



THE 1998 EUROPEAN MUSEUM FORUM LECTURE

Are Municipal Museums Outdated?

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The quality of the museums and the displays here in Stockholm is quite extraordinary and I feel that I am in a different world from the world that I normally inhabit, in Sheffield. I hope I don't seem parochial in the story I shall tell you, because the story of Sheffield is very much the story of municipal museums in Britain. The title of the talk is 'Are Municipal Museums Outdated?' I don't have a clear answer to the question, and I don't think you would expect me to have one. However, I certainly intend to deal with some relevant issues which have arisen in the past few years.

I've worked for Sheffield Galleries and Museums for just over 20 years. During that time I have seen considerable changes. I will talk about the last 10 years and try to draw out some of the major points that come out of Sheffield's experience. These points of change will, I think, start to impact on other museums in Britain.

The main change has been in the amount of money we have had to keep our museums going in Sheffield. I am sure it is a story that is the same across Europe. The amount of financial reduction in Sheffield's budget has been in the region of about 50 per cent over the last ten years. The immediate results have been a reduction in the opening hours of the museums and the non-replacement of staff as they left or retired. It became a public issue when the local authority said we had to close museums and galleries permanently to reduce staff numbers. The reason the local politicians backed down over this situation was due to the response from the general public. The politicians had under-estimated the degree of support that the local populace had for its museums and galleries. Sheffield is rich in museums and galleries and obviously the local people were fond of them and expected them to be a continuing part of their lives. The politicians were able to maintain the opening of them but, unfortunately, the quality of the services, the displays and the exhibitions diminished due to the reduced funding.

About three years ago we reached the crisis point. I have to say that we decided to try and do something about it rather than appealing to the local politicians who were themselves under great pressure to divert expenditure into education and social services. The reason this situation came about was largely due to the restriction on the ability of the city to set its own level of local rates. It was stopped at a certain level by central government. This meant there was not much of an option to raise more funds through local taxes. So the expenditure, as it was increasing in other areas, naturally was reduced in what were seen to be soft non-statutory public service provisions.

Whilst at local level the financial situation was dire, the national financial context of museums changed quite radically because of the introduction of a National Lottery. Certainly in England it changed our lives radically as it offered us previously unimagined possibilities for major new building developments or refurbishment of existing museums. However, it only addressed capital expenditure, giving no help to continuing revenue costs. After the initial excitement the museum profession found itself in the very strange situation where one could get money to build new museums or refurbish old museums, but there wasn't revenue funding to keep them going. The process of bidding for National Lottery funds required a huge amount of time and resources and often expertise that had to be bought in. Large organisations, such as national museums, who had the resources, were able to respond quickly and get their bids in. Other less fortunate organisations were not sufficiently quick off-the-mark and often found that the rules had changed in the meantime, causing frustration at the lost time and energy that had been put into failed or incomplete bids.

However, there was one scheme the Arts Lottery came up with called the Stabilisation Award. This was a pilot project which was to address the problem of revenue funding, and it was open to all art forms - theatres, orchestras, community groups, dance and writers groups, as well as the visual arts. The basic idea of the Stabilisation Award was to inject significant investment into an organisation that enabled it to put itself on a sounder, more businesslike footing - for example, to pay off loans on property that would free up funds for artistic programming or marketing initiatives, or to install new technology that enabled a better ticketing system. The aim was that after three or four years the organisation would be in a stable position to survive financially.

Sheffield Galleries and Museums put in an application that had a four-point plan including a revived artistic and educational programme, minor capital works to refurbish exhibition spaces, a marketing strategy to encourage new audiences and a new management structure. The Arts Lottery backed this as a forward thinking plan worth supporting with £1.15 million. They felt that the plan could enable Sheffield to re-establish its position as a significant museum and gallery service.

Running parallel to this situation was a project submitted to the Millennium Fund. The Lottery is split into several parts and the Millennium Commission had a large amount of money to put towards suitably ambitious projects. It had a different set of criteria than the Arts Lottery. So the city was looking for development projects at the same time as we were looking to our own futures of the galleries and museums, and they were successful in attracting a £20 million project to develop the city centre. At the heart of this was a new Millennium Gallery. We were therefore faced with an extraordinary situation of having the city pushing a new gallery for which they would have to provide revenue funding whilst they were actually running down the existing museums and galleries.

