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Papers from the Conference

Sheffield Museums and Galleries Trust
April 25 - 26, 2007

"COLLECTIONS DEVELOPMENT"

A Sustainable Future for Collecting?

Nick Merriman, Director, The Manchester Museum

In this talk I am going to be presenting the results of research I undertook last year on the general topic of sustainability and museum collecting. It is not specifically oriented towards natural science collections, but I hope that it may at least stimulate debate for your conference. What I want to talk about today is the debate about collecting and disposal, and the need for an intellectual framework within which to talk about it. What I'd like to challenge, ultimately, is whether it is realistic for all museum collections should somehow be preserved for infinity.

Before I go into the substance of my talk, there's a brief bit of audience participation. While I'm talking over the next 5 minutes or so, I'd like you to think about an object, either one personally owned by you, or one in the possession of your museum, which you really wish you could get rid of – by passing on elsewhere or destroying – but somehow you are prevented from doing so, maybe for fear of offending someone, or because you feel professionally constrained. I'd like you to write what the object is on a piece of paper, together with the reason you'd like to get rid of it, and what's stopping you from doing this. Fold the piece of paper over and keep it until I tell you what we are going to do with it, at the end of my talk.

What I'll be doing this morning is arguing that the debate around collections development can only move forward sensibly if we cease to see museum collections as somehow an objective and cumulative contribution to the collective memory of the nation, region or locality. All recent work on collective memory shows that there is effectively no such thing: public memories are historically contingent. It also shows that forgetting is essential to the functioning of memory: individuals and groups simply cannot function without forgetting most of what is presented them. Yet museums are one of the few bodies which still subscribe to the notion of an inviolate collective memory, held in trust on behalf of the future. I shall be suggesting that if museums begin to embrace the notion that their holdings are not objective but are in fact partial, historically biased accumulations of the interests of previous individuals and that these 'memories' can legitimately be re-worked -- or even forgotten -- through disposal -- then a much more realistic and dynamic approach to collections development opens up.

Real concern about the management and development of museum collections dates back at least 25 years to the late 1980s. By then, through a combination of growing professionalism, particularly in the areas of conservation and documentation, and the growth of accountability in public management models, a concern was arising about the stewardship of museum collections. The principal catalysts were two critical reports, one by the National Audit Office in 1988 on a sample of English national museums and one by the Audit Commission in 1991 on local authority museums. The NAO report, in particular, discovered huge backlogs in documentation and conservation in the museums they reviewed, and expressed considerable surprise that they were still continuing to collect actively.

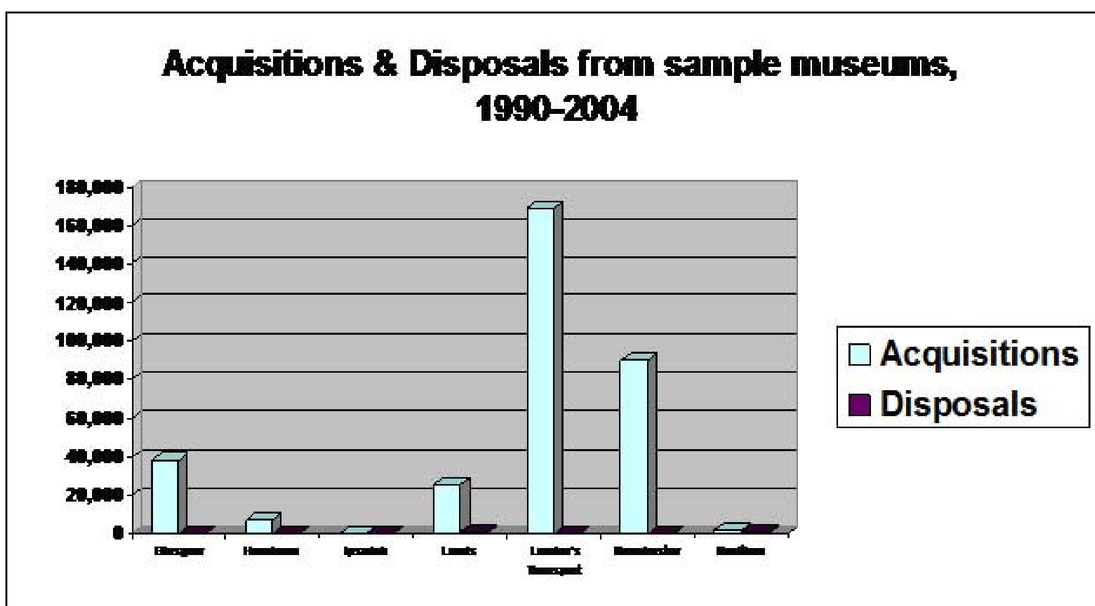
Nevertheless, it is still axiomatic in the museums profession that it is the role of museums to collect. In fact, the Museums Association report Collections for the Future says that current collecting is seriously underpowered, and that museums need to collect with more ambition and focus.

