

**Communication and community: How museums can effect change through inclusion and outreach**  
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**[1] Glasgow**

The concept of museums acting as enablers of social change is not a new one, and was part of the rationale for the development of civic collections throughout the world. Glasgow has a long history of the promotion of art and culture as a means of educating the masses, begun by 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century philanthropists, many of whom started small museums to educate their workers. However museums evolved from the private collections of art and rare or curious objects made by wealthy individuals, families or institutions. These were often displayed in so-called 'wonder rooms' or 'cabinets of curiosities' accessible only by the more privileged social classes. Most European public museums were founded on these collections and on this ethos; this has by default led to a conflict of the roles museums play in society. The outcome of this has been in general a *du haut en bas* approach to social change - feeding culture down to the masses from the museological ivory tower. The imposing Victorian edifice of Glasgow's Kelvingrove museum in particular evokes this spirit. This attitude is entrenched and not unique to Glasgow – I would say that it is one of the biggest barriers that civic and national museums have to social engagement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Museums tend to be features in the landscape, in the community but not of it.

As I am speaking from the particular perspective of Glasgow Museums, I will begin by introducing you to Glasgow itself. Understanding Glasgow's history is important in understanding the role its museums play.

**[2]** Glasgow is a city that has seen many changes throughout its history as a response to its economic successes and also through necessity. Glasgow is currently the UK's 4<sup>th</sup> largest city (after London, Birmingham and Leeds) and Scotland's most populous.

**[3]** Over the last 20 years Glasgow has been undergoing a major transformation of its identity. As its manufacturing based has dwindled it has had to move from being a heavily industrial city, to one that is built on different economic bases, bolstered by culture, creativity and innovation. It was nominated as European City of Culture in 1990, won the UK City of Architecture and Design in 1999 and will be hosting the 2014 Commonwealth Games

**[4]** Glasgow Museums is in many ways a unique organisation. It is the largest civic museum service in the UK – with 10 museums and galleries. These include:

- The Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) a contemporary art gallery in the heart of the city,
- St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, one of only 4 museums of religion in the world;

- The People's Palace Museum, opened in 1898 as one of the first social history museums;
- The newly opened publicly accessible store, Glasgow Museums Resource Centre; and
- Glasgow Museums' flagship, Kelvingrove. Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum is the most visited museum in the UK outside London and was recently named as the 27<sup>th</sup> most visited museum in the world.

I am going to focus this discussion on Kelvingrove and Glasgow Museums Resource Centre; Some of our smaller venues, notably The Gallery of Modern Art, St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art and The People's Palace have active social justice programmes but these museums were purpose-built and so they do not face the challenges of the existing 19th century industrial and colonial icon that is Kelvingrove or the new venture in an unfashionable part of town that is Glasgow Museums Resource Centre.

**[5]** The collection is as eclectic as it is large – with 1.4 million items. These range from fine art to arms and armour, to natural history, social history, costumes and textiles, transport and technology and world cultures. Over 60% of the collection is of national or international significance according to the Scottish National Audit<sup>1</sup>.

#### **[6] Museums' Roles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Alice Parman in her 2006 article **The Museum's Community Role** in CultureWork suggests that a museum can have a number of different roles in a community. She suggests the following as typical:

**Visitor attraction:** The museum is the "front porch" of the community, welcoming visitors and giving them an overview of what's special and unique about this place.

**Catalyst for change:** The museum exists to deliver a message that will encourage people to think differently about their relationship to others or to the world.

**Centre of creativity:** The museum engages visitors in activities where they make and do things. Visitors, rather than the museum, determine the outcomes.

**Memory bank:** The museum displays aspects of the history of a place, person, cultural tradition, etc.

**Story teller:** The museum interprets the history of a place, person, cultural tradition, etc. in ways that relate the past to the present--and even to the future.

**Attic:** The museum preserves objects and images that would otherwise have been discarded.

**Treasure trove:** The museum preserves valuable, meaningful, and/or rare and unusual objects and images.

**Shrine/hall of fame:** The museum honors a particular group or individual and assumes visitors have a built-in interest in this topic.

**Exclusive club:** Although open to the public, the museum is primarily aimed at people with special interests in and knowledge of the topic.

*From Parman, Alice, 2006: The Museum's Community Role, CultureWork, Vol. 10, No. 1.*

I would also argue that not only do museums play multivariate roles but the community or communities of which a museum is a part may have different definitions of the museum and its role in society, depending on the experiences of the community and its individuals. Each of these definitions might define a group's relationship with or to the museum. For instance, certain members of Glasgow's community very much regard Kelvingrove as their 'Exclusive Club'. The museum staff have tried to make Kelvingrove in particular into a Storyteller, Centre of Creativity and a Memory Bank. Most visitors regard it as anything from an attic full of junk to a treasure trove, while to the outside visitor it is a major visitor attraction. At the other end of our museum scale, Glasgow Museums Resource Centre, only 6 months old and with fewer than 10,000 visitors to date still fulfills the same broad spectra of roles to its community.

