Museums: From Cabinets of Curiosity to Cultural Shopping Experiences

Elizabeth Booth and Raymond Powell

Abstract The evolution of the museum in society has been extensively considered in both the museums and marketing literature. Museums began life as private collections assembled as spectacles for the benefit of a chosen few ('cabinets of curiosity'). Over time, in response to changes in society, a broader vision of their role evolved, anchored in ideas of public benefit and community engagement with common cultural heritage. Organisations such as ICOM (the International Committee on Museums) have been established (1946) to monitor and regulate approaches to their management worldwide.

Scholarly and custodial functions are now rooted at the heart of the museum, but museums have also gradually embraced an outward perspective towards the visitor. Since the 1990s visitor experience, education and entertainment have become embedded into general mission statements alongside the more traditional curatorial roles. The theme of evolution in museum role is perennial and leads to the consideration of current trends and changes in its emphasis.

As cultures of consumption have increasingly become pervasive in Western society, and economic constraints have led to cuts in Government funding of culture, the UK's nationally-funded museums have now become adept at generating income from trading and other sources. An emergent strand of literature suggests that alongside the—now, in the main accepted—visitor focus of museums, is the idea of the future of the museum as a 'cultural shop', implying a growing organisational orientation towards income generation. The parallel perspective on museums as part of the economic infrastructure, valued for multiplier effects related to tourism, leads to the central theme of this work—how is the increasingly commercial role of the museum influencing its visitor provision and hence its relationship to its publics?

The paper will provide an overview of the role and evolution of the museum to date prior to considering the development of role and function in one of the UK's leading nationally-funded museums, London's National Gallery. This museum is one of the UK's flagship visitor attractions, the second-best attended in the country. A content analysis of visitor provision will be undertaken and the conclusions

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related to a framework based on visitor profiling, to try to understand how trading outlets and paid interpretation is currently influencing the museum product and its audiences.

Keywords Museum management • Museum orientation • Visitor experience • Income generation • Museum interpretation

JEL Classification M14 • Corporate culture • Diversity • Social responsibility

1 Introduction

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2 Literature Review

This literature review will first examine the directions and implications of museum definition, then consider arguments relating to the function and purpose of museum and developing organisational orientations. The frameworks of income generation and its related terminology as practiced in the UK nationally funded museums will be explored, and there will be a broad look at general issues of visitor behaviour before a discussion of the research setting and method.

3 Museum Definition

Museums occupy a unique place in society. As custodians of our culture and heritage, they hold a position of responsibility in recording, representing and determining our awareness and understanding of our past and present. Through their relationship to collections of art and artefacts they possess the means to analyse, interpret and re-interpret the past; through their relationship to visitors to disseminate ideas and to encourage curiosity and understanding. The role of the museum is in constant evolution—Rentschler (2007, in Rentschler & Hede) has described the transformation of museums from a 'product' to 'market' orientation, while elsewhere the dichotomy between scholarly and visitor management missions are reflected on by such authors as Merriman (1991), and Hein (2000).

Museums are heterogeneous organisations—no two are the same. Definitions tend to focus on the general function and purpose, embracing a broad perspective rather than a particular description. Ambrose & Paine's (2006, p. 6) description of museums as 'treasure houses of the human race . . . they store the memories of the world's peoples, their culture, their dreams and hopes' provides an overview of the intellectual and, possibly, emotional significance for some, if not a grounded view of their function. It provides scope for an imagining of the variety and diversity of museums and their collections. If museums are repositories of cultural memory, dreams and hopes, then surely their physical embodiment must be as rich and colourful as the histories and traditions that their collections represent. Their evolution will reflect a variety of different influences and environmental factors. Museum definition thus changes across dimensions—as directed by their local environment and tradition, as well as over time.

Beginning with an international viewpoint, the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a non-governmental organisation with links to UNESCO, proposes the following definition (2007):

> a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

This definition recognises the importance of a museum's collections, scholarship and visitors; it also points out specifically that a museum is a non-profit organisation. This relates to ethical concerns to do with the status of museum collections as being held in trust for society, and thus to be protected from commercial concerns such as divestment and deaccession; it sets the scene of museums as organisations where commercial gain and money-making may be considered to be risky and to run directly against the grain of the custodial mission. It also presages more local descriptions that embrace universally accepted dual emphases of visitor and collections, but which are increasingly moveable feasts as national organisations and academics debate the changing role of museums and as museums themselves face the rigours of an ever-changing social—and, particularly in this case—funding environment.

