

# Museums Campaigning for Social Justice

## 5<sup>th</sup> Stephen Weil Memorial Lecture

### David Fleming, Shanghai, 8 November 2010

The theme running through this paper is the museum role in creating social justice. 'Social justice' is a notion based upon the premise that **all** people should be able to derive benefit from museums, that they have an **entitlement** to access to museums, and to see themselves **represented** in museums. Furthermore, museums have a responsibility to **fight** for social justice, not simply through ensuring access for all, but even in some instances through acting as forums for debate about basic human rights. To me, human rights, and the safeguarding of human rights, are at the core of "social harmony", and helping create social harmony is at the heart of the museum mission.

Over the past 30 or so years, museums worldwide have been changing fundamentally – how, and why?

They have become less obsessed with the internal mechanics of looking after collections, and have grown, slowly but surely, into a more **extrovert** role. **They have become more socially responsible.**

This has come about through a combination of factors:

- First, **financial pressure and the need for relevance**: politicians are increasingly looking for **value for money**. They want to see a return. All politicians want to see publicly-funded institutions used by the public in large numbers.
- Second, **changes in the nature of the museum workforce** – the workforce has grown in numbers, has increased its diversity, and there are more women – these changes have led to a wave of enthusiasm for social history and community history, and to an increased respect for community **life**, community **involvement**, community **access** and **democracy**. Also the museum workforce is increasingly **professional** and less amateurish, museum staff are better trained, and better at managing.

All this has resulted in a shift in the balance between objects and stories in museums.

The great American museum practitioner and theorist, Stephen Weil, after whom this memorial lecture is named, said that museums had

shifted from being **about something** to being **for somebody**: so let's look more closely at what museums are **for**.

**The answer is, museums are for lots of things.** Different museums in different places, play different roles, depending upon all sorts of variables: collections, location, resourcing, the make up of visitors and so on. Some museums are of purely local importance. Some cater almost exclusively for tourists. Some are object-rich. Others rely heavily on film. Some deal with nature, others manufacturing, others people. **In truth, no two museums are the same.**

What I think is no longer open to challenge is that museums are for the **public benefit**. Those which are publicly funded are supposed to *achieve* something for society, rather than act simply as self-perpetuating institutions, the value of which is obscure and unmeasurable. In other words, museums **carry a social responsibility**.

Let's consider the social responsibility of museums, and what it implies for the way we **behave**, and the way we present ourselves.

There have always been people working in museums who have been socially responsible, and there have always been museums which have acted in a socially responsible manner. More than 80 years ago John Cotton Dana said that the first task of every museum **was "adding to the happiness, wisdom and comfort of members of the community"**. Dana argued that the museum is accountable to society – that the public's support of a museum is an **"exchange transaction"**.

But it has only been in the last 30 years or so that the acknowledgement has grown that, in return for public subsidy, museums should strive to be available, accessible, welcoming and valuable to all, rather than to just a few; that missions should be strong, active and clear, not weak, passive and mysterious; that the **educational role of museums is paramount**.

The term 'social responsibility' encompasses a huge range of roles. It could be argued that the more traditional functions of museums – collecting, preservation, research, basic interpretation – are in themselves socially responsible activities, and indeed they are, to a limited degree. But to me, real social responsibility is when museums commit themselves to identifying and meeting **the needs of the public**, and when they place this at the head of their priorities, so that it becomes an imperative, the mission of the museum.

This may sound simple, and it may sound as though this is what museums do routinely. However, it is neither simple nor routine. I have to say I have known many museum staff whose motivation has been to pursue their own, collections-based interests, rather than concern themselves overly with the wider needs of society. Social benefit flows from their work only **incidentally**.

So, I want us to think about the **deliberate** exercise of social responsibility, not just its incidental occurrence. I also want us to consider the spectrum of social responsibility, from the **local** level to which all museums can aspire, to the **global**, building on broad issues of **human rights**.

Museums which are socially responsible all have one thing in common: they have **passion**, a passion to create **social value**. They are not satisfied with collecting, preservation and research. This is not to say that they do not value these activities. A museum which does not value these things is illogical and absurd. But socially responsible museums regard these as techniques and means, rather than as ends in themselves.

The socially responsible museum has at its core a powerful commitment to **education**. It also has a powerful **conscience**. The museum – or rather its governing body and its staff (for a museum's identity is all about its people rather than its collections) – is committed to an agenda which rejects absolutely the notion that museums are restricted preserves. The museum wants to reach out, to locate and engage with all manner of constituencies.

