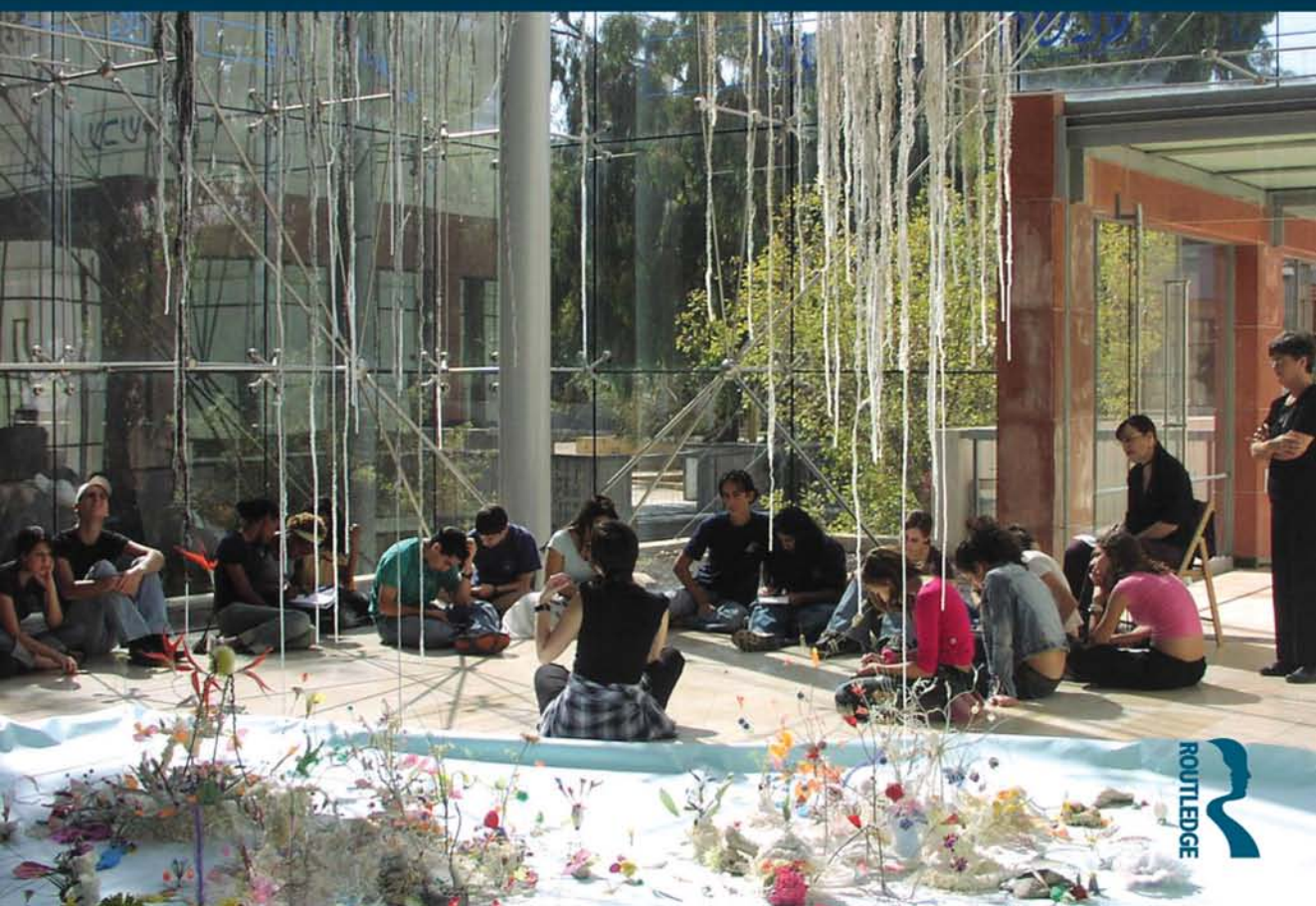


TRANSFORMING MUSEUMS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

GRAHAM BLACK



Transforming Museums in the Twenty-first Century

Graham Black argues that museums must transform themselves if they are to remain relevant to twenty-first century audiences – and this root and branch change would be necessary whether or not museums faced a funding crisis. It is the result of the impact of new technologies and the rapid societal developments that we are all a part of, and applies not just to museums but to all arts bodies and to other agents of mass communication.

Through comment, practical examples and truly inspirational case studies, this book allows the reader to build a picture of the transformed twenty-first century museum in practice. Such a museum is focused on developing its audiences as regular users. It is committed to participation and collaboration. It brings together on-site, online and mobile provision and, through social media, builds meaningful relationships with its users. It is not restricted by its walls or opening hours, but reaches outwards in partnership with its communities and with other agencies, including schools. It is a haven for families learning together. And at its heart lies prolonged user engagement with collections, and the conversations and dialogues that these inspire.

The book is filled to the brim with practical examples. It features:

- an introduction that focuses on the challenges that face museums in the twenty-first century
- an analysis of population trends and their likely impact on museums
- boxes showing ideas, models and planning suggestions to guide development
- examples and case studies illustrating practice in both large and small museums
- an up-to-date bibliography of landmark research, including numerous websites.