At the same time the document says that 'too many museum collections are underused -- not displayed, published, used for research or even understood by the institutions that care for them' (ibid: 14). One could perhaps forgive the government auditors if they still felt perplexed – why do museums want to continue adding to their collections when faced, still, with these kinds of problems? And they are very real problems. Benchmarking surveys by several of the regional agencies have shown considerable problems remain with museums meeting even minimum standards of environmental control, storage, and documentation. For example, a comprehensive snapshot of standards undertaken in 2000 for the South-East England Cultural Consortium shows that some 22% of the region's museums were below registration level in terms of environmental standards, 26% were below in terms of storage, 43% below registration for housekeeping and security.

The UK Museum Needs Assessment report, which summarised these surveys, produced for the Heritage Lottery Fund and MLA provides the most comprehensive overview of the state of the UK's museums, including standards in collections management and care. It showed, for example, that well over 90% of museums covered by the regional mapping projects had documentation backlogs; only around 45% felt their storage was adequate for their current needs, and only between 1 and 6% felt they had sufficient expansion space. What these surveys didn't show, however, was the rate at which museums were continuing to collect, and whether they were using disposal as a tool of collections management. It was this issue which I decided to address as part of the research I undertook earlier this year as part of my Clore Leadership Fellowship.

I surveyed a small sample of seven museums – the National Maritime Museum, the Horniman, London's Transport Museum, Glasgow Museums, Ipswich Museum, Leeds Museums and Manchester Museum (chosen, co-incidentally before I became Director). They were chosen to give a range of different museums in terms of scale, governance, collections and location. I looked at what they had accessioned over the last 15 years, and compared it with what they had de-accessioned. Now, I don't make any claims for statistical representativeness here, and there are some caveats about the data, but what I wanted was some kind of snapshot which would guide me as to whether there was really a problem here. If museums had really slowed down their collecting in recent years, or they were actively using disposal to keep their collections in balance, then maybe we didn't have as much of a problem as we think.

In fact, the results seem to show the opposite:



What is striking is that with the single exception of the National Maritime Museum where the number of acquisitions is not given on the same basis as the disposals, in every museum, the rate of acquisition far outstrips that of disposal. In five of the museums, the ratio of acquisition to disposal is over 745 to one.

It also seems that these seven museums are not unique. Search of the Internet shows, for example, that the Black Country Living Museum has 40,000 items, growing at an average rate of 800 items a year. The col-

lections of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford comprise around half a million items, and grow at an average of 4000 items a year.

Taking all of this evidence together, it seems that, while clearly steady progress has been made in collections management and care since the introduction of the Registration scheme in 1988, some of the concerns highlighted by the National Audit Office report of the same year are as applicable today as they were then. Continuing to add to the collections in the numerical terms revealed in the sample is exacerbating the existing collection management problems facing the great majority of museums. In short, one is driven to the inescapable conclusion that museums are in a continuing state of denial.

For this reason, museums seem inherently unsustainable institutions, taking the most commonly used definition of sustainability, that of the Brundtland Report of 1987, which defines sustainable development as:

> 'Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 8)

Although sustainability has a huge literature of its own, there are a number of common principles that can be extracted. The most important of these, and one which was brought out in the Brundtland report, is that sustainability is at root about equity, both between generations and within generations. This principle sees humans as holding the natural environment and cultural heritage of the globe in common with all other humans, past, present and future. The present generation holds these resources in trust for past and future generations, and at the same time is entitled to use and benefit from them.

Museums whose collections continue to grow whilst their existing collections lack effective management are unsustainable by this definition. They seem not to be meeting the needs of the present in full because they are not able to realise the potential of the collections they hold (indeed often do not fully know what they hold), and they are compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs by passing on these collections for them to look after, having added even more material to them. A simplistic cure for this condition would therefore be to say that the only way for museums to become sustainable would be to cease to increase their collections, or to dispose of as much material as they collect. However, this approach would fail to grasp the subtleties of thinking about sustainability. Sustainability does not mean an absence of growth, but rather is an attempt to manage growth in a way which does not damage resources and people in a significant way both now and in the long term. As such, sustainability is not a 'goal' to be pursued in a linear way, such that it will be 'achieved' after a certain amount of time, but rather it is a path, a new approach and a set of values that have to be constantly reinforced.