In the UK, the Museums Association (MA) (1998) definition shows a significant nod towards the acceptance of museums as both visitor experience and cultural custodian.

> Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.

Hudson in Kotler and Kotler (2000) suggests that the shift towards visitor represents a universal change in the concept of a museum towards an organisation that exists to serve the public. Stephen (2001) and Anderson (1997a, 1997b) echo this idea in their assertion that museum function is linked to social good and lifelong learning.

A recent development is the recognition of the museum as a tool of economic transformation and as part of the tourism infrastructure. In particular, as the nationally funded museums in the UK offer free admission, their role in inducing multiplier economic effects is increasingly important to their status as funded bodies. Alongside this dimension have come expectations of the museum as a centre of income generation, leading to ideas that as well as the scholarly and visitor oriented roles, some museums are increasingly developing an income generation orientation.

If policy is considered to be one of the 'societal' changes mentioned here, the current state of the nationally funded (DCMS) museums in the UK has been subject to a significant shift in emphasis. Babbidge (2015) stresses that these museums are now viewed more as a part of the tourism infrastructure than as a tool for social change, education and inspiration. Baxter (2015) explains that this has led to some consternation as to the possible effects of 'mainstreaming' heritage, reducing it to 'nothing more than a commodity' (Hyslop, 2013, in Baxter, 2015, p. 34). The increasing pressure on museums to generate income in view of reduced levels of public funding has to an extent been a financial success; income levels of national museums have increased overall since reductions in public funding (Babbidge, 2015). McPherson (2006) presaged this with her description of museums whose 'market-oriented ideology' embraced income generation and new technologies as much as visitor engagement. McPherson suggests that museums have become

settings for leisure and recreational experiences. The visitor has transformed from 'spectator' to 'cultural shopper', with the museum setting the context for pre-purchase contemplation and gazing prior to the tangible experience of buying product in the museum shop. Kotler (2004) identifies this as a trend towards museums as providing sociable, recreational and participatory experiences. For most, he says, these dimensions of a museum visit are now more important than the educational or intellectual vision.

4 Museum Classification

The heterogeneity of museums presents problems of classification and hence trends in their development can be difficult to generalise. Museums can be classified according to the type of collection; the organisation who runs them; the area they serve; the audience they serve; the manner of exhibiting collections (Ambrose & Paine, 2006). In this paper we examine the organisational orientation of a museum whose collection of nationally important art leads to its identification as a 'gallery'.

5 Evolving Museum Function and Purpose: The Changing Environment

Traditionally, we have seen that most definitions of a museum (eg ICOM, 2007; MA, 1998) revolve around a functional description of their activities: the prosaic aspects of preservation, communication and scholarship. Their role as institutions for the public benefit and as custodians of culture are emphasised. Since the opening of the Ashmolean Museum in 1683 socio-cultural, political and economic forces have influenced museum function and the activity of collecting. Elias Ashmole's 'cabinets of curiosity' were collected for reasons of personal esteem and economic and intellectual advancement (Turner, 1985 in Impey & McGregor, 2001) but national museum collections today are considered to be part of a collective common heritage or culture, held in trust for society.

Wood and Rentschler (2003) argue that museums have dual roles: functional and purposive. Purposive relates to the people-focussed, communication role of relating cultural meanings to audiences while the functional role is about the internally focussed object based activities. Welsh (2005) identifies three domains of museum purpose: materiality, engagement and representation, thus highlighting the vital role of interpretation (linked to representation) and learning as a functional aspect of linking material collections with engaged audiences. Museum collections provide the unique core of interest and differentiate museum organisations from other leisure oriented activities; they usually, but not always, provide the motivation to visit. Falk and Dierking (2000) suggest that as society moves from an industrial to

knowledge economy, learning will become a new leisure attraction. Uzzell (1998, p. 16) elaborates on this theme, suggesting that 'museums . . . can be seen as places where people come to understand themselves'. These words are compelling when one considers the importance of consumption to many people's identity, and the implications that an income generation orientation has for the growth of consumption as part of the museum visitor experience.

