

The Proactive Museum

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Abstract

The proactive Museum is committed towards actively participating in conversations about issues of global and local significance. That action translates into a programming mix that is inclusive in composition, responsible in the understanding of current narratives and issues, and innovative in its use of technology and design.

Young people are tech-savvy communicators who are both saturated with information about global issues and concerns as well as being immersed in their own local environment with its own set of narratives and perspectives.

Our challenge and opportunity is to engage them in museum spaces through the process of conceptual development, design and gallery experiences. We need to ensure that not only is their voice “heard” but that they are comfortable in those spaces.

Through clever programming the proactive museum can interweave the voices and aspirations of our young people with the cultural memory and precious objects of the past.

This paper will illustrate how this has been achieved through recent exhibitions developed by the Waikato Museum.

Speaker’s Bio

Kate Vusoniwailala has been director of the Waikato Museum since July 2002. She has worked in the arts and heritage sector in the Pacific for the past 22 years. Her research interests include museum history and theory, and art and heritage management in a Pacific context. She was a founding member of the Pacific Island Museums Association and undertook research in cultural heritage management funded through the UNDP, as part of a team formed by Charles Sturt University during 2005/2006. She has presented papers at several international conferences and written articles for a number of journals including: *Museums Aotearoa*, *Domodomo*, *Minpaku*, *Fur Volkerkunde*. She has an MBA from the University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji, a Post-Graduate Diploma in Art Gallery & Museum Management from Manchester University, U.K., and a BA Hons in Visual Arts with a Minor in Anthropology and Myth from Lancaster University, U.K.

Introduction

I would like to begin by acknowledging our hosts for this conference – the Singapore National Heritage Board and Asian Civilisations Museum, your hospitality has been outstanding. I would also like to thank the Commonwealth Association of Museums for their invitation to participate in what has been a very stimulating and interesting conference so far and to express my gratitude to the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO for their support with my attendance.

Over the past few days we have heard some fascinating presentations and discussions from a wide range of people that well illustrate a paradigm shift in the understanding of the role and purpose of museums. In his inspirational keynote speech Dr. Hepburn challenged us to “look with new eyes”¹ at some of the key issues we face in the world today and think about our response to this as a museum sector. Dr. Galleswara extended this on the second day, asking us to “re-think” what the museum is about and the unique opportunity we have as museum professionals managing “public/civic” space. He also challenged us to “put people rather than objects first”.²

This paper continues to ask questions about museum practice, about how we can be more inclusive in our approach and about the importance of not only “looking with new eyes”

but also “including new voices” in our museum spaces. The broad definition of a museum as outlined in the Statutes of the International Council of Museums describes an institution that “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment³.” Museums are widely recognised as contributing toward the social and cultural well being of their societies and providing educational programmes that engage students with the creative, social and technological endeavours of their forbears.

This is very laudable if we are convinced that museums practise as independent, non-partisan collectors, researchers, interpreters and presenters of material culture. However, a shift has occurred within the sector where some institutions have recognised the deception of this supposed impartiality. This has involved cognisance of the forces that have driven the very activity of the museum from the determination about what to collect, who and what cultural practices to study, and how to present such cultures and history. This position is clearly articulated by Michael Ames (quoted in Sandell 1998, 407), who describes museums as “products of the establishment [that] authenticate the established or official values and image of society”. The risk that museums then face is that they end up delivering a service and experience that reinforces “official values” and potentially marginalises certain groups in society. Those forces are rarely representative of our youth population and therefore we have the risk that the voices of our young people are not heard in the authoritative narratives of our museums.

Sandell challenges the post-modern museum to move away from a socially exclusive position of selectively representing the “majority” or those in “authority” to a socially inclusive position where groups traditionally underrepresented in museums are provided with a voice within museum spaces⁴. This transition illustrates a move away from a previous focus on the “processes of construction”⁵ to the burgeoning awareness of the “processes of reception and the tangible impact on audiences”⁶.

This has involved taking responsibility for museum practice and re-defining how that practice will unfold in our museum spaces. Sandell argues that museums have “an obligation to develop reflexive and self-conscious approaches to collection and exhibition”⁷. The opportunity therein is that as institutions with cultural authority, museums can then support and promote a practice of social inclusion. Within the context of this discussion it should mean that the stories, perspectives, hopes and fears of our young people are captured and reflected in a holistic narrative of our community. Further, within the context of this conversation about the role museums play in “assuring the survival of cultural memory and articulating a hopeful vision of a future for young people in our communities”⁸ we need to consider how we engage and include youth in this conversation. How do we connect cultural histories with current experience and future aspirations? And how do we translate this into operational practice?

Some of these questions will be explored briefly before looking at how this has been attempted in practice with the exhibition *Ngaa Pou Whenua* at the Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato in New Zealand, Aotearoa.

So how do we involve young people in this conversation?

Whilst museums cater to a wide-ranging audience, the way in which museum spaces are designed, and the interpretative and display methods that are used immediately determine the extent to which museums are able to engage with a young audience.

