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Order from chaos: The new Grant Museum of Zoology, University College London

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Abstract

The Grant Museum of Zoology at University College London relocated at short notice over an eight month period, reopening in a new larger venue in March 2011. Whilst describing the relocation process, here I discuss the benefits of installing a gallery without planning displays in advance, a process which occurred in this instance due to time pressures. The new Grant Museum employs cutting edge technology on iPads to engage visitors in conversations about science in society and how museums should operate. We are also providing services to support academic staff to meet their funders' public engagement agendas through co-curated installations based on their current research.

Keywords: museum relocation; redisplay; public engagement; computer interactives; iPads; higher education

With its reliance on a human construction forcing an unnatural structure on a natural process, taxonomy may not be an exact science. What it does do, of course, is create some order from the chaotic processes of speciation and extinction. Looking down from the balcony in the Grant Museum's new home at a couple of hundred crates of specimens randomly piled in the centre of the room, I realised that the small team of staff (a Curator, a Learning and Access Manager, a Conservator and a Manger) and five volunteers had a similar task in hand. The move of the Museum had been nothing short of chaotic, its unpacking would follow a similar theme, but the end result needed to be ordered, comprehensible, and largely taxonomic (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Packed crates in the new Grant Museum space.

First, a bit of history: the Grant Museum of Zoology was founded in 1828 as the collection of specimens that supported the teaching of zoology and comparative anatomy at University College London (UCL). Over the years it has been added to by its managing curators and professors to fit their own research interests and fill any taxonomic gaps they perceived. Over the past thirty years many other London universities disbanded their zoology collections, and they came under the care of the Grant Museum. We are now the last university zoology museum in London (Chatterjee, *pers comm.*). In 1996 the collection was moved from its laboratory space under the rafters of the Medawar Building at UCL to the ground floor of the Darwin Building on Gower Street. The aim was to turn the historic teaching collection into a public museum. Since then the Grant has substantially grown in its profile and it is now one of the leading providers of informal natural history engagement in London.

In recent years an agenda has arisen to embed public engagement activities into the everyday life of universities. UCL is one of the six Beacons for Public Engagement in the UK (www.publicengagement.ac.uk), and the Grant Museum is one of the University's major platforms for public engagement. In recognition of our growing profile, and the opportunities that having a successful venue with an established audience can provide a university seeking to work with local people, a bigger and better venue was sought for the Museum. Alongside this, the departments we shared the Darwin Building with urgently needed to grow. In the end, our home wasn't suitable as we needed somewhere bigger with better street access, and our neighbours needed our space. Museums that operate within other institutions or services will be well aware of the disadvantages of not having control of their estate. Challenges arise when other branches of your governing institution do not have an accurate grasp of how museums operate. I imagine that being asked to empty an entire storeroom at a day's notice is a horror that hasn't only happened to us.

On this occasion, the request to move the whole Museum wasn't as bad as that; we were given a few months notice to vacate our premises to allow the Departmental expansion in the Darwin Building. Anyone who has undertaken a museum relocation 'properly' will appreciate that this isn't a lot of time. The space that we were moving to, the Edwardian former medical science library across the road in the UCL Rockefeller Building, was occupied until after we had to leave our old space. This meant that we would have to move the collection twice – once to store and once to the new home – and also that we wouldn't have access to the new venue in order to design displays in advance.

The inability to plan fully resulted in a great deal of surprising advantages. We were freed from the lengthy and tedious process of measuring every specimen's footprint and matching that to the available space in the new Museum. Being a former library, the walls of the room are lined with over 100 wooden cabinets that we could fill. Every one of them has a different height, width and depth, so planning the displays for 137 cases would have been quite an undertaking. Not only that, but without a full list of specimens, we couldn't even plan the theme for each of the cases. We knew that the collection was to be largely taxonomically arranged, with some sub-collections being displayed together, but how many cases each taxon would fill couldn't be decided until we were unpacking in the venue.

We closed on 1 July 2010. Over the course of three months the excellent specialist museum movers – Constantine – packed 727 crates and boxes of material. At this point we hit a set-back. The day after the last crate left the Darwin Building a massive flood hit our two store-rooms where the vast majority of our collections was housed. This was particularly bad timing as it was the same day that the Curator left the country to get married, and when I returned from five months fieldwork in Australia.

It had taken over two months to fill diligently the brand new stores in early 2010. It took a little over two hours to evacuate the soaked store where our 'dry material' was kept. Fortunately we had the old Darwin space empty to use as a laying down space. For the period of the Museum's move, it had been planned that we would have access to the stores throughout; we now had to pack all of the evacuated material to place in off-site storage (where it still is now as our flooded stores are still being repaired) until after the move was finished.