### **[7] Glasgow Museums' Communities:**

Glasgow is still regarded as a city of change, opportunity and innovation but also conversely of entrenched hardship and poverty. Parts of the city have some of the worst statistics for unemployment, life expectancy, violent crime, addiction and health in Europe – and the consequences of these statistics are daily realities for many thousands of its citizens. Glasgow has also long been the most ethnically diverse city in Scotland and is currently home to the largest number of dispersed asylum seekers in the UK<sup>2</sup>. How can our museums possibly be relevant to these groups? How can museums fulfil our social and civic responsibilities to these communities? How can we be involved in social change? Didactics are no longer effective – if we continue to lecture we will find we are talking to ourselves or to that small group of elite who have formed the core audience for the past 200 hundred years. As museum professionals we should be looking at what museums mean to our communities and how we can change enough for new audiences to cross our thresholds and engage happily with museums themselves. We should take far more seriously what our communities may have to offer us in terms of

knowledge sharing and understanding of the collections. Can we move from being only Exclusive Clubs to, on occasions, Catalysts for Change?

**[8]** In order to effect change a Museum must put the interaction between people and the collections at its heart. Glasgow Museums do have a long established commitment to engaging with the city's diverse audiences. Glasgow Museums also has a fundamental philosophical commitment to the idea of the museum as a civic space. This means that our museums are regarded as places where social awareness is raised and a clear invitation given out to our communities to contribute to and shape the discussion being stimulated by what is on display and how we as staff facilitate that interaction. This works for our established audiences, but what about those who cannot or will not access the museums due to social, physical, geographical and other barriers? And why should they? What will they gain? At their best, museums can:

**[9]**

1. Encourage social interaction, to recall and share memories with peers, which can boost self esteem through giving value to people's life achievements and experience.
2. Inspire creativity.
3. Explore new ways of seeing the world.
4. Support community initiatives and social cohesion.
5. Support learning opportunities to help people develop transferable skills, build self confidence and begin to take ownership of cultural resources and spaces in the city

Increasingly in Glasgow we are finding ways to facilitate opportunities for participation and representation: engaging and involving people with the collections in community spaces and museums and connecting them to the more mainstream services and other cultural pathways. Partnership working enables us to best harness the collections and our team's skills and expertise to inspire and support the city's social objectives. This community engaged practice informs contemporary collecting, documentation of the collections and ensures future museum initiatives are representative of and relevant to the communities they serve. I am now going to look in more detail at Glasgow Museums' most recent innovative projects which were developed through dialogue with vulnerable young people.

**[10]** Afr-I-can was a partnership between Glasgow based artists of African origin and Kelvingrove Art Gallery to present a positive celebration of African culture and achievement. The artists worked in conjunction with Kelvingrove staff. Starting with a celebration of Africa Day on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2008, Kelvingrove hosted a series of free family events through the summer. The six workshops were designed to appeal to the whole of the African community in Glasgow as well as the wider public who wished to learn more.

[11] The visitor response was positive and enthusiastic. Feedback from Afr-I-can workshops suggested that there were differing expectations of the events' outcomes from both new and established audiences and also from the artists' and their way of working. Afr-I-can was structured as a series of artist/community led events so established audience felt the loss of the rigid structure associated with most museum events. However the targeted audience of African families and the artists themselves felt reassured by the relaxed and informal nature of the programme.

[12] These events fed and inspired the theme for '*My Africa, My Glasgow*', a temporary exhibition in Kelvingrove's Community Exhibition space. A further outcome of the event was that the profile generated by Afr-I-can events led to the first independent event led by an African organisation in Kelvingrove.

[13] **The Get into the Grove** project was an initiative which began in October 2009 after a six month period of research to try to engage with an under-represented audience of 12-17 year olds. Intervention at this age may ensure that the young people continue to visit the museum as adults because of the positive experience they have had. The varied workshops allow participants to try new skills which may offer more options for further education that they had not initially thought of.

[14] Working with young people has highlighted the fact that teachers need support and training to learn to interact effectively with museums, and so we also work closely with Glasgow's teachers and are even involved directly with teacher-training colleges. Glasgow Museums has an education officer employed by the Education department and therefore the museums are able offer programmes closely linked to the curriculum.

[15] Another teacher/museum partnership is with WOSDEC, the West of Scotland Development Education Centre. We collaborate with teachers and others responsible for education to promote global citizenship in schools to ensure that there is a global dimension throughout Scottish education.

[16] Using the display and collections we have run sessions at the museum to support learning and teaching in a way that encourages young people to be confident and effective contributors to a more just and equitable world.

[17] At Glasgow Museums Resource Centre we have different challenges. Fully opened September 2009 this publicly accessible store offers tours and workshops daily. It is situated in an area of great socio- economic deprivation and our major challenge is to attract audiences and visitors from its community who are very suspicious and hostile to the civic authority. Sustained outreach has been the key. Glasgow's Open Museum, part of Glasgow Museums Resource Centre works beyond the four walls of museum venues to facilitate access to the city's collections for more vulnerable and socially disadvantaged groups.