Such are the pressures on local authorities in Britain. Large-scale development schemes can tap into a raft of funding initiatives: once you have some of the capital on board you can pull on the rest, including European funding. I can remember saying to my boss, who has now retired, This is absurd. How can you

justify building a new gallery when you are deliberately running down old ones? This has happened already in Sheffield with the sporting facilities. We have wonderful arenas, racing tracks, Olympic standard swimming pools, but have lost most of our local swimming baths, which were popular and well used by schools. This was the dichotomy that was happening, and it touched the thinking of the museums and galleries at a fundamental point, because what we were being told was that we could provide a service for what were essentially visitors to the city. The tourist, the person who came for a one-night stay, became the target audience. But the local people who used the museums and galleries on a regular basis were not being primarily considered. And it was always the task of balancing these two almost irreconcilable elements, of new developments and reduced revenue for local services, with which we struggled. It seemed that central government policy concerns took priority over local needs and a national profile had become the aim of a provincial service. I remember saying to one of the local councillors, How are you going to face people when the Millennium Gallery pulls so much revenue out of your money that you are going to have to close your local galleries? And eventually, over a period of time, they realised it was not going to be politically acceptable because of the sporting facilities which had gone before us and the councillors realised that there was a great resistance to the pulling out of local services. This is a story that has been repeated all over the country.

There was one other element in this quite complex story that was important. The Millennium Gallery was never meant to be run or managed by the City Council. They always envisaged it as a separate Trust, a charitable organisation that would be able to focus on its activities and not be waylaid by the bureaucracy of local authorities. They also wanted the Trust to attract other monies, business sponsorship and money from other charitable organisations that were unlikely to give to local authorities, especially those whose politics they did not particularly like. Sheffield is a socialist city, has been for decades, therefore the business fraternity have not generally been in sympathy with the Council. So my colleagues and I were faced with the prospect of there being no recourse to private money for the existing services because any available funds were likely to be absorbed by the Millennium Gallery. This would attract any sponsorship money in the city, and as a major scheme would overshadow any bid for external funds that the existing service may have made. And the idea was put forward that maybe the Trust, which was to run the Millennium Gallery, could manage all the galleries and museums, so instead of a divisive situation a mutuality of support and expertise could be established.

Of course, such professional arguments don't necessarily have much effect on political concerns. The argument was strengthened by the successful application for a Stabilisation Award of £1.15 million over the next three years. This prospect caused the councillors to think more kindly about the idea. So we argued this through and we said if the Trust came in and managed all the museums it would give them the lead-in time to bring all the services up to speed in coping with the new situation. This would have benefits both for the new Trust management and for the existing services. The existing services would be brought within the umbrella of the new Trust organisation and so be protected. The Trust would be saved considerable time and expense with regard to establishing professional expertise and contacts as well as having the resources of the museum collections belonging to the city. The old museums and galleries service would be saved from marginalisation and be central to the success of the new development. Perhaps on such a basis we could launch Sheffield as a cultural centre of significance. And the politicians and the Arts Lottery said yes to the idea.

So we now have Sheffield Galleries & Museums Trust that looks after three galleries, one museum and an historic house and in two years' time it will take on the responsibility of the Millennium Gallery. People have said to me over the last year Is it working? I would say I don't know. We will have to see in five years' time whether this initiative has worked out. But I certainly know that if we hadn't done something similar, we would have seen closures of museums and galleries. We would have been seeing mothballing of collections and Sheffield really disappearing from a significant position within the context of galleries and museums in Britain.

Now it seems very easy, but if any of you have had experience of business and takeovers, which was what it effectively was, then you will know that these

situations are far from easy. What initially happened was that the Trust started to recruit the new management, starting with the Chief Executive who would provide the leadership to carry through the required changes to the organisation. I am part of the Management Team and am responsible for the curatorial aspects. We also have a Marketing and Audience Development Manager, and a Finance and Administration Manager, and in a few months' time we will be recruiting an Operations Manager who will look after all the Visitor Services and the Buildings.

The new management structure involves a new culture with a different language that has started to enter into the terms of how we refer to each other, how we talk about our forward planning, and how we talk about the tasks that we have ahead of us. We found that these two cultures, curatorial culture and the new management culture, did not necessarily sit easily together or

readily translate. One reason for this is that several new management functions did not necessitate experience of museums and galleries, but were professional skills in their own right.

