

Advocating the value of museums

Paper presented at INTERCOM/ ICOM, Vienna 20th August 2007 by Carol Scott:
Manager/ Evaluation and Audience Research, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney Australia.

Biography: Carol Scott is the Manager of Evaluation and Audience Research at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney Australia. Her career in museums includes the Presidency of Museums Australia (the national professional association for museums and galleries), lecturing in Evaluation, Audience Studies and Market Research in Museum Studies at the University of Sydney and the inaugural Chairpersonship of the Evaluation and Visitor Research Group of Museums Australia. Previous employment includes the Australia Council for the Arts, CREATE (the National Arts Industry Training Unit) and Indigenous education and teacher training. Her current research interests are focused on the role and value of museums in the 21st century.

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My paper is titled 'Advocating the value of museums'. It is directed towards all of you who argue, influence and plead the case for museums to bureaucrats and funders who, themselves, are seeking a wider framework to plan for cultural sustainability.

The context for this paper is one of challenge and change. Pressured into delivering against social and economic policy objectives and required to justify their existence in terms specified by funding bodies, the museum sector has often found itself in a reactive position, struggling to articulate the value of museums amidst pressures to define it in the utilitarian terms of economic and social policy.

In fact, the sector's struggle to articulate its worth and value from a position of real knowledge of its equity has been a subject of much debate and one which has critical implications for the future of the sector.

Unless a common and public language can be found in which to discuss cultural purposes, and intrinsic – alongside instrumental – value, then funders will tend to focus on a partial view of cultural institutions Ellis, 2003: 14)

In response to this situation, it seemed to me that we are in need of a way to describe or sector from the perspective of the people who work in it and those who are the public beneficiaries to counteract the instrumental/ utilitarian framework in which we have been operating for many years and which has been constructed by a combination of bureaucracy and economic and social policy. To this end, I embarked on a research project to examine whether we could develop a typology that describes the value of museums.

In this paper, I offer for your consideration some of the results of the research in the hope that a systematic framework generated by museum professionals and the public can go some way to developing that language of advocacy that we have been searching for.

To begin this presentation, it is useful for us to set the context, chart some recent and some not so recent developments and examine the future possibilities.

Context

Let's look at some aspects of our shared history with regard to the events that gave rise to the current context in which museums operate.

Significant changes have impacted the museum sector both locally and globally over the last three decades. Faced with the economic downturn of the 1970's, Western governments within the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) reversed the expansionism that had characterised post-war spending and introduced sweeping economic and structural reforms under the broad policy of 'modernising government'. These reforms altered both the basis for public funding and the relationship between governments and their service providers.

Under the structural reforms of the modernising agenda, public sector agencies, once funded as public goods, are required to justify the receipt of public monies. Results-based accountability was introduced to ensure that public investment in services could be justified by demonstrable outcomes. Agencies were expected to provide evidence that they were using public funds efficiently, effectively and economically.

While the efficient and effective use of resources remains an essential cornerstone of public funding agreements, recent years have witnessed a shift from the dominance of the economic paradigm. Two drivers for this change are mentioned briefly here. One has been a wider international debate criticising models for measuring the health of communities based on economic determinants such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP) as inadequate and unbalanced. Accordingly, there has been a shift in emphasis towards wider social outcomes and quality of life issues when measuring the health of communities.

Another factor has been the growing pressure on governments to deal with the impact of rapid social change. The development of knowledge economies, globalisation and culturally diverse populations, growing inequality, declining social trust and rising civil disobedience are perceived to have impacted negatively on traditional notions of connectedness, citizenship and social cohesion (Beauvais and Jensen, 2002). AEGIS (2003), Jenson (2002) and Baeker (2002) find that accelerated social change presents a challenge to governments to envisage a new civic realm that promotes social trust, co-operation and community well being. Fundamental to this new civic realm is the development of positive social capital, defined as the networks, norms and trust that enable cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2000; Fukuyama, 2002).