Building upon and complementing Graham Black's previous book, *The Engaging Museum*, we now have a clear vision of a museum of the future that engages, stimulates and inspires the publics it serves, and plays an active role in promoting tolerance and understanding within and between communities.

Graham Black is Reader in Public History and Heritage Management, at Nottingham Trent University. He is also a consultant Heritage Interpreter, and exhibitions on which he has acted as Interpretive Consultant have won the first UK £100,000 Museum Prize (2003) and been on the final 2007 shortlist, as well as winning its predecessor the Gulbenkian Prize, a Museum of the Year Award, the Special Judges Prize at the Interpret Britain Awards and the English Tourist Board's 'England for Excellence' Tourist Attraction of the Year Award. He is a Fellow of the Association for Heritage Interpretation (UK). He is the author of *The Engaging Museum* (Routledge, 2005).

Transforming Museums in the Twenty-first Century

Graham Black

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For Sam and Edward

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Introduction: change or die

We are witnessing a complete renovation of our cultural infrastructure. Those 'bricks and mortar' culture houses, citadels of experience, towers of inspiration, that for so long have stood steadfast as symbols of cultural continuity and comfort, while the streets around them have whizzed and clattered to multiple disruptive transformations, are being **turned inside out** . . . this wholesale renovation is born out of an urgent requirement to change or die, and it is just beginning.

Fleming (2009: 1), his emphasis

Few museums, outside the nationals and any other rock stars of the tourist world, can continue to exist in their present form. This Introduction sets the future of museums in the context of the rapid societal developments that we are all part of. There must be equally rapid changes in the definition and public practice of museums if they are to remain relevant to twenty-first century audiences and, therefore, to survive. The challenges facing museums belong to two inter-related fields: those that are the result of wider societal change, and those that directly challenge the traditional roles of museums. The future is now, and change is long overdue. The future for museums must focus around two forms of sustained engagement:

- the externalisation of purpose of the museum, driven by engagement with its publics and ultimately with the communities it serves (Pitman and Hirzy 2011: vi); and
- the self-initiated, self-directed, self-sustaining, collaborative engagement between the museum and its users.

CHALLENGES FROM SOCIETAL CHANGE

The impact of new technology

We are living through a period of profound change in Western society, underpinned by the rise of new media and by a resultant fundamental shift in Western economies to a globally interconnected information economy. Both have had a profound impact on the skills individuals require to succeed in work and life. The debate around what are being called twenty-first century skills – including information and communications literacy, problem solving, creativity and critical thinking, cross-disciplinary collaborative working, adaptability and multi-tasking – has grown in the last decade and is beginning to influence formal education. It is also breaking down the barriers between formal and informal education, with a general recognition that learning is a lifetime pursuit.



Figure 0.1 Is this the future for museums?

The impact of new media has gone beyond the economic to transform how we live our daily lives. This was dramatically brought home to us all by Barack Obama's campaign for the US Presidency in 2007–8 – 'a societal shift . . . played out before our eyes' (Brown 2009: 24). Building on his background as a community organiser Obama used social networking to conjure 13 million email sign-ups and over \$500 million of campaign funding. During the campaign, around 2 billion email messages were sent and over 5 million bloggers took part (Mintz 2011), illustrating that new media had 'transformed participation from something limited and infrequent to something possible anytime, for anyone, anywhere' (Simon 2010: 3). And much of that networking and participation is mobile: 'When he accepted the Democratic nomination in Mile High Stadium, tens of thousands held up their glowing mobile phones like candles at a rock concert' (Brown 2009: 24).

Obama's campaign also revealed how powerful social networking can be in creating an online community of interest. If anyone thought that this was a one-off, or only possible in the USA, the abortive Green Revolution in Iran after the disputed election in 2009 and the Arab revolutions of 2011 have shown the extent to which informal online networks on Facebook and Twitter have emerged as potent tools for democratic

engagement, producing ‘a heady atmosphere seeded by new freedoms of expression and information’ (*The Times* 2011: 2).

Social networking is having a profound effect on the nature and behaviour of Western society. We communicate in different ways. We learn differently. The pull of place has lost its power as we create other ways to ‘meet’. We require new skills to play an active role in contemporary life. And it has given birth to both a new creativity, for example, in Facebook and YouTube, and to new levels of collaboration, as in Wikipedia. Meanwhile the mobility of this new technology, combined with the attitudinal change it supports, means people today increasingly refuse to be passive recipients of whatever governments, companies or cultural institutions such as museums offer; instead they seek to be active members of what Scott McNealy (2005), chairman of Sun Microsystems, has declared to be ‘the age of participation’.

Demographic and generational change

Yet new technology, and its impact on the economy and society more generally, represents only one aspect of the changes we are living through. We are also witnessing global movements of peoples on an unprecedented scale. There are an estimated 214 million migrants worldwide, potentially rising to 405 million by 2050 (IOM 2010: xix). The populations of Western cities in particular, where so many museums are located, are in the midst of rapid demographic change, with immigration and a rise in birth rates radically altering the ethnic and racial make-up. One third of current London residents were born outside the UK, and more than 55 per cent of births were to mothers born overseas (Ford 2011: 7). ‘Diversity is becoming more and more diverse’ (Wallace Foundation 2009: 15), while previously marginalised communities are less and less willing to remain silent or let others speak for them. In this environment, issues around identity, sense of belonging and community cohesion are high on the agenda for individuals, communities and political leaders.