Considering the term “youth” within the broadest context from toddlers to young people in their twenties, some museums, especially those with a focus on science, are clearly interested in appealing to a youthful market as illustrated through the design of highly interactive exhibition spaces geared towards actively engaging that audience. A key thrust of such facilities is around engaging with and sharing knowledge and information with that audience.

A review of abstracts for the *2009 European Conference on Youth Education in Museums*, illustrates some of the many innovative initiatives that have been undertaken to engage youth beyond a pure object or gallery focus. For example, the Modern Art Centre of

the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation describes a **Heroes & Villains** project that engaged primarily with teenagers at risk of dropping out of school to “raise social and personal awareness”, “question stereotypes in the surrounding visual culture”, and “debate and question identity construction patterns and improve self-confidence through creative thinking”.⁹ Other examples, such as **Friday Nights** at the Van Gogh Museum and the **Night Club** at K21, Dusseldorf’s Museum of Contemporary Art, are all geared towards attracting a younger audience through strategic programming and over the past few days we have heard of many other such excellent initiatives to draw and engage a younger market.

But this drive is not so clearly apparent in some institutions. Is this because these institutions perceive their audience as being primarily an adult one? Is it because the focus is more heritage, or past focused? Is it because interactivity may not be seen as appropriate in the handling of certain subjects? Is it because new technology is not considered as accessible to the primary audience (an older audience)?

Half of the world’s population is under the age of 25. The 2006 World Bank Report states that “[d]eveloping countries which invest in better education, healthcare, and job training for their record numbers of young people between the ages of 12 and 24 years of age could produce surging economic growth and sharply reduced poverty”¹⁰.

The opportunity to engage young people across the arts, science and heritage starts with a commitment toward seeing them as a prime market. This then necessarily informs programming and drives the conceptual development and design of museum exhibitions and spaces to accommodate this.

Socially inclusive museum practice ensures that youth are engaged with current issues of concern such as climate change and identity. Involving them in the conversation facilitates a process of osmosis whereby the factors that influence climate change or determine identity are absorbed and considered and the voice of our young people is “heard”. Maria Paola Azzario Chiesa, President of the UNESCO Centre in Turin, advocates “a process of broad integration of the youth into the social development structures and activities. This process requires committed young people cooperating at every level and recognised as equal and valuable partners”¹¹.

So how do we connect cultural histories with current experience and future aspirations?

Case study: *Ngaa Pou Whenua*

Hamilton (Kirikiriroa in Maori) has a high youth population, with nearly half the population under the age of 30; it also has one of the highest concentrations of Maori within an urban centre in New Zealand – approximately 20% of the population. Despite these significant statistics, visitors to the city will recognise very little that immediately conveys that information; there is very little architectural, cultural, or other visual or active forms that conveys the rich cultural history of Kirikiriroa prior to confiscation of land by the colonial administration in 1864. There is also very little illustration in any form of the high youth demographic either.

The Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato, located in Hamilton, has taken a proactive approach towards communicating the rich cultural story of place through its recent exhibition *Ngaa Pou Whenua: Pillars of the Land*. The exhibition opened at the Museum in November 2010 after a development period of three years. On one level the exhibition tells the story of the four Iwi (tribal areas) of Tainui – Waikato, Pare Hauraki, Raukawa and Maniapoto. On another level it has taken a proactive approach towards ensuring that Tangata Whenua, the indigenous people of the land, are central to the creation of a contemporary space to define themselves within the museum context. The four key segments of the exhibition are:

Pou Whakapapa: The exhibition begins by establishing the four iwi of Tainui through their landmarks, Taonga (treasure), waiata (songs) and tupuna (ancestors). From the outset shared copyright was arranged between the Museum and iwi for all the material generated through the development of the exhibition, including the photographic images of key landmarks and

the audio-visual material. At the end of the exhibition all this material, including the magnificent Pou designed and made by iwi nominated artists, will be returned to iwi for their use. The key philosophy underpinning this is a commitment to partnership and recognition that “ownership” of this material rests with iwi.



Te Pihinga – Kids Activity Corner: A dedicated activity space for very young people to play in, or explore, with cabinets and drawers of Taonga from the collection, designed in such a way as to provide children with an opportunity to touch objects. There is also a sound experience – a story-telling component provided through an audio story describing “taniwha” (guardians particular to each iwi). A large magnetic wall provides many characters that kids can move around to create their own Marae or village, with characters that look like them or their whanau, or family. There is provision in this space for a mini exhibition of artworks from maori language primary schools, kohanga reo, across Tainui waka.



Pou Arataki: Explores the lives of Kaumatua from Tainui waka through a short film on their upbringing, mentors and beliefs. This section recognises and celebrates iwi nominated Kaumatua, or leaders, sharing their stories and wisdom, and providing iwi role models for young people.



Pou Moemoeaa: This final section provides an opportunity for contemporary artists to explore their hopes and dreams for the future. Each iwi identified two artists to represent their story, providing the opportunity to profile and celebrate the breadth of talent from Tainui waka.