In many Western countries, the role of arts and culture (including museums) in achieving wider social development goals is recognised in policies where governments have strong commitments to reducing exclusion, improving individual self esteem, providing opportunities for life-long learning and contributing to community health.

These economic, structural and social changes, combined, have transformed the public sector and have altered the terms of public service provision with significant implications for all service delivery, including museums. The reform agenda has promoted greater government control of public sector activity through a combination of systems of accountability, the budget process and alignment of funding with achievement of government policy.

The resulting situation is a value paradigm constructed around instrumentalism, defined by demonstration of contribution to social and economic policy objectives and measured through methods which are almost exclusively qualitative.

While not arguing with the needs for fiscal accountability and social responsibility, the implications of these changes for museums has been the subject of sustained criticism. In fact, it may be argued, as Belfiore and Bennett (2006) do, that the very vigour with which governments have pursued an instrumental agenda has served to create a counter movement emanating from the sector that focus attention on the significance of museums at the beginning of a new century, their value and ways to express that value.

The challenges

Though required to comply and work within an instrumental agenda, the sector has challenged many of the assumptions on which policy and structural reform have been based. Commentators find fault with an economic bottom line that has enforced a reductionist view of culture and has failed to take account of the much wider range of outcomes that occur as the result of cultural participation and question the assumptions upon which the utilitarian agenda is based.

Critics observe that governments have adopted a narrow interpretation of economics confined to financial issues and market forces which obscures the deeper meaning of economics as the sustainable management of a society's resources. They argue that the purpose of culture is not to create wealth but to contribute to a stable, confident and creative society through public planning that integrates cultural, social, economic and environmental factors to create a quadruple bottom line (Hawkes, 2001).

Others dispute the claim that museums can compensate for structural inequalities in society, which delivers an already differentiated population to the museum's door and **question** the suitability of museums as agents of social change, and their capacity to assume responsibility for solving deep-seated socio-economic problems.

The belief in the 'transforming' power of culture that underpins much cultural policy is also challenged. Joli Jensen, questions the 'unfounded belief in the transformational power of investment in culture' and sees this form of investment as a form of 'displacement activity' enabling governments 'not to have to address social problems more directly' (Jensen, 2002 in Ellis, 2003: 8).

Other sector criticism has focused on the models chosen by governments to assess the performance of the sector. Critics question the appropriateness of applying a system that originated in the profit-making, commercial sector where a bottom line lends itself to quantitative measurement, to the more complex environment of the public sector where multi-dimensional briefs and a wide range of stakeholders make meaningful performance assessment a much more complex issue. Finally, Funding decisions based on instrumental criteria that reduce value to material terms, may compromise the very heritage values upon which programs are based.

The values debates

We find ourselves, at this moment in time, in the midst of a paradigm shift in terms of defining the value of museums more holistically (beyond an instrumental paradigm), substantiating value claims with evidence and articulating it cogently. And so- *what* values do reflect the museum experience and the role that museums occupy in society today?

What values?

In the burgeoning literature on this subject, value is described across a variety of dimensions and three main beneficiary groups. The dimensions include instrumental, intrinsic, institutional and use values. The beneficiaries of these values can be individuals, communities and the economy. Let's take a look at each of the value dimensions through a brief survey of some of the emerging literature.

Instrumental value

'Instrumental value' describes the utilitarian and instrumental benefits that culture can provide for individuals, the economy and for society. The instrumental value of culture is sought through economic benefits such as civic branding, tourism, employment and the multiplier effect on local economies, through social benefits including increased social capital, inclusion, social cohesion, tolerance for cultural diversity, urban regeneration and civic participation and through benefits to individual such as learning, personal wellbeing and health.

Intrinsic value

Intrinsic value gets to the heart of the intangibles of museum experiences.

For individuals, intrinsic values are experienced as a 'state of absorption', or 'focused attention', 'captivation', and the 'deep satisfaction' that the 'pleasure' of seeing an art work or having a cultural experience that is moving and meaningful, can engender. As the capacity to explore 'personal meaning', the discovery of 'personal beliefs in amongst universal truths', 'new perspectives on the world' and uplifting spiritual experiences that address our needs to experience 'the religious, the numinous and the sublime' (Holden, 2004; McCarthy et al, 2004).