**[18] & [19]** Two small exhibitions in public libraries had the unexpected effect of engaging young street children who use libraries as safe havens directly with Nharo Bushman children in Botswana and AIDS orphans in Soweto.

**[20]** In 2009 The Open Museum collaborated with Theatre Nemo in an Endeavour to bring young people from disadvantaged communities together to celebrate and share their diverse interests and experiences, using museum objects and animation.

Participants were given a unique behind the scenes insight into the workings of Glasgow Museums Resource Centre. The group had an opportunity to research and explore a variety of objects in the collections and through a series of fun and creative workshops selected one object that both inspired and featured in their animation.

**[21]** This chosen object travelled to the group's own premises where it played a central role in the development of the animation. Working within the group's own venue Theatre Nemo and the Open Museum helped the group to explore their connection with the chosen object using a combination of multimedia technology, arts and crafts, music and storytelling. Such a mix of different approaches and creative techniques brought an excitement into learning about their chosen object. Team building, problem solving, communication and negotiation skills were developed and nurtured throughout this project as the group learned the audio visual skills required to feed their personality and ideas into an animation.

**[22]** These workshops helped the individual build trust in themselves and others. This was further developed through the group's involvement in recording the entire project through film, sound and photography at the BBC Scotland studios.

**[23]** Their animation, called 'A Tribute' has recently been screened at the Glasgow Film Theatre alongside a behind the scenes documentary.

**[24] Western European** museums also have a role, possibly even a duty in engaging with the global community. Glasgow's World Cultures collections were founded on the spoils of Empire and in the post-colonial age we have been actively trying to re-connect people with their material cultures. The World Cultures curators have taken advantage of digital communication to work with our stakeholders across the world. One example is a recent collaboration with the Lakota of Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota for a combined 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the repatriation of a Ghost dance shirt to the Lakota people from Glasgow Museums in 1999. The repatriation itself was the first from a European institution to a Native American tribe and was the result of 6 years of communication and discussion. The 2009 event and subsequent collaborations were primarily organised through Facebook - possibly another first.

**[25]** Through our Cultural Survival Newsflash display at Kelvingrove, we have ongoing projects with young people in Africa, Ecuador and Australia, where we have worked with indigenous communities to help give their young people

a virtual platform - to share their issues and their lives with young people in Glasgow (this project grew out of the library projects mentioned earlier). We found that outreach, communication and perseverance allowed us to overcome most difficulties at our end; we hope that by representing their wishes sympathetically and accurately we have increased awareness and support for the issues these young people face in their lives.

**[26]** Young Cofanis and oil.

**[27]** The projects I have described involved engagement and collaboration at every level and have actively changed relationships between the museums and communities in Glasgow and other parts of the world. By becoming part of our community we can accurately represent it and act as initially as a platform and possibly then a catalyst) for change.

## **Conclusions**

- Sustained outreach is recommended especially where families and more vulnerable groups are involved.
- It is important to communicate all of the processes that need to be gone through as well as the rationale behind them that are required to bring the event to fruition.
- The community should be given every opportunity to work as collaborators in whenever and wherever they are willing to participate and should be actively encouraged to lead or at the very least actively contribute to the content and planning process in parity with museum staff.
- Events should fit the needs of the participant community with regard to the atmosphere, the timing of events, and the accessibility of the venue.
- It is vital that vulnerable visitors should see the museum as a safe and welcoming environment. An informal atmosphere is important where people are likely to feel museums are alien or hostile places.
- Cooperative working through open communication is the key to success. Museum institutional standards and procedures may be incomprehensible to or conflict with the cultural norms or needs of voluntary community groups. However it is not always possible to meet with or follow a community's way of working but cooperation through transparency and negotiation could be the way forward.

The concept of museums acting as enablers of social change is not a new one, and part of the rationale for the development of civic collections throughout the world. Glasgow has a long history of the promotion of art and culture as a means of educating the masses, begun by 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century philanthropists, many of whom started small museums to educate their workers. However museums were originally the private collections of wealthy individuals, families or institutions of art and rare or curious natural objects. These were often displayed in so-called wonder rooms or cabinets of curiosities accessible only by the middle and upper classes. Most European public museums were founded on these collections and on this ethos and so we have an inbuilt conflict of roles. This has resulted in a *du haut en bas* approach to social change - feeding culture down to the masses from our ivory tower. The imposing Victorian edifice of Glasgow's Kelvingrove museum in particular evokes this spirit. This attitude is entrenched and not unique to Glasgow – I would say that it is one of the biggest barriers that civic and national museums have to social engagement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Museums tend to be features in the landscape, in the community but not of it.

The question posed by this session is the larger role of museums in society. I would like posit that museums are rooted in their communities and that every museum has social and civic responsibilities to those communities and can use those responsibilities and relationships to effect change.

Glasgow's Open Museum, part of Glasgow Museums Resource Centre works beyond the four walls of museum venues to facilitate access to the city's collections for people who are unable to access museums due to social, physical, geographical and other barriers.