

# Museum Innovation

Building More Equitable, Relevant  
and Impactful Museums



# MUSEUM INNOVATION

*Museum Innovation* encourages museums to critically reflect upon current practices and adopt new approaches to their civic responsibilities. Arguing that museums have a moral duty to perform, the book shows how social innovation can make them more equitable, relevant and impactful institutions.

Including contributions from a diverse group of international scholars, practitioners and researchers, the book investigates the innovative approaches museums are taking to address contemporary social issues. The volume focuses on the concept of social innovation and individual chapters address a range of crucial issues, such as climate change; the COVID-19 pandemic; diversity and inclusion; the travel ban; and the repatriation of museum collections. Exploring the impact that organizational structures have on museums' aspirations to act as agents for social change, the book also unpacks how museums can establish sustainable relationships with minority communities. Proposing steps that museums can take to affirm their relevance as viable community partners, the book breaks down silos and connects ideas across different areas of museum work.

*Museum Innovation* explores the role of contemporary museums in society. It is essential reading for academics, students and practitioners working in the museum and heritage studies field. The book's interdisciplinary nature makes it also an interesting read for those working in business studies, digital humanities, visual culture, arts administration and political science fields.

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and Impactful Museums

*Edited by Haitham Eid and Melissa Forstrom*

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Haitham Eid and Melissa Forstrom  
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Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

*(ICOM, 2019)*

The “traditionalist” camp at the ICOM insisted that the existing museum definition was sufficient and accused the “progressive” members of turning museums into a socio-political apparatus. The ICOM debate on the definition of a museum is one of the manifestations that reflects the ongoing ideological transformation in the museum sector.

This book (and our previous work) embraces the social innovation framework as a crucial function of contemporary museums. It embodies activism, intervention, and the need to find solutions to socio-environmental issues, including racial equity, social justice and diversity, and inclusion. The Center for Social Innovation at Stanford University defines social innovation as “the process of developing and deploying effective solutions to challenging and often systemic social and environmental issues in support of social progress” (Center for Social Innovation, n.d.). Social innovation seeks a mechanism for achieving systemic change and tackling the underlying causes of social problems. Most often, museums measure the impact of their work by surveying visitors who come to their buildings and participate in their programs when the real impact of museum work needs to be sought outside the museum walls, more specifically, in communities where museums can improve lives and promote health and well-being. Although many museums were forced to close their physical buildings due to COVID-19, they continued to deliver their programs online, helping individuals and families cope with the impact of the pandemic. That represented a significant challenge but highlighted the power of museums to contribute to the well-being of their communities (and their ability to adapt and innovate) beyond their physical locations.

A report by the Pew Research Center concluded that fewer Americans think that churches and houses of worship contribute “some” or “a great deal” to solving critical social problems (Lipka, 2016). This finding intrigued Elizabeth Merritt (2106), Vice President for Strategic Foresight and Founding Director of the Center for the Future of Museums (CFM) at the American Alliance of Museums to argue,

On the other hand, this decline is an opportunity for museums, as trusted public institutions, to step up and fill the gap. I suspect that a similar survey asking about what museums, collectively, contribute to solving important social problems would reveal that we have a lot of room for growth – room that we can and (in my opinion) should fill!

This urge for growth is what makes social innovation an exciting model for museums. Social agency and contributing to “solving important social problems,” as Merritt indicates in the previous quote, are serious endeavors that require thoughtful discussions and debates.



# INTRODUCTION

*Haitham Eid and Melissa Forstrom*

## Social Innovation

Western museums have gone through waves of ideological transformations since their inception as cabinets of curiosities, for and by the wealthy, through colonial repositories, to the present day in which the purpose of museums is being debated among practitioners and scholars alike. These ideologies shaped the expected roles of museums in society and informed how museums worked. For example, museums have transformed, perhaps in various degrees, from symbols of power and elitism to institutions of knowledge and enlightenment, and from being about “things” (i.e. objects and collections) to being for people and communities, and from colonial powerhouses to community centers. Close analysis of the current museum discourse reveals that Western museums are going through another wave of significant transformation, redefining the essence of museum work. This transformation is expressed in the museology literature using different terminologies and conceptual frameworks. Still, they all emphasize the role of museums as agents for social change, or museums as social innovators. One example that illustrates that transformation is the International Council of Museums’ (ICOM) attempt at its 2019 conference in Kyoto, Japan to update the ICOM’s definition of what constitutes a museum. The suggested definition aspired to reflect the social role of museums in society – to improve communities and act as agents for social change. The proposed definition states,

Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Within this context, many museums are critically reflecting upon their practices and striving to adopt innovative approaches to their civic responsibilities – see for example (Janes and Sandell, 2019) and (Ünsal, 2019). Whether the innovation is a new or enhanced technology, business model, or service, museums are becoming more socially, culturally, environmentally and politically aware of their surroundings. Innovation is about letting go of old, unproductive practices and embracing new thinking and methodologies. It is about being agile, responsive and mindful. We adopt Eid's (2016 and 2019) definition of museum innovation as “the new or enhanced processes, products, or business models by which museums can effectively achieve their social and cultural mission.” While museum innovation can be discussed from different perspectives and theoretical frameworks, this book focuses on investigating and highlighting museum innovations with social impact.