We are also on the cusp of a generational shift. Of course, as life expectancy increases, the Baby Boom generation will be around for a long time to come. But the tastes, interests and behaviour of those born since the 1960s – Generations X, Y and M – are beginning to dominate cultural activity. These generations are not only more diverse but also have much more choice in what they engage with; they are more demanding, and can be much harder to reach by cultural institutions. And the young represent the fastest-growing group of mixed race people, leading to complex identities and new, hybrid forms of cultural expression that break down racial and ethnic categories. Many see these categories as not fitting contemporary realities.

DIRECT CHALLENGES

Financial uncertainty

In 1995, Stephen Weil warned museums that they must inevitably face a funding crisis, and must prepare themselves for it:

When (not if, but only when) the anticipated crunch in public and private funding materializes, worthiness alone may not justify the continued support of every

museum or similar institution. The questions that each museum may have to answer are just these hardball ones: Are you really worth what you cost or just merely worthwhile? ... Are you truly able to accomplish anything that makes a difference, or are you simply an old habit?

Weil, quoted in Nolan (2010: 118)

And so, with the banking collapse in 2007–8, a 20-year expansion in funding for the arts came to a painful end. By 2010, national surveys in the USA revealed that 53 per cent of museums lacked the staffing to deliver their programmes and services (Johns Hopkins University 2010: 7), while 67 per cent reported financial stress (Katz 2010). In the UK, publicly financed museums were faced with cuts of at least between 20 and 40 per cent in their budgets. An August 2010 survey of regional museums in England by the UK Museums Association (Heywood 2010) suggested cuts would lead to many reductions in outreach, events, activities and temporary exhibitions; less staffing; shorter opening hours; and site closures, with a risk of ‘dragging museums back into the dark ages’ – and this is what seems to be happening. In Germany, 10 per cent of museums and cultural institutions face closure by 2020 due to funding cuts (DW-World.de 2010). Meanwhile newspapers have been filled with stories of the impact of funding cuts on museums in France, Italy, Greece and elsewhere.

Public funding to museums can only continue to decline across indebted Western nations. Weil’s ‘hardball’ questions will come back to haunt museum leaders as they seek to fill the gap in their business plans by joining the competition for cash from the limited available pots of grant aid and private funding – is my museum worth it? Do we make a difference? Such a continuing funding crisis reflects ‘a business model which is fundamentally flawed’ (Antrobus 2010: 1). Museums and galleries generate less of their own income than any of the other art forms. What is more, increasing engagement – which the public wants – costs much more, but without any corresponding increase in income. It is no surprise, if profoundly depressing, that the chief response by museums to public funding cuts has been to decimate the teams who engage directly with the public. Can museums and galleries instead turn increased engagement into a funding stream, and how would this match up to the commitment to reach out to the lower socio-economic groups who are under-represented in museum attendance? Alternatively, will reduced engagement not just bring the death of the museum that much closer?

Loss of certainty about what museums are for

There is nothing new about museum conflict over purpose, with a range of current functions listed in Box 0.1. Museums have always had to select where to focus and then build a clear mission around that. But today many museums seem torn in all directions and unable to define for themselves why they are here, let alone broadcast this to their potential audiences. Lack of certainty of purpose can only bode ill for future survival.

Box 0.1 What are museums for?

- a cultural treasure house
- a leisure and tourism attraction
- a source of local pride
- a resource for informal and structured learning
- an income generator
- an agent for physical, economic, cultural and social regeneration
- a memory store for all in the local community, relevant to and representative of the whole of society
- accessible to all – intellectually, physically, socially, culturally, economically
- a celebrant of cultural diversity and promoter of social inclusion, with a core purpose of improving people's lives
- a place of dialogue and toleration, and a community meeting place, committed to promoting civil engagement
- proactive in developing, working with and managing pan-agency projects
- an exemplar of quality service provision and value for money
- all of the above?

This lack of certainty, linked to public funding cuts, is a reflection of a much deeper malaise. Primarily, museums (alongside other public institutions) face a collapse in the general concept of the 'public good' in Western society. This is reflected directly in the willingness of public bodies to cut funding for being 'merely worthwhile', as Weil put it, and the increasing need to justify the funding that is received in terms of demonstrable outcomes. Public funding, while falling, is therefore coming with more and more strings attached in the form of what seem like constantly changing and certainly ill-defined public agendas. As a result, museums must find new ways to demonstrate what they are for, in terms of being 'for the benefit of the public'.

They are also being challenged by the public at large in their core function as repositories of material culture. Why do you need a museum when you can have virtual access to millions of cultural artefacts online? Why visit a museum at all when there is so much competition in the marketplace for leisure and cultural activities – and museums must compete for public attention while faced with frequently out of date, negative perceptions of their offer. One consequence of these issues is that many museum professionals themselves seem to have lost certainty about what museums are for.

A decline in attendance by traditional audiences and continuing failure to engage new audiences

Museum audiences in the Western world remain overwhelmingly white, are substantially from the well-educated and affluent professional classes, are aging, and are in decline at many – particularly smaller – museums. Their leisure time is increasingly fragmented largely due to the work commitments of dual-income households, while they have more options on how to spend their time. Survey after survey shows a

decline in their attendance at cultural sites and events, except when on holiday. Meanwhile, audience research across Western museums continues to reveal a growing failure to attract the under-35s or to replace the declining traditional audiences, particularly with the new communities living in our cities. The impending crisis in attendances is hidden by a continuing boom in cultural tourism, by the short term boost to visitor numbers following major capital schemes and by the continuing popularity of blockbuster exhibitions (Bradburne 2004).

