



## The case for the socially purposeful museum

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Our understanding of the museum – its social roles, potential and responsibilities – has transformed over the past two decades. The idea of the museum as discretely *cultural* in its remit, scope and influence – set apart from the broader social world it inhabits; collecting, researching and interpreting in ways that show little concern for the inequalities, discrimination, prejudice and rights abuses that mark our societies – is increasingly recognised as untenable and indefensible.

Today, the museum's capacity to not simply *reflect* but to actively *shape* the social world is much more widely acknowledged across the international museum sector. A rich and growing body of research has explored how museums, galleries and heritage sites of all kinds – through the decisions that are made about what is collected, whose histories are told and how; who is invited in and genuinely welcomed; and who is empowered to participate in the making of culture – shape and inform the conversations that society has about equality, fairness and differences of all kinds (Sandell 2016; Chynoweth, Lynch, Petersen and Smed 2020).

The recent Black Lives Matter protests that have spread around the world, sparked by the killing of George Floyd on May 25 2020, have powerfully swept away any lingering doubts about the museum's complicity in broader structures of power and oppression. Museums, through the narratives they construct and produce with others in space, contribute to shaping the moral and political climate within which some lives are valued more than others and in which everyday struggles for equality, dignity, respect and fair treatment are played out. Even the most mainstream and conservative of cultural organisations – those that have traditionally viewed purposeful and active engagement in contemporary social issues as beyond their remit, a practice confined exclusively to specialised human rights museums and sites of conscience – have been required to publicly acknowledge their part in legitimising some lives and excluding, oppressing and harming others.

Today, although there is widespread recognition<sup>1</sup> that museums are inherently political and powerfully enmeshed in the broader social structures and practices that shape people's lives – opening up opportunities and possibilities for some whilst closing them off to others – there is rather less consensus around the implications this holds for museum practice. How can museums think and act ethically and with purpose, harnessing their resources to tackle inequalities, dismantle structures of oppression and contribute to the good society?

Starting from the recognition that museums are inextricably bound up with the social and political worlds they inhabit, this paper makes the case for museums as active, mindful and purposeful agents in society; organisations with a unique contribution to make towards creating more democratic and equitable, inclusive and accessible, fair and just societies and enhancing the lives of all citizens. Drawing on recent scholarship, debate and examples, it addresses three key questions.

*How can we understand the social agency or influence of museums; the ways in which they shape the world?*

*What are the particular resources that position museums to tackle contemporary topics and social issues?*

*What responsibilities stem from this conception of the socially purposeful museum and what approaches might inform its future practices?*

By showing how museums, heritage sites and galleries *of all kinds* – with a variety of collections, audiences, missions and governance structures – are caught up in, and contribute to the processes through which belonging, inclusion and equality are negotiated by diverse groups in society this paper makes the case for museums as powerful – largely untapped – resources in shaping more equitable, fair and just societies.

## **Museum consequences: how museums shape the world**

The idea that museums have social agency – an ability to positively influence and affect society – has become increasingly central to the values of museums and across the world and is underpinned by a wealth of research into the political, ethical and moral identities of institutions<sup>2</sup>. Across the world, many museums express, in a variety of ways, their role in promoting understanding of, and respect for, diverse groups and cultures. In the UK, for example, the museum's capacity to act in ways that directly benefit individuals, communities and civic society more broadly is reflected in the Museums Association's vision and associated campaign – *Museums Change Lives*. Museums' confidence in expressing their purpose and value in explicitly social terms has been bolstered by a smaller, but important suite of empirical studies that have evidenced the considerable impact and influence museums have on their audiences<sup>3</sup>.

These empirical investigations have contributed to an enhanced understanding of 21<sup>st</sup> century museum audiences, who do not passively consume and uncritically accept the ideas they encounter in museums but are active in making meaning out of their museum experiences. Through carefully crafted narratives that embody ethically-informed positions on a range of social issues, and critical engagements which invite visitors to share responses or exercise judgement, museums provide a resource for audiences to understand, question and interpret ideas about contemporary life. Although these processes are complex and sometimes difficult to capture, trace and measure, a growing body of practice and academic research on this topic points towards the influence that museums can have in both shaping individuals' ways of thinking and enriching debates and conversations in society more broadly<sup>4</sup>.

Museums have proven particularly powerful places to frame, inform and host society's conversations about difference (Sandell 2007). As sites that 'construct frameworks for social understanding', as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2000: 20) suggests, museums have long served as places in which understandings of difference are constituted, reproduced and reinforced. Numerous studies have critiqued the museum's pernicious tendency to shape narratives that exclude and marginalise; that are active in processes of othering, that oppress and discriminate against groups that fall outside of narrow, elite and dominant identities and, in doing so, reinforce social inequalities. Against the backdrop of an increasingly sophisticated ethical museum discourse (Marstine 2011) and growing interest in the ways in which museums can advance human rights, the past two decades have seen a growing body of practice that seeks to respond to these critiques, adopting more respectful and equitable ways to portray difference and include diverse communities in processes of meaning-making. Situated within their own localised and hugely varied communities, these museums are reinventing their purposes and practices by nurturing

relationships of trust with their constituencies, engendering values of equality and redressing previously overlooked or underacknowledged inequities in their collections and displays.

