

Extracts from “Through the looking glass: Changing social relations in the museum” Bernadette Lynch in Robert R Janes, *Museums and the Paradox of Change*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge (Third Edition, 2013) pp.216-225.

Introduction

...In a museum in London, England, last year, a Chinese community member brought the museum’s neighbourhood consultation meeting to a standstill by simply asking of the museum professionals present, “What is it the museum wants to do to me? What is it that needs changing or improving?” Unknowingly echoing Stephen Weil, she asked, “What is it for?” In other words, how were the museum’s public engagement practices ‘useful’, and for whom? And on what foundational assumptions does this work continue to be based? Fundamentally, this woman’s question asked what *theory of change* lies at the heart of the museum’s social improvement agenda?

Identifying the museum’s theory of change

When *Museums and the Paradox of Change* was first published, it helped strip away institutional illusions about the museum’s role and purpose.¹ Bob Janes could have arrived from another planet, or another tribe, in terms of the questions he asked (echoing many of those others noted above) – questions that challenged assumptions that things should simply remain the way they were inside the museum. The questions raised during Bob’s tenure at the Glenbow Museum, in effect, highlighted the museum’s ‘theory of change’ (both existing and potential) with implications for all museums. In the process, the customs and culture of this one museum were challenged, and their legitimacy publicly (and often painfully) analysed, resulting not in some consensual agreement of purpose, but in exposing the tensions that lie at the heart of the museum enterprise – most of all, the profession’s resistance to changing itself while busying itself with the work of changing (improving) others.

Janes took us on a journey through the complex microcosm of human relations and motivations that his work unearthed in this leading Canadian museum. In doing so, he did not spare his own role – and uncertainties – as leader. In order to decide on the Museum’s priorities, Janes and his staff began the process of situating the museum within larger global concerns in order to prioritise its functions for a sustainable future. The decisions that he was forced to make were precursors of those being made by many museum directors in recent times, since the 2008 economic crisis has dramatically worsened and museums are now

unavoidably facing very tough choices. Survival of the Glenbow as an institution raised questions about its role in civil society *and its engagement with* larger global issues of social relevance and sustainability – of its institutional responsibility to contribute to issues of survival in a troubled world where natural and economic resources are rapidly diminishing...

...Through a process of painful change, Janes exposed the Glenbow's staff's very human urge to ignore the realities taking place outside the museum's doors, and take refuge within institutional customs and the profession.

In search of museum legitimacy

Janes went in search of legitimacy for the museum's practice. In my own pursuit of museum values, *awareness* and *social responsibility*, along with the urgent need to institute *reflective practice* within the profession, have been the focus. My recent critical examination of public engagement in museums has met with these same issues and tensions, just as strongly as those encountered at the Glenbow many years ago. This demonstrates a resilient ability among museums to limit any real level of social responsibility and public engagement by offering, more often than not, various versions of 'empowerment-lite'.²

I have found in my research that museum professionals have continued to struggle to examine personal and institutional values, and largely operate on assumptions about the worth of the work they do on behalf of others. Museums continue to have difficulty, for example, with the understanding, and implementation, of "empowerment", a central element in museum public engagement policies.³ Empowerment is a process that enables individuals and groups to fully access personal/collective power, authority and influence, and to employ that strength when engaging with other people, institutions or society. Empowerment is not giving people power -- it is letting this power out. By failing to understand the relationship of empowerment to institutional power, and its subtle effects, museums fail to help people to imagine a different world and to actively make it so.⁴ Consequently, by not challenging power relationships, museums have not enabled others to imagine their world differently. Museums have yet to find a way (in the tradition of the work of Freire and others) to see the development of personal, critical consciousness as a necessary precursor to empowerment and action for social change.⁵

Unlocking museum assumptions

Unable to help others realise a vision for social change, the museum has thus largely restricted the voice of others and deprived them of their autonomy. In the present time, with local resources diminishing and global pressures increasing, the museum finds itself faced with difficult choices. With increased pressure on funding, instead of using the situation to collectively examine the museum's potential contribution to the issues that face all of us locally and globally, the museum's focuses on tactics for its own 'survival' to support, unchanged, the corporate status quo. These tactics are in evidence within various funding strategies, such as in the museum's ever-increasing, corporate/commercial approach, as clearly outlined in Janes work.⁶ More recently, however, the positioning of the museum's role as 'carer', an agency providing social care to those in need as a means of opening up new areas of public funding, is proving to be effective in the UK. This new corporate shape-shifting strategy deserves further analysis.