In particular, it wants to engage with people who suffer from some form of disadvantage or discrimination, whether that be economic, social or personal, which renders them vulnerable. In other words, the socially responsible museum sees itself as valuable to **all**, not a few, and will go out of its way through **positive action** to fulfil this inclusive mission.

This is why **free admission** is such an important issue in the UK: museums which must – or which choose to – have an admission fee are handicapped in pursuing a socially responsible mission, because such a fee is a barrier to people on low incomes and therefore is a barrier to full inclusion. These museums have to find ways of overcoming this barrier if they are to exercise real social responsibility

**Positive action** means that the museum is joining the fight against social exclusion, joining with other socially responsible agencies to effect a difference at the personal, community and social levels. In other words, **social responsibility** means being **socially inclusive**, which leads ultimately to **social value** and the attainment of **social justice**: that's our primary aim, I would argue. Without social value, without achieving social justice, museums aren't worth having. This is our moral obligation.

Examples of the kind of disadvantage I have mentioned - which lead to **discrimination**, unwitting or otherwise, and **intolerance** - are legion. Anyone who belongs to a minority, or who is on the outside of the prevailing power system, may suffer disadvantage. Disadvantage may be based on communication, resources, ability, preference, belief, physical characteristics, gender, occupation, age, origin: the list is virtually endless. Every individual, no matter who they are, suffers from

vulnerability and disadvantage at some time in their lives; some individuals lead their entire lives suffering disadvantage.

So we cannot afford to be complacent or dismissive of the need to be inclusive, though the challenge for museums is extremely complex.

### **Let us consider what we are doing in Liverpool, Shanghai's Twin City:**

With a population of almost half a million people, Liverpool is home to many distinct communities. For example, because of its seafaring history, the city is home to Europe's oldest Chinese community, and has significant numbers of people whose ancestors originate in both west and east Africa. There has been massive Irish influence on the city's character which, added to significant Welsh and Scottish influence, has led to the city becoming the least English of all English cities, and one which, cultural and psychologically, looks abroad rather than inward to the rest of England. Only one English city decided to have a pavilion at the Shanghai EXPO this year, to present itself to China and the world – the city of Liverpool.

As well as a deep diversity, Liverpool has, for four generations, suffered from chronic economic decline, so that today the population is only half what it was in the 1930s. Once one of the world's richest cities and probably the world's most successful port, the city went severe decline between the two world wars, so that by the 1980s there were real fears for the city's future, and central government had to step in to try to regenerate Liverpool.

The city has recently appeared to have turned the corner, and regeneration has finally begun, with new shops, new hotels, new restaurants, new jobs, to add to Liverpool's unmatched cultural offer. Nonetheless, unemployment is still twice as high as the national average, and Liverpool and neighbouring Knowsley are ranked as the two most deprived areas in England, with Liverpool topping the rankings both in overall deprivation and in the extent of deprivation.

The point is that the **socio-economic condition of Liverpool and the surrounding area, along with the nature of our museum collections, are defining factors in how my museum service should organise itself.** While, because of Liverpool's prosperity in previous decades, the museum collections are world class, this is of little importance locally unless we can ensure that the people of the city actually derive some value from them. So, in terms of museum usage, National Museums Liverpool has a powerful commitment to achieving total inclusion of local people. **We see ourselves primarily as a socially responsible museum.**

**So, what kind of things does a socially responsible museum say in its Strategic Plan?**

## “Our values

- We believe that museums are **fundamentally educational** in purpose.
- We believe that museums are **places for ideas and dialogue** that use collections to inspire people.
- We are a democratic museum service **and we believe in the concept of social justice**: we are funded by the whole of the public and in return we strive to provide an excellent service to the whole of the public.
- We believe in **the power of museums** to help promote good and active citizenship, and **to act as agents of social change**.

## Strategy statement

National Museums Liverpool (NML) operates in a city which is the most deprived in the UK. Despite recent signs of regeneration, Liverpool... has been given “red alert” status by the Centre for Cities, and various indicators suggest that Liverpool’s recovery is extremely fragile.

Employment rates, local educational attainment and skills levels are still well below the national average.

This is a hugely challenging environment for NML. Locally, people are at risk of suffering from social tensions, lack of social cohesion, anti-social behaviour, loss of confidence and aspiration, pressure on families and relationships, high stress levels.