With a widespread move towards more inclusive curatorial practices and more equitable ways of representing difference, demands for museums to become more accessible, inclusive and attentive to visitors that have traditionally been underrepresented in museum audiences have grown too. Today, there are increasing expectations placed upon museums to be more socially engaged and purposeful – visitors, community groups and equality campaigners increasingly recognise the potency and potential of museums as sites that contribute to the conditions within which the ongoing work to tackle prejudice, discrimination and in which to advance equality and fairness takes place (Sandell 2017). For many museums, this shift has opened up exciting new possibilities to become more outward-looking institutions and to develop powerful and sustained alliances with partners, for example in the fields of equality and inclusion, health care, charity and social services – partnerships that enhance both the relevance and impact of the socially purposeful museum. Moreover, as claims to social agency have become more tangible, a growing volume of scholarly work and its adoption in practice and social policy has cemented the social role of museums across the world.

## The unique role and contribution of museums

In what ways are museums equipped to contribute towards social justice? What unique resources and qualities do museums possess that can be harnessed towards greater equity and fairness?

### *Museums as countervailing public spaces*

As significant public spaces, museums hold the privileged resource of physical space. Recent research by Suzanne MacLeod (2020) builds on an understanding of modern museums as ‘countervailing institutions’ (Muller cited in O’Neill 2013: 160) established to counter the dehumanising space of capital. MacLeod’s analysis draws attention to how people are potentially enabled or constrained to inhabit and make use of the spaces of the museum and reveals how museum spaces enable some relationships, knowledges and opportunities for experience, and close off others. Highlighting a form of museum making – the shaping of museum space – which acknowledges the histories and transpositions of specific museum spaces and works to design, instead, for creative lives – to speculate on the world we want to live in and to generate relationships, knowledge and opportunities conducive to the fullness of life – MacLeod draws attention to the significant spatial and social resource museums hold and have the potential to harness. Building on the idea of purposefully designing museum spaces that foster full, creative and empowering lives, she also highlights the emergence in museums across the world of an attitude and organisational approach which might be defined as operating at the scale of the personal, where individual names and personal histories matter, where emphasis is not on international markets or trends and is, rather, placed on local issues and relationships. In these museums, an ethics of equitable and inclusive practice drives action and the aim is to add to the lives of local people especially those who are excluded, oppressed and, in cultural institutions, under-represented. In these museums, where social relationships and opportunities for equitable and self-directed experiences take priority, success is measured not in terms of visitor figures or annual turnover, but in the experiences of and benefits to individuals, community and society that the actions of the museum generate. In its most expanded form, this museum is a ‘countervailing institution’, a social and spatial reality which is purposefully counter to the injustice and inequality of the wider society (MacLeod 2020).

### *Public trust and cultural authority*

In an age marked by increasing concern over the rise of fake news and widespread misinformation, as well as fears surrounding the part that social media plays in driving social divisions, studies have consistently identified museums as institutions that enjoy high levels of public trust<sup>5</sup>. Although perceptions of museums as trusted institutions are not even across the population – with communities that have been excluded and misrepresented understandably wary and sceptical around the integrity of many cultural institutions – the idea of the museum as a reliable, credible and legitimate source of information, less prone to the agendas and party political allegiances that characterise many mainstream media, is relatively widely understood.

With this unparalleled trust comes a suite of obligations, opportunities and challenges. If we recognise that museums play a significant part in shaping society's conversations around difference, fairness and equality, then it is incumbent on museums to work in ways that actively foster social cohesion, respect and mutual understanding. Of course, the challenge for museums in increasingly polarised and divided times, is to find ways to utilise their capacity to foster progressive values, whilst engaging diverse audiences in a collaborative process of thinking through challenging moral and ethical issues that are undeniably complex and subject to a variety of legitimate views.

### *Material evidence*

Although accounts of the socially purposeful role of the museum have tended to neglect or underplay the specific contribution of collections, recent research that draws on material culture studies (Cuzzola 2019) has begun to explore the specific role and contribution of objects. Museum objects affect every facet of the human experience, from identity, to culture and relationships. The physical encounter with material objects that typifies the museum experience, potentially lends museums greater impact than other forms of media. The presence and use of objects – the 'real thing' – appears to play an important part in constituting what Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago term the museum's 'facticity' – its capacity for 'presenting things in what in a given time and place may be legible as facts' (2004: 13). Visitor studies<sup>6</sup> have found that the encounter with objects, enhances museums' capacities to offer especially engaging, emotionally intense experiences. These affective experiences, in turn, can open up in visitors, opportunities for reflection, learning and change, pointing towards a unique contribution that museums can make to efforts by a range of civic institutions to tackle contemporary prejudice and discrimination.