The challenge of the World Wide Web

The web could be seen as the pre-eminent challenge to the role of museums in contemporary society. Its existence is a direct threat to the position museums hold as gatekeepers to and interpreters of the cultural memory of humankind. Rather than having to visit a museum, internet users now have access to millions of cultural objects online, and to information about them. The web also offers an alternative to the authority of museums. Its growth questions what expertise actually means in contemporary culture. With the web has come a new collaborative approach to knowledge generation and sharing, a recognition of multiple perspectives, and an expectation by users that they will be able to contribute and adapt/manipulate content to meet their own needs.

A curator's authority pales in comparison to the audience's vast collective stores of knowledge and passion. How can gatekeepers redefine their role in ways that harness the power of the audience without losing the sense of subjectivity and personal risk that lie behind [their] decisions?

Connor (2009: 9–10)

In a broader context, the web is also gradually changing what people want from a cultural experience. Leadbeater (2009) suggests users at arts and cultural venues have always sought an overlapping 'mix of three different experiences', – Enjoy, Talk, Do – outlined in Box 0.2.

In the past, he believes the overwhelming demand was for Enjoy experiences. But with the rise of the web, Talk and Do are overtaking Enjoy. Potential museum users

Box 0.2 Enjoy, Talk, Do: three forms of cultural engagement

- **Enjoy:** to enjoy being entertained and served; to watch, listen, read. These are passive only in the sense that people do not do much. But inside their heads, such Enjoy experiences can be intensely engaging.
- **Talk:** experiences in which the content provides a focal point for socialising and interacting. The value lies in part in the Talk that the content sets off.
- **Do:** some people also want experiences that allow them to be creative, to get involved, to contribute.

based on Leadbeater (2009: 11)

are becoming not only more diverse but also ‘more critical, promiscuous, challenging and even subversive. On the flip side ... more open, willing, adventurous, engaging and collaborative. Put short, *demand is more demanding*’ (Fleming 2009: 3). This has overwhelming implications for the development of museum content, for the roles of the curator and others who are involved in the development of this content, and for the very structure of arts and cultural organisations – with a new focus on openness, equality and pluralism (Antrobus 2010: 2).

In my view, these are *positive* challenges that will drive museums on to higher standards. The reality is that, to be successful, museums must now operate across three spheres – physical, internet, mobile – and these are increasingly coming together (Kelly 2011). Together, they provide us with opportunities undreamt of by our predecessors to share our collections, enthusiasms and expertise with the world, and to work with our publics for the benefit of all.

Inertia

Museums must either grasp the opportunities offered by our changing society or lose relevance within a generation. They must redefine their roles and discover ways, through engaging with their users, not only to reposition their offer but also to open up new funding streams. A few are actively engaged in this process but, for many others, the response to date has been one of inertia.

Inertia is linked to weak leadership, uncertainty of purpose, a staff structure geared to another age, lack of funding and responsibility for the expensive maintenance of historic buildings that often do not meet modern requirements. It is very easy to bury one’s head in the sand and hope it all goes away. But this will not happen. There has been a transformational shift in public attitudes, expectations and behaviour. Museums have still to understand or respond properly to this, but try asking the other old mass communication media like television, newspapers, the pop music industry or even bookshops about the impact of the web on their activities as audiences move online:

Here’s a hypothesis: the old giants of the mass media age were slow to recognise that the world was changing. They adapted late to the changed conditions brought by the Web and attempt to do so now only out of grim necessity. Their resistance to change offered an opportunity for disruptive innovations from upstarts and outsiders [like YouTube and political bloggers].

Connor (2009: 2)

If museums do not change to respond flexibly and rapidly to changing public demand, that public will go elsewhere.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MUSEUMS?

In a November 2007 survey, the American Association of Museums asked its members ‘What do you think is the single most significant challenge facing the museum profession over the next several years?’ (AAM 2007). Alongside funding, technology and

leadership, they identified maintaining the public relevance of museums. So, there is the underpinning issue for this book – what do we need to do *now* to ensure our museums are still relevant in, say, 2030? This date was not chosen at random but reflects projections by the Smithsonian Institution and the American Association of Museums' Center for the Future of Museums. It also relates to the usual lifespan of the expensive new permanent exhibitions many museums have installed in recent years, not to mention the many new museum buildings we have seen constructed. The decisions we are making *today* will be there to haunt us in 2030. In these terms, the future is already with us.

In hard times it is very difficult to take the long view, but that is what I want to try to do here. In 2004–5, when writing *The Engaging Museum*, I could speak of the pressure for change in museums coming from a growing legislative framework, political agendas and lobbying from both excluded groups and committed museum staff. Now I can add both necessity and urgency. Society is changing much faster than we are. We must accept the need for rapid change in museum ethos and practice, even in times of financial hardship, in order to respond to twenty-first century demands – a big challenge for a profession that is notoriously resistant to change. For the necessary change to happen, we must all be futurists now.

