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Display Case: Whose Museum?

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Museums for are for everyone, right? Well, not always. Some museums are inclusive, but many are not (for “museums,” please read “and science centers, art galleries, zoos and aquaria, historic houses, botanic gardens” and so on). Social exclusion—the prevention of some people from full participation in society—is not a new problem. But despite a couple of decades of museums trying to be more inclusive, little has changed. For some people, museums remain very unwelcoming places. So what’s going on?

Existing museum research has little to say about why people don’t visit museums. So I started looking at social exclusion from museums from the perspective of “non-visitors.” Working with four ethnic minority community groups in central London, I explored this topic through focus groups, interviews and accompanied visits to museums of their choice. Over the three-year project, my research showed that people don’t visit museums for very good reasons. Museums were seen as boring places—for people who already understood the science, art or history on display. Museums seemed overly concerned with Western culture and to require specific (and unappealing) codes of behaviour. Crucially, museums were seen as places for “other people.” We visited four museums together to try and understand how exclusion could be manifested in practice. For some people, museums presented language barriers, not to mention problems of cost, location and competing priorities for “free” time. People told me they felt awkward during our visits because there was no one else like them in the building. So a key reason people didn’t visit museums was because they didn’t feel welcome; museums were not for them.

For me, the next question is why museums remain unwelcoming, intimidating or irrelevant places. The problems of social exclusion are widely recognized, and museums have developed programs in response to these issues. Why has so little changed? Inclusion programs rarely create real change in museums. Instead many focus on small, one-time or otherwise tokenistic projects. Inclusion and the development of “new” audiences can all too easily become a check-the-box exercise. By targeting specific groups and developing short-term projects, “non-visitors” rather than museums become the problem. “New” visitors might visit a museum through such a program, but are unlikely to become regular visitors because nothing about the museum has really become more appealing, approachable or relevant. Of course, some short-term inclusion projects do pave the way for large-scale institutional change. But, as museum consultant Elaine Heumann Gurian has noted, socially responsible change in museums seems to be in decline and not, as we might expect after decades of work, improving.

Conversations with other museum practitioners and researchers in Europe and the U.S. have revealed more reasons for this lack of real change. Inclusive practice is often seen as confusing, cumbersome and someone else’s job. Some people argue that no institution can please everyone all the time. Some fear that trying to appeal to new visitors will alienate existing ones. Others tell me they wouldn’t know where to start working with a new community even if they wanted to, and suggest that given limited resources, they would rather stick with what they know. A commitment to inclusive practice can seem overwhelming.

The roots of social exclusion run deep within our histories, societies and ways of thinking. Addressing socially exclusive practices requires us to look critically at our own work, assumptions and reactions. This is difficult. Museums can be traditional places. When we make exhibitions and events programs, we please ourselves, however unintentionally. As a result, we attract visitors who, like us, already like museums. And then we do visitor research that reassures us we were right. Systems like this resist change.

What’s more, the museum field is by and large buoyed by praise from within. People who work in, research, visit and fund museums tend to be supportive of their own actions. The need to defend against funding cuts and, at the same time, develop new museums and revamp the old, has created an unrelenting tide of museum advocacy. This is not surprising. But it does run the risk of stifling critical discussions within the field and of pushing external criticism aside. We need to be able to debate the role of museums in our societies. And we must be able to critically reflect on our practices to create room for change.

Museums alone cannot solve the problems of society, but they can help, and must take responsibility for their own practices. Social exclusion is grounded in classed, raced and gendered practices as well as other forms of domination—practices museums can choose to uphold or strive against.

Some museums stand out as beacons of innovation, bastions of participatory museum practice, brave enough to learn alongside local communities about what works best. These are often places where the commitment of a few people to social inclusion has spread through the whole institution. In the U.K., for example, Thinktank, Birmingham’s science museum, has worked alongside communities to develop a training program for teenagers from marginalized local neighborhoods. Based on the science career ladder program at the New York Hall of Science, Thinktank has focused on ways to develop skills, employment experience and confidence among these teens. In a similar way, the Monterey Bay Aquarium has worked with community groups in nearby Watsonville, Calif., to identify needs within the community that the institution could address. The resulting project, “Mar y Campo,” developed the skills of local teenagers through an environmental education program. What stands out about these projects is their orientation towards long-term relationship building, working in partnership with communities. We can and must learn from each other about what does and doesn’t work.

For example, if potential visitors face language issues, we can include translations of museum text. This is a thorny subject. In a multicultural city, which languages would you choose? Should community languages be prioritized over tourist languages or vice versa? Some institutions have navigated these murky waters with success. The Children’s Discovery Museum in San Jose, for example, works with text in English, Spanish and Vietnamese, reflecting three of the languages spoken by local communities. On a smaller scale, the community-run Locke Boarding House Visitor’s Center in the Sacramento delta provides text in Chinese and English to meet the needs of locals and tourists alike. If a volunteer-run community museum can embrace the multilingual needs of visitors, surely others can too.

Developing long-term relationships with local communities can provide invaluable advice, insight and guidance. For example, the Science Museum in London has worked for many years with community panels that guide the museum in developing inclusive exhibits, programs and materials. The Oakland Museum of California works with community groups in a similar way, empowering participants to make decisions and effect change in the museum.

Put simply, when unsure how to develop inclusive museum practices we can ask local communities for help. For example, the Exploratorium has been carrying out community engagement research prior to their move to the new Pier 15 site. The relocation presented a significant opportunity for change, so researchers at the science center began working with local communities to identify and determine how best to meet their needs. The process started several years before the move and is seen as a crucial strategy for developing ongoing relationships with communities that rarely visit the existing building. The research highlighted the need for translations, so multilingual interpretation for the new building has been developed in partnership with local communities. Similarly, the South London Gallery has developed a series of projects by working with local communities. Participants have not only contributed to public programs and exhibitions, but are employed by the gallery for certain projects.

These examples show that museums can work in effective, long-term partnerships with local communities to develop socially inclusive practices. Relationships based on trust and respect can be developed between museums and “non-visitors,” and museums need not (and cannot) find all the answers on their own. Change requires time, effort, commitment, flexibility and power sharing. But while building these relationships might not always seem easy, as someone at Thinktank once said to me (in a classically British way), “It’s not that hard to sit down for a cup of tea with someone new!”