 TWM’s 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…”

While many of us may find these comments laughably horrible, 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. That’s why we need to be clear and determined in our public commitment to being agents for social good.

In July 2013, so just less than one year ago, the British Museums Association published a document entitled Museums Change Lives, which 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): Perhaps somewhat belatedly, this is a policy guidance from the world’s oldest professional museum association that urges museums to behave in certain ways that go far beyond that of collecting and conserving.

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.

The document 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 economic costs of addressing the condition. 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 people who are sufferers. 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. 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 form 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.

You can find out more about House of Memories on the NML website, [www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk](http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk)

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” 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 have a go 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 that 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, 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 stupid. Either way, it is to the discredit of museums that many still like to portray themselves as without bias, as apolitical. They are the opposite – all museums are full of bias, and all museums are political.

The only 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 don 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 or less dangerous than, control by another group?

Well for now, 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 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 an exhibition 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, reveals 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 are 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 (Japan is the highest); and Missing, about prostitution in the UK. These are important issues for museums to discuss: our work should not solely be about attractive artworks and historical curiosities.

An exhibition showing now at the Museum of Liverpool is entitled April Ashley: Portrait of a lady, which looks at the life of April Ashley, who was born George Jamieson in Liverpool in 1935, and in 1960 was 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 is 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 fearless people – teenagers!

I look forward to hearing one day of exhibitions in Taiwan about the Sunflower movement.

Museums Change Lives states that “Every museum should have the ambition to change people’s lives”. As Sharon Heal said to us on Friday, museums should aim to change the world but “everything cannot flow from collections and their care”. We had a discussion yesterday in the human rights session regarding the importance of collections. 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.

You can find more information about Museums Change Lives on the UK Museums Association website (www.museumsassociation.org).

I recommend to you two international networks of like-minded museums and partners. The first is the Social Justice Alliance for Museums (www.sjam.org), which everyone here can join (it’s free!); and the Federation of International Human Rights Museums (www.fihrm.org) of which membership is also free. Such networks are really important. As Professor Yu-Yen Liu said yesterday, quoting 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

Finally, 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 acclaim the Taipei Declaration 2014, which is supported by INTERCOM and by FIHRM:

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

www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk
www.intercom.museum
www.sjam.org
www.fihrm.org
www.museumsassociation.org