Other intrinsic benefits are experienced collectively. Symbolic value is generated through culture's 'expression of communal meanings', through the 'creation of social bonds' that 'make connections between people' and 'reinforce a sense of unity and identity'...

Use and non-use value

Direct use of cultural services is a key indicator in determining public value. Willingness to give something up, to spend money, to commit energy and to spend time visiting, using, enjoying and travelling to and from cultural activities are tangible demonstrations that the public values culture (Holden, 2004: 42).

The very fact that people go to theatres and galleries, visit country houses and museums, make music and write poetry is proof enough that they value culture. In this sense culture does not simply produce value; it embodies value (Holden, 2004:49)

However, a growing body of literature suggests that the absence of direct use does not preclude attribution of value and that non-use values such as option, future and bequest value are significant dimensions of the total value of culture.

Institutional value

Emerging to join the discussions on instrumental, intrinsic and use values is the concept of Public Value and the role of public institutions in its creation and maintenance. Initially discussed by Mark Moore (1995) and developed by others including by Kelly et al (2002), Public Value refers to the value created by government through services, laws regulation and other public institutions. Holden (2004; 2006) argues that public institutions are integral to building public confidence. He argues that well-run public agencies that are ethical, fair and equitable in their dealings with the public and transparent in their practice generate trust in the public realm (2004: 44).

Whose values?

There is a gap in our knowledge about the perceived value of museums from the perspective of the professionals working in the sector and the public who are the beneficiaries of museums (Moore and Khagram, 2004; Blaug et al, 2006).

To address this gap, I used primary research with the visiting and non-visiting public and a cohort of professionals working directly in or associated with the museums sector in Australia to test whether the four value dimensions (intrinsic, instrumental, institutional, use) could be substantiated.

The two cohorts were not aware of the existence of the typology, or, of the responses from the other cohort. My questions to both cohorts were open ended. I asked both cohorts to describe in their own words the social, economic and personal contributions of museums. In addition, I asked the public cohort what meaning the presence of a museum in their community had for themselves and for the community and what, if anything, they as an individual or the community would lose if museums no longer existed. In addition, I asked the professional cohort what evidence, if any, existed to prove that communities value museums. The results were both confirming and confounding. Confounding- because the responses were much more complex, sophisticated, far ranging and nuanced than I could have anticipated.

The Results

Use value

In terms of ‘use’ value, both direct and indirect use forms (visits to museums and visits to museum websites and outreach programs) were responses. Most particularly, the non use values of option, future and bequest value were all generated by the non-visiting public who participated in the study in response to the questions about ‘loss’, revealing that museums have significant value, irrespective of whether people choose to visit them or not.

I rarely visit museums, but I recognize their importance as a visual record of the past (Public cohort: male, visitor, 55-70, urban resident)

Even though I do not visit often, I would still feel the loss personally if museums no longer existed. I anticipate that in retirement I may have the time and be more inclined to visit (Public cohort: male, visitor, 55-70, urban resident).

I don't think I would lose much sleep if museums ceased to exist; However, it would be sad for future generations not to have the opportunity to see our history other than in photos, books etc. (Public cohort: male, non-visitor, parent, urban resident)

The attribution of value irrespective of direct consumption is a significant dimension when arguing for the value of museums and their place in today’s society. Value is not confined to physical visits or website visits.

Institutional value

With relation to institutional value, both cohorts generated a wide range of categories to describe this area:

Table 1: Institutional values accruing to communities (Scott 2007)

Value category	Citizenship	Interpretation of information	Public confidence	Building relationships
Value aspect	Public access to collections	Trusted expertise	Maintaining high standards	Local,
	Fostering democracy	Honest/ balanced presentation	Stability and permanence	National
	Modeling civil behaviour	Meaning		International

Institutional value emerges as a significant dimension in its own right. Museums are perceived as the ‘honest information broker’ presenting information in a disinterested and balanced way that enables the visitor to freely choose his or her position on a subject.