In the UK, a high proportion of government funding to museums has come, until very recently, in the form of short-term funding ear-marked for the 'learning' role of the museum. This is part of a strategy of social improvement and cohesion and, in particular, urban regeneration. Recent research into the reality of museum public engagement strategies, however, exposes a widespread practice that, in fact, disempowers people by placing them in the role of *beneficiaries*. The rhetoric of museum *service* places the subject (community member) in the role of 'supplicant', or 'beneficiary', and the museum and its staff in the role of 'carer'-- revealing a therapeutic view of the community member in need, and therefore in receipt of 'care' from the museum as 'teacher/therapist'. It is not surprising that the museum's community partners frequently convey frustration and dissatisfaction, finding themselves on the receiving end of cultural policies that demonstrate a profoundly disabling view of the individual as existing in an almost permanent state of vulnerability -- the helpless victim of external circumstances. In my experience, the origins of the many tensions evident with communities, and community partners, derive from the museum's 'doing for' as opposed to 'doing with'. There has been no let-up on museum control.

With these project funds now becoming less available, rather than finally tackling the issue of social purpose, there is growing evidence that museums are rushing headlong to find other sources of public project funding in another guise. The most recent shape-shifting adaptation to a new economic environment involves promoting the museum in another social service

guise – this time as *therapist*. This allows access to new areas of public funding (e.g. physical disability and mental health) previously unavailable to the museum. To their dismay, well-established, community-based organisations that have specialised in this work now find themselves in competition with museums for government support.

The liberal view that increasingly permeates museum policy in the UK, based on notions of the relationship between culture and public ‘well-being’, has a growing tendency to not only ignore issues of power and ‘empowerment’, but also to inflate the problem of emotional vulnerability, minimising the ability of the person to cope.⁷ Self-discovery through the museum as intermediary is promoted, based upon the assumption that individuals are helpless to confront problems and find creative solutions on their own. Thus low self-esteem is presented as an invisible disease that undermines the ability of people to control their lives...⁸

Old values revisited

...The key to a changing practice is in cultivating an ethical, self-consciousness within the museum professional – a museum transformation through reflexive practice that focuses on the relations between people, rather than the relations between people and a resource given out by the institution. A reflective practice is therefore urgently needed, one that is based on honesty about one’s own practice and that of one’s colleagues, as well as trust in others so as to open up to democratic exchange and shared authority. Such honest and reflective practice in the museum necessarily comes with an often uncomfortably forensic examination of one’s own professional journey. This is essential to identify one’s motivations and understand one’s values – for it is those values that inadvertently, or otherwise, permeate the work -- presenting obstacles or opportunities for change.⁹

We carry legacies of resistance to change and prejudice towards others that are embedded in the bricks and mortar of the museum. As museum professionals, these are in our DNA and unless we come to understand and adopt new values, our subtle prejudices will continue to undermine our efforts. Rather than continuing to maintain institutional control through perpetrating a ‘deficit’ model of public engagement which assumes that community partners have ‘gaps’ which need filling or fixing (as suggested by the Chinese woman’s astute question at the beginning of this paper), museums have the opportunity to face up to their social capability in promoting local and global solidarity and learning through shared experience and reflection. Museums can work with others in collaboratively articulating and

consolidating new ‘customs’ for the museum that can be founded upon the idea of the museum or gallery as a public institution that focuses on supporting and facilitating people’s capabilities.¹⁰ Fostering active citizenship, inside and outside the museum, museums can help people to act freely, speak openly and confront the power of others.

This is a new role for museum professionals within the complex work of engagement – developing a critical capacity through fostering reflective practice amongst museum staff and their community partners in the museum – a conversation that *Museums and the Paradox of Change* significantly helped instigate almost two decades ago. As powerful social metaphors and instruments of historical representation, museums are barometers of social change. They also have the capacity to help make change happen *or* to act as obstacles to change, even while genuinely attempting to be supportive of it. This is the central paradox in museum practice - a paradox that museums must face up to or risk losing all legitimacy. We have no time to waste.

Notes

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- ¹ R. R. Janes, *Museums and the Paradox of Change: A Case Study in Urgent Adaptation*, Calgary, Canada: Glenbow Museum, 1995 (Second Edition, 1997).
 - ² B. Lynch *Whose Cake is it Anyway?: A collaborative investigation into engagement and participation in twelve museums and galleries in the UK*. London: The Paul Hamlyn Foundation: 2011.
 - ³ Empowerment has multiple meanings relating to power, participation, capability, autonomy, choice and freedom. This definition’s utility is its recognition of both agency and structural power relations that can constrain or support autonomy and choice. It also includes dignity, self-esteem and respect.
 - ⁴ S. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, London: Macmillan Press, 1974.
 - ⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
 - ⁶ R.R. Janes, *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009, pp.94-120.
 - ⁷ Carl Schmitt's warned against the dangers of complacency entailed by triumphant liberalism. His conception of politics is a sharp challenge to those who believe that there is a third way between the left and right and that the increasing moralization of political discourse constitutes a great advance for democracy. Schmitt reminds us forcefully that the essence of politics is struggle and that the distinction between friend and enemy cannot be abolished. Mouffe, C. (ed), 1999, *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, London, Verso
 - ⁸ F. Furedi, *On Tolerance: a Defence of Moral Independence*, Continuum, London, 2011.