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Museum in a House: Collections out of context

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Abstract

In October 2015, Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales created a ‘museum’ in a house as part of a collaborative project for the Cardiff-based art festival, ‘Made in Roath’, an artist-led, free event which aims to take art out of the gallery and into the wider community. The brief was simple: to have fun with museum specimens, in order to enthuse, excite, inspire, and educate our visitors. By placing extraordinary museum objects in a family home alongside ordinary household objects, we hoped to create a real sense of surprise. We wanted to reinforce that museums could be friendly, relaxed spaces that allow everyone to indulge a spirit of discovery and fascination with the world around them. The project highlighted the benefits of working non-hierarchally without a set agenda, and how approaching a subject from a completely different perspective can energise a project and generate innovative ideas. Finally, it demonstrated the great value of working as part of a multi-disciplinary team.

Keywords: Made in Roath, collaboration, context, art festival

Background

The district of Roath, situated to the east of Cardiff city centre, is the home of the annual festival. During one weekend in October, the whole area is used as a venue for the arts, from domestic, commercial, and public areas to overlooked or disused spaces. The organisation Made in Roath, also runs other events throughout the year, and has a large, diverse following. They have received many highly-acclaimed reviews. Our relationship with them began in 2014, after a conversation on social media, when we were asked to loan a small number of specimens for a community display in a touring caravan. This project highlights how a simple enquiry can help make links to innovative external groups.

Pitching the idea

The concept was for Made in Roath to work in collaboration with the museum’s natural history

curators and conservators to create a ‘museum’ in a residential house for the festival. We would produce a display using a range of specimens from the natural history collections with an interactive element, such as handling specimens, to appeal to family audiences. Museum staff would oversee the project, but Made in Roath would select volunteers to facilitate the space during opening hours. A Conservation student from Cardiff University and three volunteers with arts and/or museum experience were specially recruited for the project.

There were a number of issues to overcome due to the unorthodox setting, but we dealt with them successfully. Concerns were raised about security, environmental conditions, and the risk of damage by visitors. Therefore, on the whole, specimens that were deemed to be low-risk and low-value, such as non-accessioned items from our support collections and old schools loan service material, would be chosen for display. The exhibition



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duration was short, for one weekend only, thus limiting the exposure of the specimens to a different environment. Made in Roath had public liability insurance and the house was to be occupied at all times for security.

When presenting the idea for approval, we focused on the potential audience that we could reach with the project. We emphasized that this was a free event, with a high footfall, in a socially diverse area, and it would be suitable for families. The strong presence of the festival on social media, as well as it being an established annual event, also gave weight to it being a successful project.

The evolution of the project

When the project was authorised, we arranged a first visit to the house to meet the family, evaluate the space, and take numerous photographs and measurements. We then chose a team of curators and conservators, specifically selecting creative people who would react well to a project of this nature. We focused on what we wanted to achieve in the space. We wanted to inspire curiosity and foster that feeling of excitement that we all felt as youngsters when visiting a museum; that feeling of discovery, of not knowing what you might find around the corner, or seeing something familiar in a different way, or something that you might never have seen before.

We initially brainstormed ideas, but soon identified certain 'star' specimens that we wanted to include, and concentrated on allocating spaces for these. These were our linchpins; once they were in place, it became easier to start visualising how each area would work. Our volunteers were fully involved from the early stages, to make this as collaborative a project as possible; their feedback, responses, and enthusiasm were important in developing ideas. We wanted to ensure that their involvement in the project was a full experience, encouraging them to learn more about the museum, its collections, and the work we do.

Promoting the event

From the outset, we took every opportunity to promote the event, to ensure that we reached as wide an audience as possible. We recognized that it was as important for this to happen internally - within our own organisation - as it was externally, so we met and spoke with various museum staff responsible for corporate affairs, community engagement, and digital content management.

We used our social media accounts in collaboration with Made in Roath to promote the event externally, creating our own Twitter hashtags (#museuminahouse and #amgueddffamewnty) to link our posts together. To generate a buzz before the event, we tweeted images of specimens as they were being made ready for display, and we had a prominent presence on the Made in Roath website (Made in Roath, 2016) and promotional material. Finally, we organised a launch event for the opening day, complete with a local celebrity to draw in the crowds.

Preparing and conserving specimens for display

We took a strategic approach when choosing and preparing some of the specimens for display, in order to reduce the workload for the conservators. We looked at our current conservation priorities, such as refreshing the fluid preserved material, to see if it could be incorporated into the displays. This gave us a chance to complete outstanding work and maximise the impact of the specimens that needed time-consuming treatments.