The museum as a social innovator is purposeful in turning the static objects and distant histories into forces of good that helps elevate communities and advance environmental and social justice causes. What is important to note in this circumstance and relevant to our discussion here is that the museum's model as social innovator is gaining momentum in the museum sector (and more broadly in arts and cultural organizations – see Cancellieri et al., 2016 for example) and is being promoted (with various terminologies) by many museologists as the future of museums, warning of a significant transformation in the museum's business model.

Although the social dimension of museum work started as an unfamiliar proposition situated at the fringe of museum work, it is now being recognized and encouraged. A common consensus among museologists now is that the role of contemporary museums goes beyond the basic functions of collecting, exhibiting and interpreting cultural heritage. Moreover, the ethics and relevance of museums as civil and cultural institutions are being questioned when they merely witness and do not act/react to grave social injustices such as poverty, inadequate health care, racial inequality, environmental crisis, and human rights abuses, which are spreading in many communities (Eid, 2019). Instead, museums are expected to capitalize on the power of their collections, exhibition spaces, and institutional voice to engage in serious actions to improve their communities. This is not only a moral obligation but also extremely important to the sustainability and relevance of the museum as an organization. In that sense, the adoption of the social innovation framework by museums marks a departure from the extraneous edutainment business model, which is criticized by many museum experts – see (Janes, 2010) for example – to a more fitting space, where museums are suited to make a valuable contribution to society. In other words, the social innovation concept gives innovation in museums a much-desired purpose, focus and context. The museum as a social innovator seeks to identify and address the social needs of their communities through intentional and systematic means.

Therefore, we ask: how can museums be innovative in addressing social issues using digital and non-digital tools? How are the organizational structures (i.e. values, behaviors and organizational design) hindering or helping museums achieve their aspirations as agents for social change? How can museums balance the need to increase earned revenues and their social objectives? How can museums establish sustainable relationships with communities of color, LGBTQ, and people with different abilities

and affirm their relevance as viable partners? What strategies can museums adopt to be more inclusive and equitable organizations? How can museums decolonize their collections, narratives, and representations in the physical and virtual spaces? There are no simple or easy answers to these questions, but this volume includes some of the most forward-thinking work in the museum sector around social innovation.

## **Innovation levels and contexts**

Although innovation is critically significant for museums to establish their relevance and avoid internal futility and stagnation, the concept itself has not been thoroughly investigated within the museum sector. This book represents one of our latest efforts to contribute to the ongoing discussions about the issue of museum innovation. This book demonstrates the notion that innovation can be achieved by all museums regardless of their sizes, collections, locations, or target audiences. Therefore, it is critical to recognize that not all innovations are created equally. The level and context of innovation play a significant role in understanding innovation. What may be considered innovative in one organization, region or sector may not be innovative to others. For example, many of the projects that have been described as innovative in the museum sector (even the most prolific ones) are essentially repackaging of ideas and concepts from other sectors. This is expected as museums do not have the ecosystem nor the sufficient infrastructure to take on universal innovative projects like Microsoft or Apple, for example. Similarly, what is considered innovative in the museum sector in one country or region may not be regarded as innovative in a different part of the world. Hence, it is crucial to be aware of the geographic, cultural and historical contexts when innovation is considered. Our conviction is that any innovation that can bring progressive change at any level (e.g. global, national, regional, or local museum sector) should be recognized and celebrated.

Understanding the different levels in which museum innovation can occur helps the museum community be more accurate, fair and objective when innovation is planned, executed and evaluated. It is the museum's responsibility to adopt the level of the innovation that suits its circumstances (e.g. budget, mission, institutional goals, infrastructure and expertise) and communicate it very clearly, when appropriate, with other stakeholders, including museum staff, the community, funders and collaborators.

## **COVID-19, closure and social unrest**

This book comes at a critical time for the cultural heritage sector, as our generation faces unprecedented times – social and health pandemics that have fundamentally changed how we live our lives. These two pandemics have impacted the world in many ways that will be felt for a long time. The year 2020 seems to mark the borderline between two different worlds. Standing before this border can be exciting but terrifying, insightful but confusing, and humbling but nerve-racking.