While we were closed we still had to fulfil all of our university teaching with the collection. The first job was to rescue the necessary specimens from the pile of flooded material, before they were sent off-site. Then we could pack everything else. This meant that over the course of summer 2010 all 68,000 specimens in our care were packed and moved, most of them for the second time in a year. With the stores drying out and the collection safely housed elsewhere, we could return to refurbishing the new Museum. A large struc-

ture was built to house the cases we brought from the Darwin Building, including those from the 1851 Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace.

Unpacking the Museum in the Rockefeller Building took about three months. Although the six main vertebrate cases remained largely the same as in the previous Museum, all 131 other cases were to be designed from scratch. Normally museums would plan for this quite carefully, but due to the reasons mentioned above, we had to make it up as we went along. Filling the cases went like this: choose a crate and unpack it, cross the crate off the list, measure the specimen, find a case it would fit in, document where you put it, repeat (Fig.2). Towards the end I went round and shuffled specimens to make sense thematically, at least on the bottom row where people can get up close. We are treating the two rows of cases above head height as 'wall-paper' (Fig. 3). People can see what's in them, but only at a distance. With this in mind, we decided that coherent organisation was not necessary, as interpretation was not possible at this height. The alternative to a thematic display (be it taxonomic, historical, ecological etc) is an aesthetic one. We have used this massive area of display space around the Museum to create an atmosphere of discovery and intrigue. Columns of skeletons, skulls and spirit specimens have achieved this end. There has been a great deal of positive feedback, without people asking what the objects actually are.



Fig. 2. Gibbon skeleton in the primate display. © UCL, Grant Museum of Zoology / Matt Clayton.

Having now completed the museum displays without spending the time to plan carefully and map the location of each specimen in advance, I question the need for other redisplay projects to do so. Obviously there are occasions when it is crucial, for example when telling a story about a specific set of specimens, or when the need for a high degree of access to collections in store would require a more structured arrangement. However, I would recommend that anyone managing such a project in the future carefully examines the extent to which they can install a gallery with as little planning as possible. Positive and time-saving results can be achieved ad hoc. At a time when resources are short, opportunities to save at any point in the process should be grabbed with both hands. A major disadvantage to note is that each step cannot be started until the one before it is complete, particularly when the same people are responsible for display and interpretation. The timing crunch we experienced was that the interpretation could not be written until installation was complete. Since we didn't know what was exactly going to be in each case (or in some instances what the theme of a whole case would be) until we installed it, no labels could be drafted, proofed or printed in advance. Although we scheduled time for this from the outset, it was a rush to the finish line.



Fig. 3. View of the Museum, showing top two rows of ‘wallpaper’ cases. © UCL, Grant Museum of Zoology / Matt Clayton.

The final part of the Grant relaunch was to bring in the technology. We have always been an ‘old fashioned museum’. By that I mean that on a daily basis people come in and say ‘this is what a museum should look like’. We have a very large number of specimens on dense display and people like that. However, we are also one of the biggest contributors to adult science engagement in London and are not old fashioned in our practice. Working with the UCL Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis (CASA) and UCL Centre for Digital Humanities, we now have in place some wonderful interactives that don’t detract from specimen-engagement in the way that computers and animatronics have in some museums. The ‘QRator’ project uses CASA’s Tales of Things technology on a specially developed application on ten iPads attached to displays across the Museum. We are using these iPads to ask our visitors to comment on the role of science in society and museum practice today (Fig. 4). For the latter at least we will use what they say to inform how we do things. Each iPad will have a question, and visitors can respond on the iPad itself, or via twitter or the ‘Tales of Things’ app on their smart phones. The first set of these constantly changing questions include: ‘What makes an animal British?’, ‘Should human and animal remains be treated differently in a museum like this?’, and ‘Should science shy away from studying biological differences between races?’. In this way, we are using a fantastic and accessible historic collection alongside cutting-edge technology in a way that museums have never done before.

In our new space we are able to address the University’s and wider higher education sector’s public engagement agendas by offering to share our display space, audience and expertise with UCL’s staff and students. UCL researchers – both scientists and artists – are now able to co-curate installations and exhibitions about their current work in three areas of the Museum (Fig. 5). In this way we are able to increase our worth to our major funder, UCL, as well as provide thoroughly current content for our visitors to engage with. Many academics have a strong desire to engage with the public, and now the funding councils require them to demonstrate pathways to impact for their research grants. What have often been lacking in the process are platforms for academics to reach an audience, and the specific skills required to engage through exhibitions. Museums can offer both, and such partnerships have the potential to serve the varied agendas of the institutions and people involved.



Fig. 4. iPads enable unique specimen engagement. © UCL, Grant Museum of Zoology / Matt Clayton.



Fig. 5. The new Grant Museum of Zoology. © UCL, Grant Museum of Zoology / Matt Clayton.

The whole move, from closing through packing, storing, delivering, unpacking, remounting, installing, interpreting, marketing and reopening, took just over eight months. It was certainly a chaotic rush, and not standard for a relocation or redisplay project, but the end result has been overwhelmingly positively received.

Acknowledgements

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