Most urgently, we require a shared vision centred on the 'Why' of what we do – what is our 'mission' for in the twenty-first century and why is it so important? What difference will it make to future generations that we are still here? And this vision must be strong enough to:

- 1 persuade the public at large, as well as funders, of the essential value of museums to society as a whole
- 2 convince individuals, families, social groups, schools and communities of the unique benefits they will gain through the experience of engaging with what museums have to offer, whether on-site or online, and
- 3 persuade local communities to work in partnership with museums.

In my view, this mission *cannot* involve a 'safety first' return to a twentieth century focus on museums that were little more than collection warehouses, with exhibitions targeted at elite audiences. Equally, while many are benefiting from the ongoing boom in cultural tourism, museums – as the cultural memory of humankind and as major social and civil spaces within their communities – must strive to be much more than tourist attractions and providers of leisure activities (although I am happy for them to perform those functions as well).

The key lies in the word I would place at the heart of the vision: *engagement*. This refers to two tasks: museums must support the active, prolonged and meaningful engagement of their users, and they must look outwards to reach out and engage directly both with their communities and with contemporary issues.

Borrowing from the Dallas Museum of Art strapline, we must *ignite* the power of museum collections (Pitman and Hirzy 2011) in four ways.

1 We must enable our users to engage with the cultural memory of humankind

Culture, and its representation and inclusion within the collective, is an essential element in the construction of both individual and community identity. It reflects a sense

of belonging over time and space, of a place in the human story. Through cultural forms we can explore and gain an understanding of differing beliefs, attitudes and opinions, and such understanding must form the bedrock of a cohesive, culturally diverse society and a globalised world. A twenty-first century museum, aware of the increasing diversity of society, will be a place where ideas and cultures can collide positively, learn off one another, ask new questions and stimulate new thoughts and dialogue (Lavanga 2006).

2 We must stimulate creativity and imagination

The cultural heritage is not there simply to be preserved in aspic, but to be constantly re-examined and recontextualised for contemporary society. And creativity is central to expressive life and the creation of meaning. It enables people to lead productive and fulfilled lives. It is worth spending a moment here to examine the most famous work of psychologist Abraham Maslow: his 'hierarchy of needs', in the form of a pyramid, developed in the 1950s (2nd edn 1970). His pyramid gave absolute precedence to physical survival and security. He makes room for higher needs – social belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation – but only once the more basic needs have been met. However, this contrasts dramatically with research on what motivates people at work. Here, basic factors give rise to *dissatisfaction* if not adequate. However, *satisfaction* depends entirely on the things Maslow regarded as higher needs – advancement, responsibility, the work itself, recognition, a sense of achievement. Zohar and Marshall (2004: 16–17) argue that in the developed Western world, basic needs are met as a birthright and that Maslow's higher needs bring more than satisfaction and happiness. In their view, Maslow's pyramid should be inverted: 'We need a sense of meaning and driving purpose in our lives. Without it we become ill or we die.' This viewpoint is surely reinforced in societies that are increasingly reliant on industries of the mind.

3 We must benefit society as a whole through the impact of cultural engagement

In the USA, the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance has shown conclusively that higher civic engagement is directly correlated with higher cultural engagement – investments in culture are also investments in civic engagement and quality of life (Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance 2009). Museums, through the opportunities for creative encounters that their collections offer, are essential to modern society – but only through the dynamic manner in which they support active use of those collections. Their continuing relevance depends on their ability to meet this challenge.

4 We must help strengthen communities and encourage them to engage with the great issues of today

The potential role of museums in promoting and supporting civil engagement introduces a further issue concerning their capacity to remain relevant in the twenty-first century: the ability of museums to tackle contemporary issues. Doug Worts speaks of the 'winds of change' (<http://douglasworts.org>) in wider society and the responsibility of museums to engage their users in the great issues of the day. Beyond that lies the wider capacity of museums to support previously marginalised individuals and communities to develop the skills and confidence to engage fully within civil society.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

Twenty-first century museums will seek to engage and involve their users, on-site and online, on a number of levels:

- 1 still providing enjoyable, exciting and stimulating experiences for families and groups of friends to participate in together, whether on a one-off visit or as regular users
- 2 focusing on developing their audiences as long term, regular users rather than one-off visitors (although still welcoming the one-off visitor)
- 3 engaging with users as active participants, contributors and collaborators on a learning journey together, rather than as passive recipients of museum wisdom
- 4 reaching out to build relationships and partner their communities
- 5 continuing to change and take on new meanings and roles as society continues to transform itself, and
- 6 through building ever-closer relationships with their users, creating new funding streams (not a subject for this book, but one that needs urgent attention).

Engagement

The word *engagement* highlights the dynamic role of museums as user-focused institutions. Focusing on meaningful engagement as the core outcome changes museums from being inward-looking institutions centred on their collections to outward-looking organisations confident in the important role they can play in the lives of individuals and the positive contribution they can make to wider society. Museums have the ability to make a difference to people's lives through their capacity to inspire, excite, empower, give confidence, help people grow as individuals and communities, and assist them to explore and interact with the world in new and stimulating ways. However, making this positive difference requires sustained interaction with museum content – what the Exploratorium in San Francisco has called 'active prolonged engagement' (Humphrey and Gutwill 2005) – which in turn leads to personal and social meaning-making. Engagement is, preferably, for the long term – relevant to one-off visitors but most effective for regular users.

