



NMDC Response to the Museums Association Consultation: Sustainability and Museums

September 2008

The NMDC welcomes the Museum Association's concern for the sustainability of museums and the sector. We would like to thank the MA for raising the broad set of sustainability issues contained in the consultation paper, and for helping to move the debate forward.

Economic sustainability, particularly as public purse strings tighten, continues to be a key concern for the sector. The NMDC has been working with the cultural sector to promote 'Private Giving for the Public Good' to complement government funding. For more information about this work please visit our website:
http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/private_giving_apr08.html

A focus on social sustainability also underpins much of the work of NMDC and that of our members. One notable project currently underway is our work with the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) exploring museums' next steps in engaging and working with young people and their families. For more information about this project please see the attached draft book outline.

In our response to the consultation however we have chosen to focus more narrowly on environmental sustainability and environmental conditions for collections and loans in particular. To achieve real change, this issue requires not just national, but international cooperation. So, in follow up to a paper Sir Nicholas Serota put to the Bizot Group in May, the NMDC has convened a group of conservators from across our membership to identify issues and areas for concern and to set out how an international group of conservators might liaise between October 2008 and spring 2009 with a view to drafting a full proposal for consideration by the European and International Bizot Groups.

Our response to Question 7, below, pulls out key points from both the paper presented by Sir Nicholas Serota to the May 2008 meeting of the Bizot Group (*Museum Environmental Conditions in an Era of Energy Constraint*), and a draft paper written by Mark Jones and circulated to museums colleagues for comment and feedback in June 2008¹.

Q7 Do you think that collection-care, loan and government-indemnity standards should be reviewed or used more flexibly , with a view to reducing energy use?

¹ Their thinking draws on a body of evidence that has developed within the conservation over the years, including, for example, what many view as a breakthrough paper by Jonathan Ashley-Smith, 'Let's Be Honest' presented at the IIC conference on Preventive Conservation, Ottawa 1994.

- The museums sector is under increasing pressure to reduce energy costs and to undertake a programme of reducing our environmental impact.
- Heating and air-conditioning are probably the most significant consumers of fossil fuels by galleries and museums. We need to devise imaginative new solutions to resolve the dichotomy between long-term collections care and expensive environmental conditions.
- Existing guidelines on relative humidity and temperature for exhibitions are expressed in a form that assumes the need for air conditioning. This language derives from a dialogue between museum clients and architects and engineers.
- Since lenders require these conditions and since funding bodies, including the Heritage Lottery Fund normally require them, museums which include loans in their exhibitions or which look to external funders for assistance with the capital cost of renewing their displays or stores are effectively required to install air conditioning designed to control the environment within tight limits. Such schemes have a high carbon footprint, resulting both from the embedded energy in elaborate and expensive plant which requires regular maintenance and replacement on a 15 year cycle, and high energy use to run the plant.
- The results of air-conditioning have been effective, but in depending on the one solution that could be implemented in the latter half of the twentieth century we have lost sight of the original debate. In the meantime that solution has become more expensive to implement and maintain and in future will become even more so.
- Lower temperature limits cited are not, as is implied, required for the survival of objects but for the comfort of human beings. Since rates of decay approximately double for every 10° c rise in temperature, cooler would clearly be better for the preservation of many objects. (Though lower temperatures mean increased relative humidity, which may be worse for some materials.)
- There are less energy intensive alternatives to air conditioning systems. For example if air change is kept to a minimum, as it was and is in traditional stores, relative humidity and temperature remain naturally stable. Materials naturally capable of taking up and giving off moisture, like paper itself or lime plaster on walls, will help to reduce the speed with which relative humidity changes. Reducing solar gain, using low energy light sources, insulating buildings, bringing in cool air in the early morning but not hot air in the middle of the day, can keep galleries relatively stable.
- Most objects have much simpler requirements. Metalwork needs to be kept reasonably dry, woodwork needs reasonably stable humidity and some, for example ceramics, are tolerant of most conditions. Where objects are genuinely vulnerable cupboards, cases or paintings under glass can easily and cheaply be locally conditioned, for example by using silica gel.
- Care of our art collections should therefore be expressed in a way that does not assume air-conditioning or any other current solutions. We need to establish a new dialogue between professionals and empower them to consider fresh options.

- Guidelines or standards should be developed to underpin imaginative solutions for future new buildings and operations. This is particularly important for establishing the requirements for new buildings where the best opportunity exists for novel solutions.
- In the meantime we have to consider the running costs of existing air-conditioning systems. With this in mind, some NMDC members are devising workable solutions involving broader annual parameters for relative humidity and temperature.
- Discussion of conditions must go in tandem with a consideration of what museum collections are for, and how long they should last.
- It is important to include all the stakeholders who collectively share responsibility for display and care of collections, as well as having a responsibility for the wider environment. New guidelines will be received positively only if they satisfy the important concerns of each party: these may be perceived as increased risk to the collection, display restrictions, architectural constraints and restrictions on gallery activities.

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