The section also includes a multi-screen component where young and old share their sense of what it means to belong to the Tainui waka and their aspirations for the future. Many young people were consulted and given the opportunity to share what it means to be Tainui today and what their wishes for the future are. These voices are strong, confident and optimistic. Each year whilst this exhibition is on the floor, over 140,000 museum visitors will hear the voices of these young people embracing their heritage and identity with pride.



Overarching methodology: The exhibition was grounded in consultation with iwi from the outset, from discussions about the concept and its development, the identification of key landmarks, selection of Taonga (treasures) and waiata (songs) for each iwi. Recognising the importance of engaging with young people, *Ngaa Pou Whenua* is highly interactive and was designed to incorporate the Taonga of the past as well as current technology to share the stories of that Taonga in the form of small films illustrating the fabrication methods, usage and significance of the Taonga. It has bilingual text throughout the exhibition space in recognition that the reo (language) itself is a Taonga (treasure).

It was recognised that once the exhibition opened to the general public, it would be important to continue to provide a presence in the space to welcome and engage visitors. A kaiawhina, or host, role was created for this purpose with the aim being that a young person would be engaged to take up this responsibility and lead public programmes in the future.

Conclusion

The development of *Ngaa Pou Whenua* illustrates an inclusive approach to exhibition projects in museums. Within the context of Sandell's¹² typology of social inclusion, the approach fits both models of the museum as an "agent of social regeneration", providing for increased self-esteem of identified parties, as iwi celebrate their past, present and future aspirations in this public space, and the museum as a "vehicle for broad social change", where the museum aims to influence positive social change and encourage appreciation and respect for identified parties in an urban context in which there is little other representation or presence for this significant cultural group and demographic. The project manager for the exhibition stated from the outset:

The lack of contemporary Iwi representation within museums can have an ongoing affect on how Tainui children perceive themselves, by defining their worth within a historical context, rather than current practice. This exhibition concept consciously addresses the need for an exhibition that reflects current community, hapu and whanau practice through the vessels of Whakapapa; Arataki and Moemoea (genealogy, leadership and aspiration).¹³

Throughout the four key segments of the exhibition, cultural foundation stones have provided the base on which young and old have been able to identify and communicate their desires for the future. The museum practice in this instance has interwoven the voices and aspirations of our young people with the cultural memory of our elders and precious Taonga of the past. The Whakatauki, saying, of the first Maori King – Potatau te Wherowhero, is very pertinent in this case:

Kotahi te kohao o te ngira, e kuhuna ai te miro
maa, te miro pango me te miro whero
(There is but one eye of the needle through
which the red, black and white threads pass)¹⁴

This Whakatauki, or saying, speaks of strength and beauty through both unity and diversity by alluding to the beauty and the strength of the woven tukutuku. The idea is that whilst individual threads may be weak, the process of weaving them together makes for a strong fabric; whilst individual colours tell no story, woven together the pattern is both beautiful and capable of telling a story.

The partnership with Iwi around the development of the exhibition and agreement about the ongoing intellectual property rights and "ownership" of material generated and captured, as well as the initiative to engage young people and provide them with a clear voice in this museum space, illustrates the Waikato Museum's commitment towards taking a proactive approach to the exhibition project *Ngaa Pou Whenua*.

Notes

¹ Hepburn, Dr. Davidson, Keynote Address by the President of the General Conference, UNESCO, on the occasion of the Triennial Conference of the Commonwealth Association of Museums "Culture, Economy, Climate Change and Youth", May 2011.

² Galleswara, Amareswara, Keynote Address at the Commonwealth Association of Museums Conference on "Culture, Economy, Climate Change and Youth", May 2011.

³ ICOM Statutes art.3 para.1.

⁴ Sandell, Richard, "Museums as Agents of Social Inclusion" in *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Vol 17, No 4, pp. 401–18, 1998.

⁵ Sandell Richard, "Museums and the combating of social inequality: roles, responsibility, resistance", in *Museums, Society, Inequality*, ed. Richard Sandell (2002).

⁶ Sandell, "Museums and the combating of social inequality: roles, responsibility, resistance".

⁷ Sandell, "Museums and the combating of social inequality: roles, responsibility, resistance".

⁸ Call for papers for the Commonwealth Association of Museum Conference on “Culture, Economy, Climate Change and Youth”.

⁹ Gomes da Silva, Susana, “Heroes & Villains”, The European Conference on “Youth Education in Museums”, 2009.

¹⁰ 2006 World Bank Report

¹¹ Chiesa, Maria Paola Azzario (President of the UNESCO Centre in Turin), “A Brief Outline of the UNESCO Art Programs for Youth, of the Italian UNESCO Centres' Role, and of the UNESCO Centre in Turin's Activities”, The European Conference on Youth Education in Museums, Bucharest, May 14–17, 2009.

¹² Sandell, “Museums as Agents of Social Inclusion”.

¹³ Davey, Moana, *Project document for Ngaa Pou Whenua*, Waikato Museum (2010).

¹⁴ King Potatau Te Wherowhero, Whakatauki, saying of the King.