There has been a growing recognition that the role of the museum is developing and changing in response to a changing political, social and economic environment (Van Mensch in Weil, 1990; Bryant, 1988 cited in McLean in Moore, 1997; Ames, 1989; Janes, 1995; Postman, 1996; Hein, 2002). Rentschler and Gilmore (2002) consider education to be the sole common thread linking most museum missions, but suggest that the organisational emphasis exists on a spectrum from custodial (preservation and scholarship) to marketing (temporary rather than permanent exhibitions, audience development and so on). Authors discuss the growing emphasis on entertainment rather than education (Hein, 2002) exemplified by a trend towards favouring temporary exhibitions over permanent displays, a de-emphasis of the value of the object in its own right and an experience that has become more conceptual, brought about by the influence of stakeholders on programming, including funders, trustees and the public. These changes are broadly considered to be detrimental to the value of the museum. Ames (1989) highlights the operational conflicts that can result in an unsatisfactory experience for a visitor who is seeking the opportunity for quiet contemplation, but finds an altogether different environment; Hein (2002) fears that museums will become just another experience, indistinguishable from theme parks. Goodman (1976) cited in Hein (2002) highlights the problems of diminishing the value of the original; the public become immune to the specialness of the original when exposed to too many copies of the same thing. Weil (1990) argues for the primary importance of the collection in museum purpose to provide benefit to the public by making the collection accessible.

6 Museum Collections and the Taint of Commerciality

If collections define what a museum is and distinguish them from other heritage organisations and leisure activities, the act of developing and selling heritage as a consumer product is considered in museums as a form of 'commodification' of values and objects relating to culture, history and identity (Hewison, 1991) and hence presents a challenge to the role of museums as custodians of material evidence. 'Commodification' is a loaded term in that it represents the transformation of cultural values to the commercial, centred in a world view that is rarely used in a positive context in heritage. Alexander (1999), on the other hand, suggests that commercial activity is not specifically damaging to a museum's scholarly or custodial role, merely offers a route to offer culture to a wider public. Resistance

to the commercial stems from a fear of falling public subsidy rather than a deeply held suspicion of the taint of commerce.

The growing debates surrounding the role of museums in society reflect Bourdieu's (1984) considerations of the relationship between cultural supply and public taste. He suggests that public taste, as well as competing cultural originators, influence cultural output through a favouring of those most successful at appealing to current trends. While this may seem to indicate the power of cultural democracy through the popularisation of culture, Bourdieu warns that the 'economically dispossessed' are those most likely to become the 'culturally dispossessed'; in other words, those with the most disposable income are also those most likely to consume high culture and to influence the elite associations of high art. Embedded in Bourdieu's thinking is the idea that governments fund most of what we consider to be high art, or what a free market will not otherwise support; thus the consideration of museum visitation as 'cultural shopping' brings with it questions of the likely influence on museum audiences and the social mission, as well as museum production.

Hewison and Holden (2004) suggest that culture today is less local and national than personal, constructed by individuals who consider themselves more consumers than citizens. In a sector dominated by publicly funded organisations, the value of culture is currently at the heart of a political and philosophical debate that echoes the perennial arguments between those who advocate culture as something of innate value, and those who prefer to emphasise Utilitarian Economic values (Postman, 1996). This reflects the changing policy emphasis in the UK government from the Labour party's (1997–2010) considerations of art and culture as a vehicle for social inclusion to the current Tory perspective (2010–?) of culture and in particular the top nationally funded museums as a part of the tourism and economic infrastructure. Funding agreements between the DCMS (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, the UK's government department with responsibility for culture and tourism) and its sponsored bodies requiring not only social but also efficiency and audience targets, including the need to self generate income.

7 The Visitor Perspective: Contemplation, Participation or Cultural Shopping?

Each museum is unique, but central to its purpose and function is education, and the fact that people want to view such collections. The contemplation of collections leads to an improved comprehension of the world we live in (Goodman, 1985 cited in Weil, 1990). Museums globally exist in the context of displaying a version of history. Visitors, drawn from an increasingly multi-cultural society, often question the authorised versions of events and the perspective of the exhibits on display (Cameron, 2005). Therefore museums have an additional function of considering a multiplicity of viewpoints and opinions in order to fulfil their purpose, and the

introduction of an income generation orientation into the visitor product may provide ethical challenges. Thyne (2001) refers to the development of 'edutainment' as museums increasingly find themselves working to entertain as well as educate audiences.

