

All this is yours

Stewardship, Equity, Flow

Museums have a real opportunity to imagine a positive future where we might consume less, be more mindful of our relationship with a natural environment, and create a kinder, gentler but no less interesting world.

I love looking at Joseph Wright's painting *A Philosopher giving a Lecture on the Orrery in which a lamp is put in place of the Sun* in Derby Museum. Painted in 1766 at the height of the British Enlightenment, it shows a group of children and adults listening attentively to a learned man explaining the wonders of the planet and the universe. The people in this picture are curious, eager to learn and attentive to the teller

Our museums, inspired by the human instinct to acquire, categorise and show off objects, help us to make sense of our place in the world.

This is one of the first pictures taken of the earth from space. It represents the first time man was fully confronted with the fragility of the Earth amid the vast expanse of space. It was a clear message of the finite nature of our home planet and the moment has been credited with the birth of the modern environmental movement – with Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace setting up within two years.

Nearly 50 years since that photo was taken, however, we continue to treat the planet like there is no tomorrow. We have entered a new geological era – the Anthropocene – an era defined by the impact of humanity on our ecosystem. It's an impact which includes climate change, loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification, soil degradation and resource depletion.

Underpinning much of this impact is the exponential growth in our levels of consumption - which are driving us beyond the natural limits of our planet. Research by the Global Footprint Network suggests if consumption levels worldwide were the same as the current rate of the UK - we would require the resources of 3.5 planets to meet our needs.

I've worked in museums for over 15 years, during which time we had seen nothing but growth in the sector. Most UK and European cities have new or refurbished buildings and cultural development seemed to go hand in hand with economic regeneration. Economic growth seemed the only true driver for societal well-being.

Yet might we be mindful of the words of Satish Kumar "Materialism degrades matter, museums rise it up" when we conduct our next economic impact study.

Economic growth – or GDP – is currently the way we measure societal progress. However it has some crucial flaws. It encourages resource depletion through a focus on growth - and can't differentiate between spending on good things (like education) and terrible things (like the rebuilding required after a natural disaster). It doesn't measure services that nature provides, such as fresh water, or those without a market price, such as raising children. As Robert Kennedy once put it, GDP measures everything "except that which makes life worthwhile."

Our obsession with growth isn't matched with a desire to redistribute the proceeds of prosperity more equally. The gap between rich and poor has grown faster in the last 15 years than at anytime during the previous 100. A study published by Oxfam only last week showed that the Top five richest families in Britain worth more than bottom. My children are likely to be the first generation to be poorer than the preceding one.

We still live in a society of relative abundance. We have reaped the short-term economic rewards of exploiting our environments, natural resources. As Robert Skidelsky notes the western economy has given us "wealth beyond measure, but has taken away the chief benefits of wealth, the consciousness of having enough."

Whether it was Robert Putnam describing an atomised United States in *Bowling Alone*, or Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson proposing that more equal societies do better in *The Spirit Level* or Joseph Steiglitz's highlighting the moral and economic costs of the *Price of Inequality* – there is a sense that something has to change.

Museums must be mindful of our environment and the need for a more equal society. They should also seek to change perceptions of the world, so that people look at their own places differently. To really change lives, I think we have to think about museums not just as places for collective memory but as places which are able to attend to the whole person.

Much could be learnt from the practise of Psychology. For many years at Museum of East Anglian Life I witnessed the pleasure and well-being volunteers and vulnerable adults derived from doing something meaningful, surrounded by new friends. They were experiencing what Mihalyi Csíkszentmihályi describes as *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. People are happiest when they are in a state of flow— a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand. For them time stops.

We need museums which encourage people to think, feel and do. Think with our heads, feel with our hearts and do with our hands

Museums contribute best to communities not when they help people but when they are amplify the capacities of individuals to connect and collaborate with others. For genuinely socially active museums, 'helping' people is not enough we have to work to give people agency to change.

As Alexis de Tocqueville noted in 1835 in his journey around the United States "[It is]the free voluntary associations which strengthen civil society by creating Habits of the Heart"

To make the leap to a liveable world, we need to find ways of activating and strengthening the kinds of values that will help us create more sustainable ways of living.

The Happy Museum Project

My vision for the Happy Museum project was not a means to highlight impact of museums could have on the community, but to suggest that they articulate a new and equitable vision of a good society.