NML carries a very great responsibility in terms of delivering first class museums that, as part of a wider pattern of cultural provision, can help create “social capital” in the area, enhancing well being, confidence and social connectedness. We strongly believe that NML can help mitigate the social consequences of adverse economic conditions.

We are committed to facing up to this social responsibility, and our determination to provide free access to all of our exhibitions, events and activities, allied with the highest quality standards and enormous variety, is at the core of this commitment.

We will meet our responsibilities by assembling, researching, caring for and exhibiting our **collections**; training, developing and motivating our **staff**; refurbishing and developing our **buildings**; increasing the range and reach of our **education** programmes; improving the quality of our **visitor** experience; and showing an

appetite for **risk** and innovation, without which no cultural organisation can prosper.

In doing all this we will:

- widen participation in our activities, thereby fulfilling our **social objectives**, especially by attracting diverse audiences
- ensure that we offer **educational opportunities** to people of all ages and backgrounds
- strive to create an **organisational culture** that motivates our team and enables us to work effectively and in harmony
- actively seek to increase the **diversity of our workforce**
- be alert to **social, economic and technological change** to ensure we remain focussed and relevant
- work in **partnership** with other agencies – arts, business, public bodies
- behave in an **ethical manner** at all times, promoting sustainable practices.”

Now, we can recognise that **museums have many roles**, and they have many different impacts or outcomes. This means that museums are full of potential, but they need to move forward, **away from traditional thinking**, in order to fulfil this potential. In turn, this causes stress in some museums, because not all museum people are able or willing to break with traditional thinking. Nonetheless, it is essential that Museums play their full role in society, not least because this is the way to help protect and enhance public funding for museums.

I think we can usefully divide museum roles into three broad headings:

**1. research and collecting**

**2. economic role**

**3. social role**, which is:

- audience-focussed
- educational
- community-orientated
- democratic
- open to debate
- diverse
- **socially responsible**

Despite the deeply engrained tendency to focus inwardly, museums now take education and learning more seriously, and are acting in a far more socially responsible way than before. This is a process which has been **underway on a worldwide scale** for a generation. This has resulted in a variety of developments in museum attitudes, structures and behaviours and skills.

The socially responsible museum has:

- A **socially responsible mission**, of the kind we have in Liverpool.
- **Staffing structures** which give education and learning a place at the most senior levels in a museum hierarchy, and a significant proportion of the staffing budget is given over to education staff.
- An **organisational culture** which promotes and celebrates learning. If visitors and other users are to learn from their contact with the museum, then the museum has to have engrained within it a real commitment to team working, and has to have a level of trust and respect between staff who have different skills that is often missing in museums. There are no elites. There are no groups of staff whose outputs are less valued than those of others.

There is a hierarchy, but the museum is not hierarchical. In this way, true integration of effort can take place on the basis of an understanding of roles and of purpose. So many museums have curators on a pedestal, because they are the ones with the greatest knowledge of the collections. The importance of this knowledge must never be underestimated. But **if knowledge cannot be unlocked then it is of no genuine value**, and it can only be unlocked by the curators learning to work, as equals, with people who have different knowledge, different skills.

All successful teams contain individuals with complementary skills. Nobody would ever pick a soccer team made up entirely of goalkeepers, or strikers; nobody would arrange a symphony orchestra to contain only violinists, or only percussionists: it is the blend of different skills which makes things work. And so it is with museums.

Therefore, when it comes to creating exhibitions, or educational programmes, or publications, the socially responsible museum harnesses all its talents, and from their outset these projects involve, among others, education specialists.

- In the socially responsible museum, **staff are able to take risks**. There is no blame culture, so that when things don't work there are no recriminations, just lessons to be learned. Staff are given credit when things go well. The museum experiments and tries to do things differently, to see whether there are better ways. Staff are encouraged to learn and broaden their own skills through training programmes and other development opportunities.

- **Change** is regarded as a good thing, not a threat, and change is anticipated, not just reacted to. In a fast moving world, the socially responsible museum has to move fast.
- The socially responsible museum is **comfortable with the idea that people have different needs and different ways of learning**. We cannot **control** what people learn, and there is no monocultural approach to learning which can come through quiet contemplation for some, or through dressing up and role-playing noisily for others. The audience may be relatively learned, or it may be utterly inexperienced; it may be highly receptive and relaxed, or difficult and awkward. The essence of the socially responsible museum, where learning is taken seriously, is the variety of medium and of message.