In the 1980s Britain saw an increase in heritage museums that had very little to do with objects and care of collections, but which were popular with the public. These new museums had good management practices, good marketing, lots of good presentation techniques, and lots of audience awareness. The Chief Executive we now have has a lot of experience in that area. I feel that this marketing culture really is what we need to come to terms with. It would be honest of me to say that we didn't really know who our audiences were, didn't really know what they wanted from us, we never really asked them, and if they inadvertently told us we tended to forget or didn't act upon it. And so I feel that we have to acknowledge that we cannot be curators without an awareness of our public and who they are. So what's been happening over the last few months is a lot of marketing research, led by the Marketing Manager, finding out who are the people who come, who are the people who don't come, what they like about us, what they want and what they expect, and hopefully over the next few years this will feed in and we'll be able to become much more focused about where we put our energies.

Another aspect to it is that there are a lot of people talking about who are the audiences, and who the audiences should be? Where we used to talk about communities, we used to talk about ethnic minorities, we used to talk about children, education and schools, the discussion has moved into another area. It's talking about businessmen, it's talking about looking after business sponsors, it's looking at those people as being the ones we want to attract. And of course I feel that there is a danger in this because we become so focused on the notion of finding the finance, the money and the support at the local business level, that we don't do what we should be doing, which is addressing the needs of our local audience. There is a lot of talk in Britain about the Millennium Dome and I always remember one phrase used by the Prime Minister that it would be a great day out, and I have to say it fills me with horror because this notion of the Leisure Industry, this notion of people's leisure time, this notion of having a great day out cannot be the sole purpose of municipal museums. Municipal museums have a much more profound relationship with the communities they serve.

I still haven't addressed the title question of the talk as to whether municipal museums are outdated. Outdated is a word usually used in the context of technology or fashion as though the old ways have been either superseded by better functioning machines or systems, or have become unfashionable. Certainly the museums and galleries in Sheffield were not as able to move with the times as the new heritage museums were (usually independently run, able to invest in new display techniques and attract audiences willing to pay for their experience). We were consequently left marooned in an increasingly competitive world as far as the fight for people's leisure time went. In many ways our static museum displays were superseded by interactive technological techniques that enlivened many a new museum. Nevertheless, what was surprising was that people still came to the museums and galleries in Sheffield on a regular basis with very little encouragement via marketing strategies. Habit and word of mouth are still the strongest incentives in people's behaviour. The collections and the institutions, long established in the city, were still wanted. Increasingly in our society there are few free spaces which people from all walks of life can occupy at the same time. The public parks and the streets are now considered unsafe, the only free spaces are the shops, the new shopping malls, the public libraries and some of the galleries and museums. On a Saturday or Sunday I see all sorts of people using the gallery and museum who would not usually be in the same space together. The opportunity for museums to be a socially benign space where all visitors are equal is surely an important component of social life, especially as society is increasingly segregated, restricted and confined. Opportunities for conversation and social meeting are important consequences of the displays. This I think is the core role of the municipal museum. The management structure is merely a means to an end.

The independence of the Trust, as opposed to the policy constraints of the local authority, gives us greater freedom to operate quickly and efficiently. But as a Trust we may benefit from business practices, but we must remember we are not a business in our core content or product. Our professional life is not quite as simple as selling a product, for museums are dealing daily with cultural artefacts, past and present, that require redefining constantly. The subtlety of the curatorial staff and their professional understanding of the issues surrounding their subject areas cannot be forgotten, as it is this that our visitors want to experience. Marketing cannot replace scholarship. Consequently the success of this new venture will be related directly to the ability of the museum profession to use and direct the business practices we now have available to us. If we manage this securing of the principle of public service, in all its complexity, I think that we can safely say that the municipal museums may be outdated in the sense that the autonomous and inward looking municipality is increasingly an outmoded structure of social organisation. Apart from major urban centres, few cities and towns can maintain an identity of greater significance than that of the region that they are in. Consequently it's a larger sense of scale that we need to deal with. We need to be ambitious, be outward-looking and seek partnerships with other institutions and organisations that allow us to reflect a wider perspective. Despite the obvious exaggerations of new business and management speak, the future lies not in competition in a supposed leisure market, but lies more in co-operation between institutions concerned with cultural values. The core value of museums and galleries is surely in the direct experience of the object. This experience is not replaceable by screen technology. No matter how valuable as additional information this may be, it cannot replace the experience of actual presence. We are all familiar with TV personalities, but few of us think we know them. It is the habit of direct experience that is important to people. Where else but in public museums and galleries can objects of cultural value be found freely available to all?