

Making a difference: the cultural impact of museums

Executive summary

An essay for NMDC
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How hot was it!! How heavy were the coats!... Our troops in difficult conditions with impossible goals... This actually makes you realise that war is real and happening right now... Truth hurts!... I am moved touched and I want to cry... I honestly believe being a soldier – or a genuine ‘freedom fighter’ must be the toughest job on earth... Every city should have an exhibition like this... *better* than television... I found out loads of things I didn’t know... We don’t learn much do we?... To start a war always means that you have lost!... Does looking at war get us any closer to PEACE?... How will that “victory”, if it comes, be defined?... I still say it aint our war... Needs must I hope it’s all worth it in the end... And how many Afghan civilians have been killed?... By visiting this museum it is more and more clear the fact that war is always useless, because it isn’t able to solve problems, but it creates other ones... I knew something of the operations in Afghanistan but I had no *feel* for it until I had seen this exhibition. All members of Parliament should be invited (and if necessary *made*) to see it... We are proud of our military. The same cannot be said of our politicians... To all souljaz wishin yoooh da best of luck!... Man I look up to you we are with you all the way... You guys go through so much. How do you do it?... From a bog standard ‘civvy’ train driver – more people back here do think of you on a daily basis than you know... He is not just my husband or a Dad to our kids, he is very brave and a hero... For those who paid the ultimate price, stand easy... You fight, some die, the result is that people are free to write comments like these.

Nearly 1,000 visitor comments have been collected by the museum in response to the exhibition *Helmand: The Soldiers’ Story*, which opened in August 2007

The exhibition has helped to provoke thought about the conflict, and has generated a quite intense response. We heard from children, parents, pensioners, veterans, soldiers, their families and friends, international visitors. The comments wall took on a life of its own as a social commentary on not only the exhibition but the conflict, the government, the latest media stories and even on other comments made by others. It makes fascinating reading.

Source: Jo Woolley, exhibition team leader, <http://www.national-army-museum.ac.uk/pages/helmand/> (retrieved 27.06.2010)

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Part 1: Introduction

Although cultural institutions - including museums - are driven by the desire to contribute to the public's cultural experiences, their cultural impact is not always acknowledged in the frameworks designed for government accountability. As NMDC put it

The museum sector believes that it makes a real difference to peoples' lives. It is a line that is frequently used to advocate and promote our work to stakeholders; but what does it mean and how might we investigate it? What is the nature of the impact that museums have on the individual and how does this play out in communities, societies and even nations? (NMDC, undated)

The end of the so-called 'golden age' of New Labour's cultural policy and funding regime is a timely moment to revisit the question of what difference museums make. Indeed, several NMDC members are already exploring how best to demonstrate precisely that.

This essay hopes to provoke thinking within NMDC about museums' cultural impact and how to describe it. This is something that neither government nor the institutions themselves are necessarily used to doing. It attempts to describe the differences that museum collections, exhibitions, displays and other programmes make to people: how they affect their understanding of the world and how people respond to their museum experiences.

This essay draws principally on what NMDC's members identified as their cultural impact in replies to an invitation of January 2010. Responses were received from 22 out of 28 NMDC members. They described around 85 projects, and sent a number of reports and other documents. Taken together, these suggest a number of common interests – both in terms of intentions and subject matter - promoting a wider interest in history and the world in general and more specifically, generating empathy for and understanding of minority groups; addressing marginalization; encouraging community engagement; advancing institutional interests, authority and values; dealing with difficult subject matter; challenging perceptions and creating associations and identities. Other noticeable characteristics were projects' currency; their research-centeredness; the fact that they were conceived as national initiatives, and that they involved some element of digitization. Projects selected as examples to be used in this essay offered the most compelling evidence of their impact.

Part 2: Reflecting on the cultural impact of museums

The sector knows very little about the true extent of its cultural impacts - what they are, how far reaching they are, who benefits and how. As one NMDC member put it

In terms of actual evidence of cultural impact, there is not a lot. We have a fair amount of evaluation which points to attitudinal changes amongst visitors/users in response to particular pieces of programming – particularly, for example, exhibitions which add new narratives or perspectives... But it would be hard make a strong case for this leading to cultural change as it could be argued that we are 'preaching to the converted.

The subject of this essay, the cultural impact of museums, has its origins in the debate about valuing the arts and culture, prompted by New Labour since 1998. The various strands to this include the highly determined expectations of publicly-funded arts and culture; the presumption of instrumental effects in a sphere of activity largely associated with intrinsic value; the

introduction of a target culture and accountability by quantitative performance measures; the predominance of economic value in a field often described as one characterised by market failure, and the use of economic indicators as proxies for social impact.

The debate about how the arts and culture should be valued chimed with the mobilization of the notion of public value, a theory of public management about how best to produce a change in the material conditions of society, which was taken up by Cabinet Office in 2002.

The concept of cultural value fitted advocacy, if not organizational purposes. While some regarded it as politically expedient, others conceived of it differently.