It is understood that most users will visit the museum and simply take as they find: they will view exhibitions which, hopefully, will provoke a reaction, will change their view of the world somehow. It might have museums collections on show – it might not – perhaps the theme of the exhibition does not lend itself to the display of objects. That's alright. It's the learning that's important; the end, not the means.

- The socially responsible museum **will tackle difficult, contemporary issues**, or issues with a contemporary relevance. It will offer up observations on the state of the environment, not just display lots of rocks; it will make the links between the architectural splendour of modern Liverpool, and the obscenity of the slave trade which so enriched Liverpool merchants; it will consider homelessness, prostitution and Gay Rights.
- But more than this, the socially responsible museum will **actively seek out people who do not use museums**, and pursue programmes designed to include them. It will take positive action.
- In our socially responsible museum **we research our audiences**, and we devise programmes to suit them. We listen to our public. We evaluate everything we do. We do not simply hunt down project funding, lurching from one scheme to another, but we have a strategy and we have core funding. We have fast-track procedures for new audiences, who want things today or tomorrow, not in five years time.
- We recognise that **without access there can be no learning**, and no fulfilling of social responsibility, so we take the broadest imaginable view of access - not just the physical but the intellectual; not just the programme but the promotion; not just the message but the medium. We wish to see the diversity of our communities properly represented in our museums. We remove

all the barriers we can think of, including, if possible, admission charges.

- But there is more that we have to do. The socially responsible museum needs to be **networked on a grand scale**. It will have scores, perhaps hundreds, of community, cultural and educational partnerships. These partnerships provide new ideas, contacts, information, audiences and confidence, and they often can enable the museum to short cut to the relationships based on trust which are so important when museums attempt to work with socially excluded people: we need to be a *listening* organisation.

Finally, let us consider the **human rights museum**, because it is here, I believe, that we see the socially responsible museum beginning to realise its full potential, and where we can most readily see the impact of **museums campaigning for social justice**.

The language of the human rights museum includes visceral terms like **oppression, rejection, victimisation, intolerance, persecution, racism, genocide**. The human rights museum explores issues such as these, challenges visitors to reject assaults on human rights, and actively campaigns against human rights abuses.

There is a growing number of museums of this kind, worldwide. One of them is Liverpool's International Slavery Museum, which opened in 2007. The museum explores the story of the transatlantic slave trade, the source of so much of Liverpool's early wealth. Though this is a big international story which has a wide resonance, it also addresses local issues, notably the ongoing racism which characterises the city. This is ironic in that Liverpool was a racially diverse city 250 years ago, when other British cities were monocultural. Nonetheless, the Black community in Liverpool, old though it is, feels alienated, undervalued and besieged. Recently, someone painted a swastika on the museum wall.

This museum is absolutely not neutral on the subject of human rights abuse. It rejects the notion that museums should seek to be "neutral", or can even truly aspire to being neutral, and offers up the alternative vision that museums can be positive forces for change and progress, can offer **positive** spaces rather than "neutral" ones.

This is an extremely heretical view of the role of the museum, though it is a view that, exactly one year ago in Torreón, Mexico, was supported by an international group of museum professionals who gathered under the auspices of INTERCOM, ICOM's international committee for management. At that meeting, 150 people acclaimed the following Declaration:

**“INTERCOM Declaration of Museum Responsibility to Promote Human Rights:**

**INTERCOM believes that it is a fundamental responsibility of museums, wherever possible, to be active in promoting diversity and human rights, respect and equality for people of all origins, beliefs and background.”**

If you look on the INTERCOM website you will find this Declaration in nine languages.

I am hugely encouraged that the new generation of museum professionals are prepared to speak out in this way, to challenge the museum orthodoxy that we should be “neutral”, and to place their museums at the centre of modern debate.

If you want to hear more about this kind of thinking you should attend tomorrow’s INTERCOM workshop entitled *The Changing Role of Museums: approaching controversy – neutral space or political place?*

**These are just a few thoughts on the social role of museums, on the social responsibility of museums, and on the need for museums to pursue a social justice agenda. I would argue that museums need fundamentally to rethink and re-envision how we manage ourselves. This is happening, but it is not without pain and disagreement, as our sector continues to modernise, seek public validation, and realise our full potential.**