At the Museum Associations Conference in Brighton in 2011, Caroline Lucas the UK's first Green MP quoted extensively from the paper, The Happy Museum – a Tale of how it might turn out alright, she noted that 'Apart from the ubiquitous gift shop strategically positioned by the exit, museums have little to 'sell' to their visitors but understanding and enjoyment. In a world that seems saturated by advertising, a trip to a museum is an opportunity to find sanctuary from commercial messages. '

Museums' function as social spaces is significant. With recent trends seeing city space being increasingly transferred to private ownership, museums are an important bulwark against the erosion of the public realm. For many people, a museum visit is not a solitary activity but an opportunity to spend time with family or to meet up with friends. Jude Kelly, artistic director of the Southbank Centre in London, has described the centre as first and foremost 'a place for encounters'.

Museums encourage visitors to be psychologically 'present', with attention focused completely in the here and now and on the aesthetic qualities of things. Experiencing this kind of involvement is not only enjoyable in itself, but is associated with wider psychological benefits.

Reciprocity and 'giving back' to others promotes well-being for people of all ages. A shift in focus from being didactic educators to 'co-creators of well-being' will enable a more active and engaged role for the visitor. Opportunities for volunteering, can directly influence the well-being of individuals by leaving them with a sense of self-worth and status. Motivated and valued people inspired by a museum are more likely and better equipped to get involved with civic life within their own communities.

The Happy Museum Project suggested six qualities which environmentally and socially engaged organisations might show:

1. Create the conditions for well-being. Museums were uncomfortable with the notion that they exist to make people happy - they challenge, excite and induce anger and sadness too. Well-being is more than smiles or positive emotion but about the quality of our lives and relationships. Happy Museums will explore how to create the environment for these to flourish
2. Find ways to have more mutual relationships with your communities, supporters and visitors. Explore how museum staff and public can work together, with different expertise but equal status, to achieve common outcomes such as making a sustainable locality in which to live and work. Learn from voluntary organisations and social enterprises to try out new models of working with people. Consider the possibility of becoming a mutual organisation, or of running your organisation as a co-operative
3. Museums enable individuals and communities to learn together. Museum learning is already all the things much orthodox learning is not: curiosity driven; non-judgmental; non-compulsory; engaging; informal; and fun. The people needed in the future will be resilient, creative, resourceful and empathetic systems-thinkers, exactly the kind of capacities museum learning can support. Museums could lead in developing our understanding of why and how education needs to change to bring about these capacities.

4. Happy Museum introduces the notion of stewardship. This term can encompass both the natural environment and museums' function as keepers of material culture. In an environmental context, stewardship applies to the notion of responsible use and protection of the natural environment through conservation and sustainable practices. Happy Museum suggests that collections and the environment are the same part of the 'Museum ecology' – its cultural and natural resources

5. Be an active citizen challenges individuals to be more active within civil society (and includes individuals working in museums as well as their communities) Using what they learn from connections within their communities, the work of museums should better reflect current trends and issues which affect people's daily lives. Active citizenship also relates to awareness and understanding of connectivity across the world, seeking international associations to contextualise local issues (and vice versa). This, as one participant noted 'creates an opportunity for Happy Museum participants to put their personal beliefs into influencing organisational change'.

6. Measure what matters – ensure that your museum is serious about evaluation not just for advocacy but for genuine learning. Good research with users, means that the museum will continually improve. Good research will also help you measure the value you contribute to the community

We felt the best way to establish these ideas was to create a community of practice and we've supported 22 museums to experiment, take risks and reflect on their impact on society and their ability to do good. The projects have been joyful, unexpected, meaningful and all inspiring. Some influenced the way their organisations thought, many inspired those delivering them, almost all impacted positively on participants.

There have been fabulous projects:

- A 'pharmacy' made of recycled paper dispensing well-being treatments in the museums suggested by local people
- A winter cutting garden in Lambeth exploring the ethics of the flower trade
- A safe space, conversation hub with homeless charity in London
- A comedian in residence in Northumberland
- A programme to ensure 'play' is an integral part of the experience to visitors to the Manchester Museum

‘Remaking the Museum’ in Derby

Derby Museums Trust operates three museums, Derby Museum and Art Gallery, Pickford’s House and Derby Silk Mill. It cares for the collections of cultural heritage on behalf of Derby City Council.

Derby has unique cultural assets. The Silk Mill is the site of the world’s first factory and is in the Derwent Valley UNESCO World Heritage site. Derby Museums has the finest world’s largest and most outstanding collection of work by Joseph Wright of Derby, the 18th century artist of scientific enquiry Enlightenment and is ‘Designated’ by Arts Council England as a collection of national significance.