With

Engagement, in turn, cannot be separated from the expectation by modern audiences that they will be able to participate actively, which has the potential to transform the nature of cultural exchange. Charles Leadbeater, in his essay *The Art of With*, speaks of an industrialised world in which goods and services are delivered *to* and *for* people. This world applies not only to the commercial sector but also to much of the educational and cultural environment: 'Often in the name of doing things *for* people traditional, hierarchical organisations end up doing things *to* people' (Leadbeater 2009: 2). A classic example is the transfer of knowledge from the expert to the passive receiver that forms the basis of our formal educational system. It also applies to much of the public side of museum provision where the curator and/or educator provides content *for* and delivers it to the audience. As Leadbeater almost puts it, the curator bases this on his/

her assessment of the audience's needs, rather than reflecting the latter's capabilities and potential.

For a museum to truly engage its users, it must cease acting as a controlling gatekeeper to its collections and expertise. Rather, the museum must work with its users and communities to unlock the stories its collections hold (Lynch 2001), responding to the choices its users make. As such, it must give up its traditional authoritarian voice so that users are free to question, debate, collaborate and speculate – seeking out those issues that most concern them – and are given the support and inspiration required to do so. *With* is at the heart of the engaging museum. It can be seen, for example, in the way staff at the USS *Constitution* Museum in Boston work with families to develop new exhibits. It underpins the concept of participation promoted by Nina Simon in her book *The Participatory Museum* (2010). The principle of *with* also changes the way knowledge in the museum is developed to a process that is co-created, reflective of many sources and shared. Such collaborative learning is already a mainstay of how many people use museums, reflecting the social nature of most museum visiting. It can be expanded exponentially if museums grasp the opportunity to reach outwards that new technology offers. Web 2.0, and the principle of *with* it embodies, represents a chance to share authority and collaborate for the benefit of all. By collaborating with contributors worldwide, the expertise of museum staff will increase.

Crucially, *with* is central to the development of a long term relationship between the museum and its users, symbolising the shift in mind-set and behaviour from the one-off visit to an ongoing association, online as well as on-site, over time. It ensures that the user's voice is at the heart of the museum experience.

Finally, *with* is also about partnerships. Museum relevance in the long term will depend on an ability to forge partnerships – with communities, with schools and others working in the field of complementary education, with other cultural institutions, with other relevant agencies, and with their users:

Partnerships allow museums to extend the boundaries of what is possible: to share risks, acquire resources, reach new audiences, obtain complementary skills, improve the quality of service, achieve projects that would otherwise have been impossible, acquire validation from an external source, and win community and political support.

Anderson (1997: 69)

Social responsibility

In the museum context, being truly relevant demands identification of external challenges to which the museum's expertise can be directed and make a positive difference. It is not simply a matter of trying to engage the community in what the museum wants to do (Carbonne 2003). Rather it needs to be about a wholehearted externalisation of purpose.

Koster and Baumann (2005: 86)

The engaging museum of the twenty-first century must work to place itself at the heart of the communities it serves. As such, it is incumbent on the museum to seek to attract

as diverse an audience as possible, to reflect the complexity of a changing society and to represent all its communities through collections, content and programming. It must strive to enhance tolerance, build community capacity and promote civil engagement. It should actively encourage and incorporate user contributions, represent multiple perspectives, and willingly share authority. It must not flinch from tackling contentious issues but must instead focus on promoting dialogue and understanding.

Driving change

A museum cannot transform itself overnight. It is like any long-established institution which had in the past a clear sense of purpose and direction, and developed its staff structure, business plan, activities, etc. accordingly. The seismic change involved in transforming a traditional museum into an engaging and campaigning museum will not happen by accident. If there is to be more than a piecemeal response to the need for change, it must be driven by a committed governing body and leadership, a focused staff structure and a shared purpose.

From the leadership must come a clear vision, an explicitly stated mission, a commitment to work actively to achieve their goals and an effective strategy for doing so. But leaders cannot operate in a vacuum, as noted by Jack Lohman, Director of the Museum of London:

A leader has got to give the message that this has got to be embedded, that it's the responsibility of all of us. Leaders have to grow a critical mass of support for this agenda because that in turn supports their leadership. They can't carry the burden and the responsibility and actually the pleasure of leading in this agenda ... It's got to be shared, you know: dispersed leadership, empowering people, embedding this so that it's sustained.

Lohman (2010)

Sustained change will take time and will require a shared responsibility by all who work in – and use – museums. As part of this, the knowledge and expertise of museum staff will be needed more than ever, but in a different way that extends their role to develop new technical and interpersonal skills, from using social media to working in partnership with their communities. This transformation has already begun. We see it in family-focused museums across the world. It shines through in the work of curators who mediate between community memories and work with communities to draw out relevancies from existing collections (for example Denniston 2003, Bott et al. 2005 and the Collective Conversations project at Manchester Museum). We also see museums, particularly in the USA, committing themselves to supporting civil engagement.