Providing safe forums in which current social questions can be debated fosters democracy. High standards of customer satisfactions add to the public confidence necessary for building public value and relationship building international partnerships increases the intellectual trade in ideas. And very importantly, museums are contributors to civil renewal through providing public access to cultural heritage, past and present collections, identified as an important aspect of citizenship.

[if we didn't have museums] Exhibits would be lost to private collections, beyond the sight of the majority of people (Public cohort male, visitor, 35-50, urban resident)

[Museums] enable ordinary people to see artifacts they might never have the opportunity to experience (Public cohort: female, non-visitor, 35-70, urban resident)

Intrinsic value

The intrinsic value of museums generated by the respondents to this study is presented here with respect to both individual and collective benefits. Individuals felt that

Museums] give a perspective of how insignificant the human race really is. Sometimes that is really good when you feel like things happening in your life are overwhelming (Public cohort: female, visitor, parent, urban resident)

A quite place to go and have a look and browse; A tranquil place to wander when quiet time is needed (Public cohort: female, visitor, 18-24 years, urban resident)

[Museums offer] possibilities to look at both the familiar and the unexpected. New discoveries among the old friends at every visit (Public cohort: female, visitor, 55-70 years, urban resident)

Museums can be places of excitement and awe. They can provide windows to art, history and worlds that individuals have no other way of experiencing (Public cohort: female, non-visitor, parent, regional resident)

Table 2: Intrinsic values experienced by individuals (Scott 2007)

Value category	Cognitive domain	Empathetic domain	Well-being domain
Value aspect	Perspective	Awareness	Refreshment
	Reflection	Insight	Sensitivities and values
	Enrichment		Excitement and awe
	Discovery		Affirmation
	Enlightenment		Joy
	Inspiration		

While museums build community identity and symbolic and spiritual value, the public particularly values their role in preserving history. Historical value is experienced through access to a communal archive, opportunities to experience the past, learning from the lessons of history, a sense of belonging and a conduit for cultural continuity and cultural transmission.

They [museums] can make people feel like they have something to belong to, a type of heritage (Public cohort: female, non-visitor, parent, regional visitor);

[museums provide] A sense of where we came from. Which in turn develops a sense of pride and belonging (Public cohort: female, visitor, 55-70, urban resident)

Museums mean a "Living" link to my History, where I came from, how I developed and how my City was formed (Public cohort: male, visitor, 55-70, urban resident).

Table 3: Intrinsic values experienced collectively (Scott 2007)

Value category	Historical value	Social value	Symbolic value	Spiritual value
Value aspect	The communal archive	Civic places and spaces	Commemorative events	Wonder and awe
	Experience of the past	Sense of place		Meaning
	The lessons of history	Community identity		
	Belonging			
	Cultural transmission			
	Cultural continuity			

Importantly, this study also revealed that the contribution that museums make to the economy most valued by the public is of an intrinsic, rather than an instrumental nature and is related to museums providing *inspiration*, through access to the communal archive of ideas, for new ideas and new products. Museums are valued for

...providing a knowledge archive for the community- something which is unique and valued by others by providing a research venue for individuals, organisations and businesses (Public cohort: male, visitor, 35-50, regional resident)

..providing stimulus to the creative process, by exposing original ideas and experiments they lead to future developments (Public cohort: male, non-visitor, 55-70, urban resident)

Instrumental value

Instrumental value is recognised through a range of aspects. The positive contributions that museums make to individuals, communities and the economy were recognised and expressed by both cohorts.