Hein (1998) has suggested that museums need to pay attention to learning theory and shape their offerings to meet varied learning needs. He contends that museums are part of the social and educational framework which is integral to modern society. Museums should offer the opportunity for visitors to engage with the collections in a way which stimulates them and allows the opportunity to explore. Weil (1990) claims that museums offer visitors the opportunity for stimulation and empowerment as learners: they provide opportunities for education. Knowledge is recognised as being the commodity which is offered by museums (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994). Museums assemble their collections and present them in a way which allows both physical and intellectual access to the public (Weil, 1997). Chhabra (2008) and Hollinshead (1998) argue that these current trends are leading to a "Disneyfication" or oversimplification of museum culture centred on a familiarity with 'brands'. The process of programming in the nationally funded museums that are the focus of this study has certainly been strongly influenced by the need to attract visitors in large numbers, though whether this amounts to Disneyfication is open to argument. Another driver towards the commodification of museum product is the increasing competition for time that the museum faces from other leisure products outside and within the home.

8 Museums Income Generation: Definitional Framework

Museums income generation is driven by the need to make money in an environment where public funding is diminishing and becoming increasingly conditional. As we have discussed, museums are heterogeneous; that is to say, each organisation is individual and represents a unique set of material culture and cultural values that predetermine mission and constrain or shape the way in which the organisation can operate. This means that not every museum can aspire to the same scale, style or level of involvement in income generation. The National Gallery, for example, possesses an art collection of world eminence, uniquely connected to British identity and heritage. Its visitor base and location make it one of the best attended museums in the UK, and it is in receipt of a reliable, if diminishing, government grant that enables it to operate with a certain degree of confidence. It has a commercial wing, The National Gallery Company, which is staffed by commercial and marketing specialists who have a familiarity with the relevant operational, market and business environments. All of this underpins the idea of the National Gallery as an internationally powerful and recognised tourism brand capable of supporting a wide range of different income generating activities. It also highlights that smaller organisations with less financial and skills resources, and less branding power than the internationally significant National Gallery, generally possess

significantly less potential to generate income. Thus the 'income generation orientation' to which we refer in this paper may only apply in very particular, possibly rather narrow circumstances.

NAO (National Audit Office) (2004, p. 12) defines income generation in museums as: 'the gross income received through fundraising and admissions, and the profit from trading activities'. Trading embraces such activities as ecommerce, licensing, catering, retail, reproduction and photograph rights, mail order and venue hire while fundraising includes gifts and grants, memberships, donations and sponsorships.

Retail, ecommerce or its cousin mail order, involves the development of merchandise, or selling souvenirs based on the idea of a visit, or on an image or object in the museum collection. This presents particular challenges of both ethics and authenticity. In developing and selling merchandise that is inspired by a collection object or image, a museum is presenting that part of history or art for the consumption of the public, and is making a judgement of what to present and how to present it on the basis not only of public interest and scholarly rigour, but also of saleability, profitability and efficiency (Gazin-Schwartz in Rowan and Baram, 2004). Key questions are the extent to which the development of an income generation orientation can influence the core scholarly and visitor provision of the museum. If, as Hewison (1991) suggests, museums lose their core identity and purpose, becoming 'units of production' instead of neutral custodians of our past, what influence does this have on the core responsibilities of the museum? Can income generating activities, for example retail and product development, become a vital and integral part of a museum's mission to provide a good visitor experience and communicate cultural messages?

Retail shops in museums can fulfil multiple purposes, for example as a source of self-generated income (AEA, 1999), a tool for audience development, a form of representation of museum identities (AEA, 1999; NAO, 2004; Theobald, 2000) and a source of visitor satisfaction or experience (AEA, 1999; Kent, 2010; Kotler & Andreasen, 1987; McPherson, Foley, & Durie, 1998; Theobald, 2000). Retail finds its inspiration from core concepts associated with the organisation including but not limited to collection objects, historical themes or institutional brands (AEA, 1999; Theobald, 2000) and often sits on the cusp of what is regarded as acceptable interpretation of sensitive cultural values, occupying a place where commerce meets culture. The production and sale of merchandise involves issues of both management and representation. Constrained in their approach by limited resources and expertise, many museum organisations (often small scale, local institutions) find it difficult to realise the optimal benefits of merchandising, while the larger scale museums, for example the National Gallery, have become increasingly expert at exploiting their identities to both commercial—and cultural—gain. Yet the skills involved in authentic heritage representation, and those involved in selling culture to make money, are very different. In museums where money making takes place on a significant scale, then the activity is often managed under the wing of a separate company (eg V & A Enterprises) or charity set up with the sole purpose of managing the income generation activities. Enterprises staff are often skilled

marketers; while curatorial staff are experts in the content of their collections, hopefully skilled at interpretation and communication.