WHAT FOLLOWS

In the following chapters I attempt to represent the ethos and practice of a museum in the twenty-first century that has committed itself to remaining relevant to its communities of users. The book is divided into two unequal parts. The first, shorter section focuses on the key underpinning issues of knowing our audiences, reaching out to build relationships and supporting their engagement through the creation of a user-friendly environment. Chapter 1 begins with a short overview of visitor surveys before focusing on profiling by motivation and key issues around longer term visitor trends, finishing with an analysis of the impact of cultural tourism. Chapter 2 explores the key role marketing can play in winning hearts and minds, stimulating visits, building relationships and helping to convert people from visitors into users. Chapter 3 concentrates on the visitor experience, looking at issues around visitor services, creating a user-friendly environment and enabling users to customise their visits.

Section 2 – which forms the bulk of the book – then examines what I believe is meant by a twenty-first century museum in practice. Beginning with the changing landscapes of informal (Chapter 4) and formal (Chapter 5) learning, it then places conversation at the heart of user engagement and learning for adult (Chapter 6) and family (Chapter 7) visits. By contrast, the key word in Chapter 8 is *dialogue* as the book looks in breadth and depth at the museum's engagement with its communities. It uses case studies and exemplar activity throughout to project the concept of the engaging museum. The book concludes with a short endpiece examining what all this means for the stalwart of the museum, the permanent exhibition.

Section 1

From visitor to user

The value of museums begins and ends with the relationship with our visitors. It's a contract that is renewed each and every time they engage with us, and if we don't live up to it, we will be usurped.

Falk (2010)

The ambition for the twenty-first century museum should be to change the mind-set of museum audiences, converting them from one-off visitors into regular users who see themselves as active partners in the work of the museum. For this to happen, we must begin by learning much more about current and potential users and responding to what this reveals. But museums must also transform themselves in both attitude and practice. This cannot wait. Apart from the continuing growth in cultural tourism, museums are currently haemorrhaging traditional audiences while not replacing them with new ones.

In the last 20 years, the argument within the museum profession that the twenty-first century museum should be people-centred has largely been won. Yet over the same timespan the audiences for museums, and for cultural institutions more generally, have remained largely white, have been in decline and are getting older, while the nature of many of the local communities within which museums are located has changed dramatically. If we want our museums not only to survive but flourish during the demographic transformation that will continue to take place over the *next* 20 years, it is imperative that we develop a much fuller understanding of existing visitors and of the current and future communities we want to serve, and work to transform our relationship with them.

This section of the book examines the basic issues of knowing our users better, stimulating visits and both caring for and supporting users on-site. The first step on the road to transforming visitors into users is to increase our understanding of actual, potential and future audiences, their demographics, the dynamics of new generations, their changing motivations and the choices they all have in the use of their leisure time. The second is to begin

the process of building relationships for the long term – winning hearts and minds, stimulating visits both on-site and online, converting visitors into users. Much will depend on the images museums project and how successfully they create an atmosphere of belonging.

1 Getting to know our users better

All our traditional arts organisations were developed in very different times, for audiences very different from those we address now. If we are to adapt at the speed set by the fast-changing world around us, then audience insight is the catalyst we need to help us match that pace of change.

Morris and McIntyre (undated: 2)

INTRODUCTION: FROM VISITOR TO USER

This book is not primarily about visitor studies, but about visitor engagement. However, as the Introduction discussed, the changing nature and demands of museum users and potential users are a primary reason why museums must transform themselves or die. Unless museum change can keep pace with the needs and expectations of their publics, they are lost. And the issue is made more complex by the fact that users are now engaging with museums across three spheres – physical, online and mobile (Kelly 2011).

The starting point is a much greater understanding of users and non-users. Morris and McIntyre define the two tools that will enable us to achieve this challenge:

- *Intelligence*: an awareness of the changing world around us that looks way beyond our own database, and
- *Insight*: an understanding of the needs, attitudes and motivations of our existing and potential audiences.

Morris and McIntyre (undated: 2)

This chapter seeks to provide a brief overview, beginning with basic visitor surveys, before focusing on profiling by motivation and key issues around longer term visitor trends. It is completed by an examination of that continuing success story for museums, the growth of cultural tourism. The bulk of the chapter examines on-site users. While there is a growing understanding of those who are engaging with museums online and via social media, the situation is changing so rapidly that it is difficult to give definitive information. I will return to this theme later in the chapter.

Beyond the continuing success of major tourist draws, on-site museum audiences are in a state of flux. Traditional visitors are coming less often. Emerging new generations have different demands. Museums, on the whole, have failed to engage adequately with new communities. Until recent years, visitor research in museums, if it occurred at all, was driven by marketing departments and focused on market segments.

Such research tells us, for example, that:

- the 'traditional' on-site visitor to a Western museum is white, professional class and well educated
- for most of our users, a visit to a museum represents an occasional leisure-led event
- the family group is frequently the largest audience, characteristically making up from 40 per cent to 55 per cent of total visitor numbers
- slightly more adult females than males visit, except to military and industrial museums
- ethnic and racial minority groups, young people and families with children under 5 years old are under-represented among museum visitors, and
- there are clear peaks and troughs in visitation through the week and year, with different segments also coming at different times.

This sort of data is easily quantifiable and provides a core understanding of existing visitors and an essential underpinning for business plans. However, it tells us little about the motivations behind museum visits or the strategies that audiences use during their visit. Today it is increasingly supported by more focused research into why people come (or do not come), their expectations of the experience the museum will provide and the impact this has on the way they seek to personalise their visits.

