



Keynote: Accessibility for Diverse Communities

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Museums all over the world are facing a host of new challenges. The need is for them, now more than ever before, to demonstrate that they are accessible to diverse audiences and that no one is excluded from what museums do. The pressure is on to pursue a social justice agenda and become socially responsible by rethinking their operations and how value is perceived.

This is for a few key reasons: Firstly, society's needs are growing more complex, and the public voice is becoming louder and more demanding, not least because of the extraordinary power of social media. To ensure that they are not irrelevant and left behind, museums must go beyond just keeping up with technological change!

Secondly, as some museums rely on public funding, they need to ensure that they are seen by society as worth funding. With an increase in competition and global pressure on public spending, museums can no longer remain secure that they hold a position as public good that simply has to be funded. Those who fail to show their value to society will inevitably disappear.

A third factor is the changes in the nature of the museum workforce. The overall workforce has grown in quantity and diversity: More women and younger people are in charge of museums now, which has led to a wave of enthusiasm for social history and community history, as well as to an increased respect for community life, community involvement, community access and democracy. It helps that the museum workforce is also increasingly professional, so museum staff are better trained and equipped for management.

And so, the traditional museum—the museum which measured its excellence solely in terms of scholarship and knowledge and did not need to worry about its relevance—is in many ways, *finished*. To survive, the modern museum must prove its worth goes above and beyond tourist numbers, and demonstrate that its value is not merely economical, but also social.

This is not so easy if you consider how funders everywhere are panicking in the face of insufficient public funding and requesting museums reduce pressure on the public purse

by earning as much income as they can. In fact, this has opened up more avenues for corporate interests and populist politicians to influence if not dominate, in a world where museums lamentably are already at risk of letting commercial competition and political values overpower their cultural ones.

Successful museums are those that are able to combine scholarship with public accessibility. They do not simply repeat everything that funders demand or want to hear, and in doing so they are able to retain the trust from the public. Museums bear a heavy responsibility and should not betray the public by kowtowing to the party with the most money in his or her pockets. Case in point: A museum which deals with environmental matters must teach the public about the environment—even if it is bad news—and not just display the propaganda of fossil fuel companies.

More challenging yet is treading the thin line between pandering to the opinions of others in order to procure money to survive, and the belief that museum professionals are the only ones who can use public funding to express their opinions. This may be why despite still holding museums in high regard, society has become more distrusting of the information shared.

If museums wish to stay in business and increase their perceived value to society, they need to welcome dissent and different points of view, rather than to pretend that they have an inalienable and eternal right to survive simply because they represent some kind of high point in cultural life that everyone ought to respect. Museums have to behave in a *socially responsible* fashion.

Recognising this will help answer the question of how museums ensure that they are accessible. It will remind museums that modern values have changed and that they can no longer rest on their laurels, enjoying a relatively untouchable role as guardians of knowledge, wisdom and truth. Now, they must strive to be valuable.

The acceptance of this has caused a shift in the balance between objects and stories in museums. Museums have become less obsessed with the internal mechanics of looking after collections. Instead, they have grown into a more extroverted role focused on being socially responsible. But what does this mean?

Ordinarily, museum roles can be divided into three broad categories:

1. Traditional roles: This includes research and collecting, a spectrum of work treasured by academics and conservatives.
2. Economic roles: For tourism and job creation, which is what interests politicians.
3. Social roles: Responsibilities include being
 - audience-focused,
 - educational,
 - community-oriented,
 - democratic,
 - open to debate,
 - diverse, and
 - socially responsible.

This is important to the public.

Museums play different roles depending on where they are situated. These roles depend on all sorts of variables; the content of collections, location, resources available, and type of

visitors, just to name a few. Some museums are catered to locals while others almost exclusively for tourists. Some are object-rich while others rely heavily on film. Some deal with nature, others art, ancient history, modern history, manufacturing, or even people.

No two museums are identical, but museums who are socially responsible have this in common: 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—it would be illogical and absurd not to—rather that socially responsible museums regard these things as techniques and means, not as ends in themselves.

The socially responsible museum has at its core a powerful commitment to education. It also has a powerful conscience. It is committed to an agenda which rejects the notion that museums are restricted to preservation. Instead, it wants to reach out, locate and engage with all manners of constituencies.

In particular, it wants to engage with people who suffer from some form of disadvantage or discrimination, whether that is economic, social or personal. 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.

Positive action means that the museum is joining the fight against social exclusion. It will partner other socially responsible agencies to effect a difference at the personal, community and social levels. To be socially responsible, therefore, means being socially inclusive, which will ultimately lead to increasing social value and the attainment of social justice, without which museums aren't worth having.

What are museums in Liverpool doing about this?

To provide some context, Liverpool was once one of the richest cities in the world, with what some might argue was the world's most successful port. Unfortunately, somewhere between the two world wars, the city began to decline and today, the population is only half what it was in the 1930s. As recently as in the 1980s, there were real fears for Liverpool's future—so much so that the central government had to step in to ensure its survival.

The situation has improved in recent times, and there are signs of regeneration with new shops, new hotels, new restaurants and new jobs, all of which can add to the city's unmatched cultural offerings. Nonetheless, unemployment is still high, and Liverpool tops the ranks as a place with the highest deprivation.

These socio-economic conditions, coupled with the nature of the museum collections, are defining factors in how the museum service organises itself. As such, National Museums Liverpool has a powerful part to play in achieving total inclusion of local people and sees itself primarily as a socially responsible museum service.