At Derby we made a conscious decision to involve the public in every aspect of the museum’s life. As a consequence this has caused us to think our role as civic ‘leaders’. We have the city’s cultural heritage at our disposal, our responsibility is not just to look after it but to unlock and share its delights. We shouldn’t fear, but relish this challenge

Like an onion, we wanted to peel back the layers of the museum. This process began with the Re:Make project at Derby Silk Mill. Here at the site of the world’s first factory we are creating a Museum of Making, illuminating a 300 year old story of creativity in Derby. Since 2013 we have worked with Makers in Residence, artists, makers, hackers, tinkerers and members of the public to shape and design a new museum. People can learn new skills in our workshop, make new friends and be creative in a way unconstrained by formal learning. The results of the experimental phase have been unexpected, unusual and have breathed new life into what was a fairly uninspiring industrial museum.

Building on what was learnt at the Silk Mill, we used the same co-production methodology in the creation of a new natural history gallery at Derby Museum and Art Gallery. The gallery Notice Nature Feel Joy, involved a phalanx of specialists and experts such as zoologists, entomologists, taxidermists, psychologists and musicians as well as a large group of public volunteers. The results were a beautiful melange of specimen, stories and details of the wonders of the natural world, enriched by the voices of many individuals. Never has the maxim that ‘no one of us is smarter than all of us’ been so true

Both these projects could have resulted in displays which appealed exclusively to the interests of those involved. To guard against this we used a human centred design methodology in project development. This analyses and foresees how users are likely to use a product. It also tests the validity of assumptions with regard to user behaviour in real world tests with actual users.

At the start we set up ‘project labs’ in our galleries where we gathered user suggestions. For example there was a strong message of “do not tell us what we can find out on google”. People wanted displays which were experiential, not didactic. Throughout the project, we tested ideas in an open gallery space, making the exhibition in full public view so that visitors would feel they could talk to staff and volunteers and offer views. We would imagine, prototype, test, evaluate, make and share – just like the scientists and artists of the 18th century Enlightenment embodied by the work of Joseph Wright of Derby.

Whilst this was going on, we were fighting the prospect of huge cuts from our major funder. Last December, Derby City Council announced that funding for 2015-16 would be reduced by 26% as they responded to

swingeing reductions passed on from central government. This would have had a devastating effect on the organisation, threatening the closure of one of our museums. Reluctantly we went public and launched a petition to the city council urging them to reconsider. This show of independence changed our relationship with the city, it exposed our activities more than ever. The museums campaign was partially successful, securing nearly 7,000 signatures on a petition which triggered a debate the Council chamber. The Council was agreed to spread the cuts over two years which gives the organisation breathing space to seek alternative income or models of operation.

Whilst ostensibly the campaign focused upon potential closures of museums it also caused local opinion formers to scrutinise our activities. Why, for example, are there collections of value in store (namely a work by LS Lowry) and could they not be sold to reinvest in culture in the city?

This is a legitimate question and one museums are loathe to address outside of the confines of 'ethical disposal' or loss of Accreditation and access to grants. Our immediate response was to put the Lowry back on display in a prominent place. Moreover it stung us into thinking more deeply about the purpose of a civic collection.

We went back to the founding documents of the museum in 1879, and read through the 'Curator's book'. In 1881 supporters of the new Art Gallery noted that it should not "provide a fashionable lounge where our exquisites alone may congregate to study and admire the beautiful, but to develop the artistic aspirations of all sorts and conditions." In the 1940s the Gallery Curator wrote proudly of mounting an exhibition of artwork by refugee children from Nazi Germany.

Our response was to present the exhibition A Common Treasury. It features some fine objects, many of which have not been on show for some time including work by, Lowry, Epstein (a bust of Jawaharlal Nehru), Benjamin West, John Piper, John Singer Sergeant. There are also delicate examples of Derby porcelain and Paleolithic hand axes found in Somalia (the rest of the 'set' is in the British Museum). All these objects, collected over 100 years reflect a thirst to understand the world. Yet interestingly by the 1970s Derby Museums' ambitions seemed to have been clipped, and an emphasis on collecting material related only to the city. It was as if the museum felt that Derby people didn't know about their city. But I think to understand our place, we should discover our place in the world

To end

We need a world view more than ever in order to connect to each other rather than divide us. Insecurity and growing inequality drive many to narrow identity politics and nationalism. Our great museums have collections to inspire free thought, feelings of commonality and a shared stake in the future. But they have to be open to participation and constant change, they have to be brave and stand up for their values in public, but above all they have to embody the notion of 'the civic' where citizens and institutions co-operate in a free and open public