We have found that everyone in the arts and cultural sector is struggling with talk about 'value'. It is no good trying to relate all the value of arts and culture to monetary valuations, and equally unhelpful to try to justify the arts as some kind of special case, different from all other spending priorities and subject to unique criteria (Leicester & Sharpe, 2010: 11)

One school of thought suggested that since different economies need to exist alongside each other, making meaning an inalienable quality should be regarded as standing at the other extreme of our lives to monetary economy. 'The relationship between the economy of meaning and the economy of money must be carefully managed in order to maintain the vitality of both'.

One effect of agencies regarding themselves, or being regarded, as 'architects of value' was the generation of frameworks of those values that they might be expected to produce. A comparison with American models highlights the utilitarian, if not highly determined nature of the British values and benefits associated with culture. But, under interrogation, these can be seen to vary enormously. Four DCMS-family value frameworks alone contain around 90 different outcomes and values. On the one hand, this demonstrates the extent to which these kinds of generic structures are subject to vacillations in policy, changes of nuance or the absence of joined-up thinking. On the other, they highlight the fact that the outcomes reported tend to be those, which are simply most apposite to the requirements of the framework being used.

By definition, generic frameworks override the particular, they make no distinction between different cultural activities and no reference to the subject matter or content which encompasses particular values or generates particular outcomes. The quantitative indicators, generated by the Generic Learning Outcomes, for example, were crucial in fulfilling a political purpose, which was to convince the Treasury to release more money for Renaissance and Strategic Commissioning. Given their emphasis on learning, they also demonstrated that the excitement, enjoyment and inspirational quality of the museum/gallery experience stimulated the acquisition of facts and the development of attitudes and perceptions. However, use of the toolkit did not result in an understanding of museums' consequent impacts on visitors - even in relation to policy priorities.

But there might be other ways of identifying, and reporting, museums' cultural impact. The models referred to include those used by the Arts Council England, UK Film Council and HEFCE. These include direct consultation to assess public value, self-evaluation, peer and user-review, and stakeholder analysis. Indeed, an increasing body of work is being developed around such approaches. However, to date, DCMS have largely relied on peer and specialist review, drawing on small, professional networks rather than end-users.

This essay attempts to explore cultural impacts, as distinct from economic or social impacts. They may or may not be instrumental. They relate specifically to the difference that museum programmes make to individuals and organisations. They focus on programmes' subject matter

and content, and on responses to them in some depth. Wherever possible, the evidence used is that of the impactee rather than the impactor.

Part 3: Strategies for making a difference

Quite apart from their standard means of presentation – exhibitions, displays, education programmes, events and publications, museums seek to exert cultural impact in various ways:

- Some NMDC museums reported rebranding in an attempt to extend, or reinforce, their sphere of influence and to encourage a better appreciation of their public value.
- They undertake research projects, intended to generate new knowledge and understanding of museum collections. Several such projects have been facilitated by the UK Research Council's development of a portfolio of knowledge transfer activities, which embrace interactions between the research base and user community, commercialisation, collaborative research and development, and collaborative training.
- NMDC members are involved in partnerships and networks including those with academics and museum colleagues centred around the sharing of expertise and collections, and the potential to reach more, if not different, audiences. Others involve completely different organisations. Some are prompted, and certainly supported by funding initiatives; others are driven by common goals – such as those dedicated to contributing to changing attitudes to science.
- Digital technologies have opened up the possibilities of cultural organisations overcoming the traditional constraints imposed by physical sites; expanding their audience reach; opening new avenues for developing areas of activity; creating new sources of economic and cultural value, and prompting new business models.

Part 4: The kinds of impacts that museums exert

The kinds of impacts that museums exert are often perceived very broadly – not least in terms of making places cultural. They tend to report those that comply with generic frameworks, although they may - in some cases - regard such outcomes as secondary to their main purpose.

This section explores what audiences, themselves, have said about how their museum experiences have impacted on them – what they have been prompted to think about, and why. It describes people responding to museum programmes in terms of

- saying the unsaid – articulating and exploring sensitive and difficult issues within the context of a national institution;
- generating a sense of belonging and integrating themselves within local communities and society;
- opening themselves up to different attitudes and perceptions – envisaging potential and revisiting personal histories;
- considering their affiliations and associations – albeit to the personal and the national.

It also highlights changes in museums' own cultures of collecting and making exhibitions.

The problem lies in the fact that there is little or no space built into the system to allow 'different' work. Put another way, 'good work' becomes that which is covered by the PI, can be externally evaluated in a quantitative manner and can supply hard data. As a result, some types of work and some types of professional practice become seen as 'difficult' because they are not susceptible to this form of evaluation... this places pressure on certain groups of professionals to change their working practices or become marginalized within the system and thus risk a reduction or cessation in funding for no other reason than the fact that their work does not fit the requirements of audit and therefore cannot be 'trusted' in the same way as more structured professional practice. For many professionals who fall into this group the choice is stark: change working practices or risk extinction. However, the risk of such an isomorphic approach to service delivery is that professional innovation, judgment and autonomy will disappear which may directly affect the development of service provision. (Barton, 2008: 275)