For longer term planning, museums must also look at future population and leisure trends. Our users in the future will make different demands on museums. Given that many of the long term exhibitions that museums are developing now will still be in place in 10 to 20 years' time, we must immerse ourselves in these trends to ensure we plan for the future, not to continue to meet the needs of past audiences.

Audience segmentation

No introduction to visitor studies can begin without an understanding of market segmentation. Segmentation is a market research method for breaking down audiences into groups that behave in similar ways or have similar needs. Most visitor surveys provide basic quantitative data on audiences, using established market segmentation techniques to provide audience breakdowns. Classic market segmentation breaks down 'traditional' heritage audiences in terms of:

1 Demographics:

- age
- gender
- educational level attained

Family status is heavily used in segmentation, as it can be such a major predictor of behaviour (dependant; pre-family; family at different stages; late life-cycle, including empty nesters). In the past, ethnic or racial origin has been a rare factor in visitor surveys, but this has changed as museums seek to respond to the needs of changing local communities and broaden their audience base. There is substantial evidence that the higher the educational level attained, the more often people will visit museums.

2 Geography:

- resident/local
- day tripper
- tourist:
 - VFR (visitor staying with friends or relatives)
 - national
 - international

3 Class/occupation:

There is ongoing controversy over the concept of social class and its relationship to income, education and occupation but here is not the place to discuss it. Social class and occupation, however, continue to be used as key market segments. Although the British government introduced a new National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification in 2000, the Social Class based on Occupation classification is still the most commonly used by heritage sites and museums in the UK because it enables comparisons to be made with previous surveys:

- A = higher managerial, administrative or professional
- B = middle managerial, administrative or professional
- C1 = supervisory, clerical or managerial
- C2 = skilled manual workers
- D = semi- and unskilled manual workers
- E = pensioners, the unemployed, casual or lowest grade workers.

All the available evidence suggests people on higher incomes are more likely to visit museums and galleries. Among higher income groups in the USA, art museum attendance rates varied from 34 per cent of adults in households making \$100,000 to \$150,000 to 52 per cent of adults in households earning more than \$150,000 (NEA 2009). In the UK, those with a household income of £30,000 or more are twice as likely to have visited a museum as those who earn less than £17,500 (MLA 2004: 5).

4 Structured educational use:

- primary/elementary (to age c. 11/12)
- secondary/high (aged c. 11–16/18)
- student (college/university).

5 Special interest:

- subject specialist
- self-directed learning
- booked group, e.g. a local history group.

This can also be referred to as a part of behaviouristic segmentation, linking groups of people according to interest in or relationship with particular subjects/products.

6 Psychographic:

Segmentation relating to lifestyles, opinions, attitudes, etc. is still infrequently used, although it is becoming more common to hear reference to these terms as museums increasingly take leisure trends and visitor profiling into account.

VISITOR SURVEYS

As already noted, museum visitor surveys began largely as the tool of the marketing office. As such, the *quantitative* information they contain can give us key insights into visitor trends – who the visitors are (in terms of market segmentation analysis), where they are coming from, who they are coming with, how they are getting to the site, maybe how often they are coming, and how current attendance compares with that in the past. This, in turn, can enable museums to define who is missing or under-represented, and thus also forms the basis for a systematic approach to the development of new audiences. For historic data, Hood (1993, 1996) provides an effective summary of USA surveys while Davies (1994) is a classic quantitative ‘survey of surveys’ for museums in the UK.

Today, however, surveys are also widely used to provide broad *qualitative* insights into visitor motivations, expectations and needs, as well as exploring visit satisfaction, learning and other potential elements that can be measured to reflect museum or government policies. Motivations, expectations and needs are discussed below, and the evaluation of visitor learning in Chapter 5.

National surveys of participation

Public participation in the arts has become a matter of concern for governments internationally, and it has gradually become the norm to carry out regular surveys involving nationally representative samples of the adult population. In the USA, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has been carrying out its *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (SPPA) since 1982, most recently in 2008 (NEA 2009). Unfortunately NEA data tracks only art museums and gallery attendance, not cultural, historical or science museums. For these, one must rely on the proxy of visits to historic sites. In England, government agencies have been commissioning national surveys of museum visiting since 1999, initially carried out by MORI (1999). Since 2005, the work has been incorporated within a wider rolling survey commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport: *Taking Part: England's Survey of Leisure, Culture and Sport* (DCMS 2007 and ongoing), which measures not only participation and non-participation but also satisfaction, enjoyment, volunteering and barriers to participation. It is providing consistent year-on-year data. In Canada, Hill Strategies Research Inc. (2007) has profiled the cultural and heritage activities of Canadians since 1992, drawing on data from Statistics Canada's General Social Surveys. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has been collecting data on both adult and child participation in leisure and cultural activities every three years since 2000. These surveys now provide an underpinning for our understanding of museum visitors and, increasingly, allow us to make comparisons over time.

What the surveys reveal: the ‘traditional’ museum audience

The CASE programme (Culture and Sport Evidence) is a three year joint research programme in the UK involving the Arts Council, English Heritage, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council and Sport England to inform UK policy on culture and sport. It is closely linked to the *Taking Part Survey* referred to above. One aspect