Table 4: Instrumental value of museums experienced by individuals, communities and the economy (Scott, 2007)

Individuals	Communities	Economy
Learning (a) Self directed through visual objects, in a free choice environment with an entertaining dimension (b) Volunteer programs assist individuals to gain life skills, work experience, training that contributes directly or indirectly to career development	Social cohesion (a) Providing opportunities for engagement (b) Encouraging social interaction (c) Fostering social inclusion	Direct: (a) Provision of employment (b) Producing new commercial products (c) Purchasers of services
	Community capacity building (a) An educational resource for schools (b) A learning resource for the whole community (c) Knowledge building (d) Cultural capital (e) Leisure facilities (f) Developing civic/ community pride	Indirect (a) Contribution to cultural Tourism (b) Local multiplier effect (c) Contribution to regeneration (d) Attracting creative communities (e) Contribution to civic branding (f) Provision of expertise

Conclusion

Importantly, this research has demonstrated that museums have value, encompassing but not confined to, utilitarian and instrumental outcomes. Museums are revealed to be a rich and layered experience offering different ways to interact and intersect with objects and the stories that lie buried within them. The many forms of learning that may result, the feelings of joy and well-being they engender and the empathy that they nurture are valued by those who directly partake of the experience. But value is not confined to direct experience.

This research revealed that non-users still value the fact that museums exist, that the option for visiting may lie in the future and that, as a society, we will have something to pass onto our children.

For communities, there is a whole range of intangible values associated with the role of museums in enabling us to see and touch our past, facilitating our conversations about who we are as a society, sharing a public culture and coming together for significant events. The significance, range and depth of this dimension of value, particularly with respect to the importance which history holds in the popular imagination are yet to be fully explored.

This value of museums is described across a variety of dimensions. For the sector, articulating the worth of museums in terms of their value may offer the ‘language’ we have all been seeking.

References

Australian Expert Group on Industry Studies (AEGIS) 2004, *Social impacts of participating in the arts and cultural activities: report on stage two- evidence, issues and recommendations*, University of Western Sydney, Sydney.

Baeker, G 2002, 'Sharpening the lens: recent research on cultural policy, cultural diversity and social cohesion', *Canadian Journal of Communication*, vol. 27, pp. 179-196.

Beauvais C, and Jenson J 2002, *Social Cohesion: Updating the State of the Research*, CPRN Discussion Paper No. F/22, Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc. (CPRN), Ottawa, Viewed 12th January 2007, <http://www.cprn.com/en/doc.cfm?doc=167>

Belfiore, E & Bennett, O 2006, *Rethinking the social impacts of the arts: a critical-historical review*, Centre for Cultural Policy Studies, University of Warwick, Warwick, viewed 6 March 2007, http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/theatre_s/cp/publications/centrepubs/ccps_paper_9.pdf

Blaug R., Horner L., Lekhi R. 2006, *Public value, politics and public management: A literature review*, The Work Foundation, London.

Ellis, A 2003, 'Valuing culture', paper presented at the *Valuing Culture* event held at the National Theatre Studio on 17th June 2003, organised by Demos in partnership with the National Gallery, the National Theatre and AeA Consulting, viewed 5 October 2004, <http://www.demos.co.uk/files/File/VACUAEllis.pdf>

Fukuyama, F 2002, 'Social capital and development: the coming agenda', *SAIS Review*, vol. XXII, no. 1, Winter–Spring, pp. 23-37.

Hawkes, J 2001, *The fourth pillar of sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning*, Common Ground Publishing Pty. Ltd, Victoria.

Holden, J 2004, *Capturing cultural value: how culture has become a tool of government policy*, DEMOS, London, viewed 21 November 2004, <http://www.demos.co.uk/files/CapturingCulturalValue.pdf>

Kelly, G Mulgan, G & Muers, S 2002, *Creating public value: an analytical framework for public service reform*, Strategy Unit, Cabinet Office, London, viewed 5 October 2006, http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/downloads/files/public_value2.pdf

McCarthy, K Ondaatje, E Zakaras, L Brooks, A 2004, *Gifts of the muse: reframing the debate about the benefits of the arts*, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, viewed 30 August 2005 http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG218.pdf

Moore, MH 1995, *Creating public value: strategic management in government*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Moore, MH & Khagram S 2004, *On Creating Public Value: What Business Might Learn from Government about Strategic Management*. Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative Working Paper No. 3. Cambridge, MA: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

Putnam, R 2000, [*Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*](#), Simon & Schuster, New York.