While income generation is often managed as an entity separate from the museum, the product and experience is viewed by the visitor or consumer as a seamless part of the visit, and occasionally finds value in its own right (McPherson et al., 1998). Museums need to develop new streams of income for their financial sustainability, and visitors enjoy using facilities such as shops, cafes and guided tours, yet the process of engaging in commercial activities is seen by many within the sector to threaten the integrity of the role and place in society of museums. This is relevant for wider theoretical debates on the commodification of culture as museums struggle to reconcile entertainment and educational roles in a society where they are increasingly driven to account for themselves on economic and tourism grounds. While inter-departmental collaboration between curators and enterprises has been found to be vital for income generation success (AEA, 1999; NAO, 2004), and performance indicators have been developed to measure both financial and educational success of museum retail (Mottner & Ford, 2005), internal conflicts around the role and purpose of the museum abound. In some museums, there is strong internal resistance to commercial activities (AEA, 1999).

9 Literature Review Conclusions

Table 1 below presents the key evolutionary stages involved in museum development to date, and considers the influence of income generation as an orientation.

The perception of the trends represented in the chart may be considered to present a dichotomy—between the externally observable outcome of a visit and the internally intangible intention. While the visitor may truly only want recreation, what the museum provides may well embrace a deeper learning intention—and while learning may well be a passive outcome of a leisure-oriented visit, it can perhaps be considered to be an intended one for the museum curator, or even the product developer. While income generation is a clear necessity in these cash-strapped days, to what extent do museums themselves consider income generation to be influencing their visitor provision? If museums still cater largely for their ‘traditional middle class’ audiences (Martin, 2002), despite efforts towards a more socially inclusive presentation during the years of the Labour Government, what impact is the new income generation orientation having on museum organisation, product and museum audiences?

Table 1 From 'cabinets of curiosity' to cultural shops: the evolution of an income generation orientation in museums

Progression over time (?)				
Museums	Cabinets of curiosity—peepshows	Places of research and scholarly activity; custodians of collective heritage	Educators/story-tellers/entertainers	Cultural Shops
Role of collections	Esteem, objects of personal obsession. Consumables	Developing awareness of material culture. Sacred nature of collection objects; the need to preserve	'Means rather than end' 'Units of cultural production'	Collection objects as 'content'
Role of marketing		Supporting role; 'clear separation of church and state'	Audience development	Marketing as the master, rather than the means?
Income generation	Private individuals as funders	Reliance on philanthropy and community funding	Public sources of funding; multiple sources of income	Increasing reliance on income generation
Orientation	Personal obsession	Self orientation—museums and curators as repositories of knowledge	Increasing market orientation—multiple audiences, multiple stakeholders including funders, sponsors, corporate and private partners	Increasing importance of income generation
Power	Private collectors	Curators (experts necessary to decode)	Central government—increasing instrumentalism of cultural policy	Increasing stakeholder involvement/ the consumer 'cultural shopper'
Societal forces	The individual	Power of communities, the common good	Western materialism, the power of the individual	Ultimately, capitalism and the power of money.

Ever increasing stakeholder involvement in collection management (communities, government, corporate partners, patrons); arguably resulting in democratisation of curatorial processes; integration of commercial and custodial roles? Can market forces ensure equality of access to cultural heritage?

10 Methods

This research will aim to explore the developing orientation of a leading UK nationally funded museum—the National Gallery—from the point of view of the visitor 'product' and interpretation and the influence of income generation. A brief content analysis will depict general visitor provision at the museum from the perspectives of the key orientation hubs of: (1) income generation (as informed by McPherson), and sociable, recreational and participatory focus (Kotler, 2004).

A second stage of planned research will attempt to map the processes of cultural production within the museum. Following the principle of three organisational 'cultures' (enterprises, curatorial and visitor management) (AEA, 1999), each mirroring the various directions within which museum orientation is suggested to be developing, interview data is to be collected from curators, enterprise managers and visitor service staff. An analysis of the data will discuss the various perspectives on museum orientation, matching operational intention to product outcome, and considering the impact any new orientation is having on visitor provision and experience.

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