This is most clearly demonstrated at the International Slavery Museum (ISM) and at the Museum of Liverpool (MoL).

The ISM is overtly an anti-racist museum, and visitors will find it brings a powerful message that slavery, along with other human rights abuses, are entirely unacceptable. For example, on 23 August each year, ISM leads Slavery Remembrance Day events in Liverpool to mark the anniversary of the uprising of enslaved Haitians.



Figure 1. International Slavery Museum, 2011. Image courtesy of the International Slavery Museum.



Figure 2. Exhibits in the International Slavery Museum, 2017. Image courtesy of the International Slavery Museum.



Figure 3. Slavery Remembrance Day held at Liverpool, 2015. Image courtesy of the International Slavery Museum.

MoL, on the other hand, has used its exhibitions to challenge discrimination based on disability and sexuality. This has seen the museum engage with the Liverpool Chinese community, teenage girls, and with people living with dementia. Visitors will find messages that advocate peace

and challenge misconceptions about the British Empire. MoL is a museum that does not shrink from taking a position. It is ambitious in its aims, and by being story-led, creates an extremely emotional experience.



Figure 4. Visitors gathering at the Museum of Liverpool, 2017. Image courtesy of the Museum of Liverpool.



Figure 5. An exhibition at the Museum of Liverpool that brought to light stories of those with learning disabilities, 2015. Image courtesy of the Museum of Liverpool.

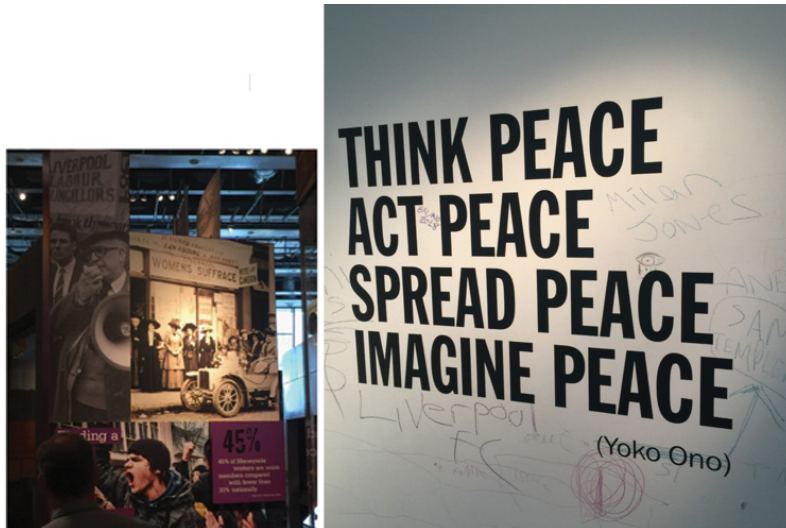


Figure 6. Exhibitions advocating for peace in the Museum of Liverpool, 2018. Image courtesy of the Museum of Liverpool.

The fact is that museums have many roles, and with each role comes a different impact or outcome. This means that museums are full of potential that will only be fulfilled if they move away from traditional forms of thinking. Although this is a cause of tension in some museums, it remains essential that museums attempt to contribute to society, for reasons that go beyond just protecting and enhancing public funding.

It is heartening that despite the deeply engrained tendency to focus inwardly, museums are beginning to take education and learning more seriously and are acting in a far more socially responsible way than before. Changes have been seen worldwide for over a generation, which has led to shifts in museum attitudes, structures and behaviours and skills.

A socially responsible museum is one that tackles difficult, contemporary issues such as homelessness, prostitution, gay rights and sexuality, disability issues, ethnicity, migration, and human rights in general. It is one where

policies are faced up to and not avoided, where audience research is done, and programmes are devised accordingly. It is where the needs of the public are heard.

In a socially responsible museum, it is recognised that without access there can be no learning, and so the broadest view of access is taken. Access is not just given physically but also intellectually; it is found in the programme and the promotional methods, in the message and the mediums used to deliver it. It also ensures that the diversity of communities is appropriately represented.

But there is more that needs to be done. The socially responsible museum needs to increase its network of community, cultural and educational organisations in order to be inspired with new ideas, equipped with contacts and information, and to gain access to audiences. These networks will allow museums to leverage relationships to build trust—something that is imperative for a museum to be able to work with socially excluded people. Ultimately, the

socially responsible museum needs to be a *listening* organisation.

It goes almost without saying that free access—including to special exhibitions—is a key component in a museum’s ability to behave in a socially responsible fashion. Yet the costs of running museums cannot be ignored, and often the contribution to this made through levying an admission charge is negated by a museum’s failure to attract people from a low-income background. My belief is that if a museum is to achieve true accessibility, then it has to be able to remove the significant barrier presented to many people by an admission charge. Many museums in the USA have agonised for years over the question of whether they might have a greater social impact if only they did not require an admission charge.

Perhaps it is just as the UK Museums Association said in the first edition of *Museums Change Lives*. There are ways for museums to have social impact:

- Everyone has the right to meaningful participation in the life and work of museums.
- Audiences are creators as well as consumers of knowledge; their insights and expertise enrich and transform the museum experience for others.
- Active public participation changes museums for the better.
- Effective museums engage with contemporary issues.
- Museums are not neutral spaces.

In conclusion, museums need to both be relevant and appeal to one’s emotions. They need to behave differently from how they used to. In fact, in order to truly be accessible, they may well need to be activists, just like the International Slavery Museum and the Museum of Liverpool have become.