This way of thinking allows us not to be so pessimistic about collections growth in the future. The path towards sustainability has to begin with a fully strategic approach to collections management, which includes programmes of community engagement, documentation, storage improvement, acquisition, and disposal. Once this is embraced, then a sustainable approach to collections management will allow some continued growth of collections.

In order to do this, disposal does have to begin to play a significant role in collections management, but is still currently rarely used. This is because a professional reticence over the issue has developed, both through decades of training which has instilled a 'presumption against disposal' into museum staff, and because all disposals -- apart from restitutions to communities of origin – have been done on pragmatic grounds of saving costs or space, with no coherent intellectual framework within which to justify them. Making disposals on grounds of costs or space is dangerous in that it lays museums open to the charge of being driven by expediency rather than principle. Why not focus efforts on raising the appropriate resources rather then divesting themselves of collections? The charge can be made that what instead is needed is a review of the philosophy underpinning museum collecting and an examination of whether it still serves us well.

Towards an intellectual framework for sustainable museum collecting

The long-held 'presumption against disposal', which persists in the current Code of Ethics for Museums, has developed through a combination of factors, which stretch back to the original idea that museums hold material forms of collective memories which provide an objective record in which are located the identities of particular communities. In this section I want to look at the history of these ideas of objectivity and collective memory, and begin to challenge their utility as a set of ideas with which to structure the contemporary museum.

Museum Collections: Objectivity and Permanence

First, I want to examine how the notion has arisen that museum collections should generally be retained in their entirety for posterity, and how post-modern thought has begun to challenge this.

Several writers, most especially Susan Pearce (1995), have shown how the emphasis shifted in the 17th century – or Early Modern Period – from cabinets of curiosities which were essentially concerned with the rare and the curious, to the assembly of the normal and the regular. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's work Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge (1992) draws on the work of Michel Foucault in describing this period as one of a transition from the Renaissance episteme to the classical one, in which knowledge is derived from classification through observation and measurement.

A number of scholars have shown that, in their public form in the 18th and 19th centuries, museums are almost archetypal modernist institutions. Benedict Anderson, in Imagined Communities (1983), wrote that modern states use three technologies of power to control their subjects: the census, the map and the museum. Just as maps laid claim to tracts of foreign land (and clarified ownership of land at home) and naturalised the colonial project, so too museums legitimised colonisation, and placed the boundaries of 19th century nation states in the mists of the past. Museums were the storehouses of the very material which justified the possession of territory by a particular nation, and justified the exploitation of others through the explicit and implicit narratives of their collections and their displays.

Susan Pearce in her book On Collecting (1995) takes this further by arguing that in the heyday of museum collecting, which she places from 1850-1950, systems of classification based on evolutionary principles developed in natural history, became applied to all aspects of human history and human relationships. Evolution could be transferred to society, and archaeology and the discovery of stratigraphy, added a time dimension to it. In this period, she argues:

> 'The big collections…demonstrate the central fact that organised material is knowledge, and knowledge is organised material. The belief that material display creates both knowledge and proper social relationships is a fundamental aspect of the European mentality' (Pearce 1995: 139)

In other words, the museum is fundamental to modernism because modernism's notion of knowledge is based on material evidence, organised systematically to legitimate the social system which gave rise to it. The encyclopaedic nature of collecting (with the aim of completeness, and the rhetoric of 'gap-filling') were fundamental because the total collection was a vital element of the grand narrative explaining European supremacy.

Pearce has also noted (1992: 33-5; 1995: 389) that it is no coincidence that state museums and their collections emerge at the same time as mature capitalism. One of the important functions of museums in capitalism, she argues, is the role they play as a kind of sacred set-aside for objects which would otherwise be market commodities.

It is this notion of set-aside, coupled with notions of objectivity, classificatory completeness, encyclopaedic holdings and the notion of retaining collections in trust for posterity, which have led to such anxieties about disposal from museum collections.

Another suspected cause of the persistence of a strongly held 'presumption against disposal' resides in an

inherited, collective vigilance in a profession understandably sensitised to past decisions by governing bodies to 'sell off the family silver' for reasons which have been seen to undermine public trust in the museum and marginalise a profession, which is by its very nature, conservative. Such deeply ingrained attitudes are only partially rational, and are perhaps hindering professional debate on this issue.