We also took the opportunity to use some of our larger specimens that were held in storage and had not been displayed for some time. These impressive pieces were made ready for display again with very little conservation work; sometimes just a light surface clean was required. In cases where bespoke displays needed to be created, we designed them so that they could be reused for future outreach activities. For example, we created a herbarium window display made from pressed plants, which we then featured in our display at the spring 2016 Cardiff RHS show and will reuse at museum open day events.

Bringing the concept to life

A number of factors enabled the project's successful transition from the ideas stage to the final display. Firstly, our multi-disciplinary team collaboratively brought a broad range of knowledge and skills to the project. Secondly, the non-hierarchical, free-flowing nature of the project allowed flexibility and innovative, creative thinking. Many aspects were not set in stone, and ideas naturally developed in response to the environment during installation.

We encouraged and trusted our volunteers to work to their strengths, and this paid off, as they proved to be fantastically capable and committed to the

project. Overall, it was a wonderful experience for all involved, to work in such a creative and free atmosphere. Staff felt equally valued and proud of what they had achieved, and all felt that they had a significant part to play in producing the final display.

Specimens out of context

So what did we do? In the front of the house, we played on the 'wow' factor, drawing people into the house from the street by placing a large ostrich skeleton in the main bay window (Figure 1). We named the plants in the front garden, using their common and scientific names, and, in keeping with the quirky nature of the project, this also included naming an unsuspecting garden spider that had made its web there (Figure 2). Botanical illustrations were hung in the hallway, and we suspended flying ducks from the banisters, as if flying down the stairs. Finally, a crocodile mount was placed at child height in the gap under the stairs, to create an element of surprise as you walked along the hallway (Figure 3).



Figure 1. The ostrich skeleton placed in the front bay window.



Figure 2. Labels on the plants in the front garden.



Figure 3. The crocodile under the stairs.

Skulls and smaller taxidermy were interspersed on shelves with the family's books. To really emphasize that sense of fun, we installed an otter and a fox playing Scrabble in the fireplace, with the scientific and common names of the two animals spelled out in Scrabble tiles.



Figure 4. The fox and otter playing scrabble in the front room.

We created several bespoke displays in the back room. The herbarium screens had a great visual impact, using the light and space perfectly (Figure 5). We filled a pool table with pinned insects, which was a fun, quirky, and innovative way of using a 'difficult' piece of furniture in a novel way (Figure 6). Finally, we projected digital images of museum specimens on to the ceiling of the room, allowing us to showcase collections that were too valuable or not suitable for display (Figure 7).



Figure 5. Herbarium window display.



Figure 6. Entomological collections on pool table.



Figure 7. Projection of digital images onto ceiling.

We used the Welsh dresser in the kitchen to display delicate and fluid preserved specimens (Figure 8). We dotted large specimens around the room, such as Arthur, our Arthropleura model, crawling along the worktops, a mounted sheep by the Aga, and an ichthyosaur cast by the pots and pans, to really emphasise that idea of specimens being out of context (Figure 9).



Figure 8. The Welsh dresser.



Figure 10. Drawing activities in the kitchen.



Figure 9. The kitchen with Arthur the Arthropleura model, sheep mount, and ichthyosaur cast.



Figure 11. House shaped comment cards attached to a washing line.

Museum specimens that could be handled were used in the kitchen as part of a drawing activity (Figure 10). This was also a space where visitors could feed back their comments. The evaluation was in keeping with the rest of the project, using house-shaped comment cards pegged to a washing line, as well as writing in a visitor's book (Figure 11). This was a fun way of recording their views and opinions, and getting them involved.

Was it a success?

The short answer: yes, it was! The house was open for a total of ten hours over the weekend, and we had 600 visitors; a record for the festival. We had many repeat visitors, as well as others following recommendations from friends and family. It certainly had a 'buzz' about it.

We used all the information we had gathered from evaluation and feedback to advertise our success internally, at the highest level, to ensure it was recognised and commended. We created a Storify link to bring together all of the social media activity related to the project (Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales, 2016), and we also wrote a blog for the Museum's webpages (Carter and Made in Roath, 2014; Townsend, 2015). We ensured that all team members filled out evaluation forms covering different aspects of the project, from the design stages to final install, so that we were as inclusive as possible. All of this feedback and evaluation has been used to write up an internal case study as an example of best practice for the future.

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