## **Responsibilities and opportunities**

If we recognise the museum as a social institution, a key civic resource that does not simply *reflect* but is *active* in shaping the social world, what imperatives and opportunities does this generate and how might museums proceed in navigating the challenges that are inevitably posed? The dilemmas bound up in this emerging practice are many: how, for example, do museums determine their standpoint on moral issues that divide public opinion; how can they choose between potentially competing claims for inclusion; and what strategies are most likely to draw in and engage diverse audiences, opening up opportunities for reflection rather than prompting alienation and rejection? Although there are no straightforward formulae with which to navigate this shifting moral terrain, there is nevertheless a growing awareness

that to sidestep, to remain silent on social issues that animate public discourse – or to attempt impartiality – is increasingly untenable.

### *Embracing bias*

In recent years, the idea of the museum as impartial and unbiased has been thoroughly critiqued. Museums of all kinds, it is now widely argued, are inherently political, even if this is rarely acknowledged within exhibition narratives that continue to present the museum as objective. As David Fleming has argued, 'Museum neutrality is not merely the avoidance of a position, it is the covert adoption of a position, disguised as neutrality'. 'The world' he continues 'is full of falsely neutral museums that mislead the public by pretending to adopt no position at all' (2016: 8).

Yet, despite this increasing understanding of the museum as both non-neutral and active in shaping the way we perceive, think and act, the notion that museums can purposefully intervene in public debate – seeking to build public and political support for a particular vision of society and explicitly lending support for a set of values around equality, fairness and justice – is one that many museum leaders and practitioners still find troubling. Adopting a position on contested issues, it is argued, is incompatible with the long standing preference in museum work for even-handedness and balance – for presenting both sides of an argument rather than advocating support for a particular standpoint.

Rather than articulate an institutional position on contentious contemporary issues, many museums prefer to present themselves as spaces for dialogue in which divergent viewpoints are presented, and in which visitors are invited to make up their own minds. But, of course, museums take sides all the time. In most parts of the world, proponents of overtly racist or sexist ideologies are absent from museums or, where they appear in exhibitions examining social and political struggles, they are presented as abhorrent by virtue of their violation of prevailing human rights norms.

In his analysis of the role that museums play in relation to social movements, Sandell argues for a greater openness to embracing impartiality. He highlights the harm that can be inflicted on communities when contemporary struggles for equality are held up for public debate in ways that give legitimacy to all viewpoints. For Sandell, museums' engagement with matters that pertain to contemporary human rights – Black Lives Matter, the treatment of migrants and refugees, equality for women, disabled people, LGBTQ communities and faith groups and so on – requires a refinement of the idea of the *museum as forum*, in which the responsibility for weighing up the legitimacy of divergent moral standpoints is sometimes left to the visitor, towards the idea of the *museum as arbiter* (Sandell 2016). Museums, he suggests need to be prepared to assess and choose between competing moral claims, declaring their support for equality, respect and dignity for all and opposing oppression and discrimination, in whatever form this takes, even where this generates public challenge and controversy.

This is by no means a straightforward task and there are significant challenges for museums in expressing and building support for progressive values whilst, at the same time, seeking to engage and build relations of trust with diverse audiences and constituencies. Taking a stand on contemporary issues, while often accompanied by numerous complex ethical dilemmas and made increasingly difficult by growing polarisation, is nevertheless becoming an increasingly central feature of twenty-first century museum practice.



- 1 This is reflected in, for example, increasing professional debate around the social roles and responsibilities of museums such as the 2020 conference, *Museums and Social Responsibility: values revisited*, co-organised by the German Museums Association and Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) <https://www.nemo.org/about-us/eu-presidency-museum-conference.html>, as well as increasing awareness of the political pressures experienced by museum professionals (Marstine and Mintcheva 2020).
- 2 See, for example, EuNaMus 2013; Golding 2016; Marstine 2017; Sandell 2016.
- 3 For an analysis of the evidence that attests to the impact of museums on visitors see Dodd, Sandell and Scott 2014. A series of large scale visitor studies, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to reveal the ways in which visitors engage with and respond to museum and heritage projects that seek to build support for inclusive and rights-based positions can also be found at <https://le.ac.uk/rcmg>.
- 4 See, for example, Dodd et al 2018. This report shares the findings of research into how visitors engaged with a large scale national public programme by the National Trust that celebrated connections at museums and heritage sites in England and Wales to histories of same-sex love and gender diversity. The programme reached 353,553 visitors and generated over 500 press and media mentions. Although some accounts in national newspapers claimed that the Trust's tackling of LGBTQ themes was hugely unpopular with members, volunteers and the wider public, the large scale survey of visitors between March and November 2017 (n. 4195) revealed a positive impact on visitors with an unprecedented increase from 44-51% of visitors perceiving the National Trust as 'telling stories of diverse culture and heritage'. A detailed mixed-methods study of audience responses (n. 1683) showed that 71% supported the Trust's celebration of sexual and gender diversity and revealed the extensive – sometimes transformative – impact on visitors' thinking and attitudes towards LGBTQ people.
- 5 An American Alliance of Museums study found that museums are the most trustworthy source of information in America—rated higher than local papers, non-profits, researchers, the U.S. government, or academic researchers (American Alliance of Museums 2012).
- 6 See, for example, Sandell 2007.

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