The changing museum paradigm

There is now a strong feeling that, in reaction to the modernist associations of the museum, we are already moving into a new kind of museum paradigm, in which, to quote Eilean Hooper-Greenhill:

> 'The great collecting phase of museums is over. The post-museum will hold and care for objects, but will concentrate more on their use rather than on further accumulation….Knowledge is no longer unified and monolithic; it becomes fragmented and multi-vocal. There is no necessary unified perspective – rather a cacophony of voices may be heard that present a range of views, experiences and values…'

The idea of a single universal truth expressed in museum collections and interpretations is replaced by an acceptance that knowledge is contingent upon historical and political circumstances, class, gender, ethnicity, and a host of other factors, and that there are therefore multiple perspectives on the 'meaning' of particular objects or of particular displays.

The question then arises as to whether, in the light of this changed conception of the museum and its role, the notions of permanence, posterity, set-aside and presumption against disposal of the modernist museum, still pertain?

Posterity, memory and heritage

Examination of some of the literature in the wider field of cultural heritage and the anthropology of memory can provide some assistance. The starting point for this must be the growing interest in memory and forgetting, summarised in Forty and Küchler's book The Art of Forgetting. In this, Forty clearly sets out how, following the Aristotelian model, the Western approach to memory since the Renaissance:

> '…has been founded upon an assumption that material objects, whether natural or artificial, can act as analogues of human memory. It has generally been taken for granted that memories, formed in the mind, can be transferred to solid material objects, which can come to stand for memories and, by virtue of their durability, either prolong or preserve them indefinitely beyond their purely mental existence' (ibid: 2).

The philosopher John Locke wrote about the human memory being a storehouse of ideas, and the museologist Susan Crane draws on this analogy in her analysis of museums:

> 'The externalizing of the memory function in museums literalizes Locke's metaphor: the museum stores memories' (Crane 2000: 3).

Given these ideas, it is hardly surprising that maintaining the integrity of museum collections has been so closely defended. Museum collections, under this way of thinking, were literally physical embodiments of the collective memory of the nation (or region, or locality), and were also objective records through their tangibility and through the all-encompassing classificatory schemes which provided the collecting impulse.

However, increasing numbers of scholars – such as Paul Connerton, David Gross, and John Urry, have begun seriously to question this framework as a basis for understanding how memory and material culture can best be understood. They argue that, for example, advances in neurobiology have overthrown the idea that memories are in any way accurate or true, and have demonstrated that collective memories (for example of nation, class or religion) have been shown to be partial and manipulated for particular purposes.

From this latter insight has developed an interest in forgetting, as a corollary to the scholarly interest in social memory. It is pointed out that in order for individuals to function, they have to forget the vast majority

of things that they encounter, and that societies also have to forget much of their history in order to heal wounds, or simply because of the mass of potential memories available.

Others go so far as to challenge the notion that the past is a non-renewable resource. According to Cornelius Holtorf, this is misleading because 'the heritage' is created again and again from the available materials, and if some are destroyed then the values with which they were imbued become transferred to other materials. Whilst this may seem an extreme argument, there is surely some truth in the notion that heritage does not exist 'out there' to be saved, but is rather created through the actions of heritage professionals.

David Lowenthal, in an important article in 2000, summarises the implications of this:

'Time-honoured goals of eternity, stability, and permanence are nowadays increasingly discarded as unreachable. Cultural guardians who once hoped to husband heritage for all time, like ecologists who envisaged a timeless, changeless nature, are learning to accept that things are in perpetual flux'

And, a further quotation from him runs thus:

> 'In shedding claims to omniscience and omnipotence, in admitting that their stewardship can only be partial and temporary, heritage managers gain both self-confidence and public credence. It is not a sign of despair but a mark of maturity to realise that we hand down not some eternal stock of artefacts and sites but, rather, an ever-changing array of evanescent relics' (Lowenthal 2000: 20).

The need to ascribe value

If we begin seriously to challenge the notions of objectivity, permanence and collective memory in museums, then where does that leave us? Does it now mean that museum collections become subject to the whims and interests of individual curators? Does it mean that we can simply get rid of anything we like? It is certainly not the case that the only alternative is a descent into extreme relativism. What it does mean, however, is that the museums profession has to give far greater attention to the purpose of holding collections in museums than it has before, rather than hiding behind notions of objectivity and permanence as a means of avoiding tackling pressing issues of collections management.

The opportunity afforded by the challenge to traditional museum values outlined above is to free up museum workers to see museum collections not as inalienable assemblages passed on from their predecessors, but as dynamic resources, which can be re-worked to suit contemporary and future needs, and to be able to pass on a sustainable legacy to the future.

This in turn means that we will have to assess collections much more in terms of their value and significance for present and future, rather than treating all material as if it were of equal merit. Heritage professionals are used to ascribing values to the historic environment in order to make choices about what to preserve and what to allow to be destroyed, yet we tend to resist such categorisations of museum material. However, we have had Designation of whole collections; and there are now some good examples of museums beginning to grade their collections in terms of importance so that they can make decisions about their future management, including disposal. We also need to recognise that there are many different ways of assessing value – for example research, enjoyment, educational, symbolic, monetary -- and we need to develop mechanisms for assessing these for museum collections, drawing on the wide experience of other areas of environmental resource management, including archaeology and conservation.

We can never know what future generations' needs will be so we have to be clear that we are making value judgements based on today. We must also be clear that heritage is not actually contained within the objects and records that are preserved. Rather, heritage is comprised in cultural values, which society constructs and imposes on objects and the way in which we see them. Such values are inherently evanescent, a fact that we would do well to remember when considering the status of objects and the way we develop a sustainable paradigm for collections management.

Existing schemes to ascribe value to museum collections

In the UK, a few museums have embarked on large-scale 'rationalisation' programmes in which collections are graded in terms of their significance. A number of schemes have used different forms of grading, which are summarised in the slide.

From these, we can see that there will always be a central 'core' of collections which are likely to be retained for as long as possible. These, it is important to note, would include well-documented research collections, such as the voucher specimens essential to scientific research or the well-contested archaeological archives fundamental to the construction of the early past. Level of use should thus not normally be the main axis on which value is measured.

To take two examples, the National Maritime Museum (NMM) has been undertaking a Collections Reform Programme which has used curatorial expertise to grade collections from A to E, and then carried out a preservation assessment of those in grades C and D. For those in grade E, collections reviews were carried out in order to prepare for their disposal. Reviews have so far been carried out on the props in the Queen's House, the ordnance, furniture and ships' models.

Glasgow Museums Service is just embarking on a review of all of its collections. It has developed a scheme for assessing their significance by grading them on a scale from international importance to no importance. Assessment will be undertaken by specialist curators, who have to justify their choices by reference to a series of questions which examine its representativeness, potential for research, learning, creativity and display or for informing better management of the resource. Its provenance, state of documentation and preservation are also taken into account in coming to a recommendation for future use.

Conclusions and Prospects

So, what are the prospects for the future? I think what all this means is that we should free ourselves up to take our own responsibility for active stewardship of collections rather than feeling under the burden of slavish acceptance of our predecessors' decisions which have to be preserved intact for an indefinable posterity. This, emphatically, does not mean that we can get rid of anything we like. Rather, it means that curators and managers will have to develop the confidence to ascribe value and significance to collections, in order to allow their sustainable development. One of the implications of this is that expertise becomes absolutely fundamental to the process. So, one of the key issues about sustainability is how we invest in the museums workforce to allow this to happen.
I think we should recognize that not all museum collections should be accorded the same treatment and valuation. It may be the case, for example, that different kinds of museums – and different kinds of collections – might have different life-cycles and trajectories. The great national museums come closest to the notion of permanence and preservation for the indefinite future, while some community museums – for example mining museums founded as an act of collective community grieving for the passing of an industry and a way of life – might have a shorter lifecycle once grieving is over and recovery is underway.
Overall, my message is that, however much we may improve standards, we continue to operate unsustainably in relation to museum collections, and that this is no longer justifiable on intellectual grounds, on resource grounds, and on moral grounds in terms of intergenerational equity, so we must begin to be more courageous about our responsibilities to the future by getting to grips with the problem today. I would like to see a loosening up of the whole process of collecting, disposal and collections management. We could think of museum collections as ecosystems or habitats, which need managing, developing, sometimes growing, sometimes cutting back to prevent choking. The challenge for museum professionals, then, is to think through what balanced museum ecology would look like. To tackle the collections management problems in museums, and to continue to collect sustainably, will require therefore an ethical effort at collective altruism. This is something museums have never really been inclined to do, obsessed as they have been by the notion of collecting as an end in itself.

Finally, to return to the piece of paper you wrote on at the beginning. I thought we could burn them all in a bonfire outside as a ritual act of disposal, but this would be contrary to my ecological principles. So, what I suggest is that you exchange your paper with the person next to you, and as you make your way out now, begin a conversation with them about the collective altruism of disposal.