As we prepared the final manuscript of this book, COVID-19 and the powerful social movements that erupted as a result of the brutal death of George Floyd (a Black



man) in the hands of a White police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota took place. Museums were forced to close their doors and offer their services remotely. They were also sharply criticized for their responses to the popular demonstrations that spread across the United States and the world. We quickly recognized that these developing events are critically important and should be addressed in the book. Although the impact of COVID-19 on museums cannot be fully realized at the time of preparing this book, the need to share some of the early efforts to deal with the pandemic compelled us to include two chapters (Chapter 16 and Chapter 17) on the issue. Other chapters included the pandemic in their discussions as well.

## The Museum Innovation Forum (MIF) and MCNx New Orleans

Some of the chapters in this book were presented at the Museum Innovation Forum (MIF) and MCNx New Orleans, both of which took place at the New Orleans Jazz Museum on the International Museum Day (May 18, 2019). The remaining chapters were included after a special invitation from the editors. This introduction provides an overview of the book's themes and the underlying conceptual framework (i.e. social innovation) that inspires its four parts and seventeen chapters.

The MIF and MCNx New Orleans hosted more than 150 international museum professionals, academics, administrators, artists, and community activists to discuss museums' relevance to pressing social and environmental issues. Some of the presentations were given virtually by experts residing in three different continents. In her keynote "Decolonizing the Future: Thoughts on Temporal Equity," Elizabeth Merritt, Vice President for Strategic Foresight and Founding Director of the Center for the Future of Museums (CFM) at the American Alliance of Museums, argued that museums can play a crucial role in shaping an equitable and sustainable future for the next generation. She contends that museums can help people envision what the world will be like based on today's actions. The Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, for example, envisioned the future of mobility in *The Road Ahead* exhibition (2018), the Museum of London looked at the future of epidemics (*Disease X*) on the 100th anniversary of the Spanish Flu, and LACMA's fictional Hereafter Institute explored *Graveyards of the Future*.

Additionally, Merritt challenged museums to integrate inter-generational equity in their organizational structure. As the museum sector thinks about making museum boards more inclusive in terms of race, gender and socioeconomic status, it's worth thinking about how museums can share power with the next generation as well. Merritt's intriguing blog post on the CFM website ([bit.ly/futureofmuseum](https://bit.ly/futureofmuseum)), which is based on her Keynote at the Museum Innovation Forum, provides a compelling argument for museums as agents for a fairer and sustainable future.

Robert R. Janes, Founder and Co-Chair of the Coalition of Museums for Climate Justice, delivered a special message to the Forum through a recorded video. Entitled "Museums and the Climate Challenge: A Call to Action," Janes' message provided a compelling case for museums to be active in addressing the climate crisis. He argued that climate change is no longer just about science or politics – it is also about social justice.



Therefore, as the world's largest, self-organized, franchise of public storefronts, museums have a moral obligation to take action. Janes challenged museums to revisit their vision and mission statements to reflect how they are tackling socio-environmental issues, tell their visitors how climate change and disruption came to be, and develop an advocacy policy that defines what issues are important and how the museum will respond when confronted with moral and civic challenges, such as climate change.

In his closing remarks, Ross Parry, Professor of Museum Technology at the University of Leicester (UK), synthesized the day-long discussions and highlighted the intersectionality of digital and activism in the postdigital museum. He argued that the legitimacy of digital in the museum context has been historically driven by the values of efficiency and effectiveness (e.g. faster software or equipment). However, this is changing where digital is now legitimized by its ability to contribute to improving social causes. It is about our socially purposeful practice looking across to (and being informed and helped by) our digital practice; and it's about our digital practice looking up from its operational focus, and looking out to the bigger social goals which it needs to serve, Parry concluded.

## Book parts

This book is divided into four parts covering the major aspects of museum work: Part I Innovation in museum collections, narratives and exhibitions; Part II: Innovation in Digital; Part III: Innovation in Diversity and Inclusion Practices; and Part IV: Institution-Wide Innovation.

Part I consists of six chapters, five of which tackle innovative approaches to addressing the legacy of colonial structures in displaying and interpreting museum collections. The remaining chapter, Chapter 1, uses the power of museum interpretation and exhibition to address one of the crucial challenges that faces our generation, the climate crisis. Entitled Youth and Community Engagement at the Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, Sarah Younan, Youth Engagement Coordinator at the National Museum of Wales (UK) and Jade Baurley, PhD student at Cardiff University (UK), present a youth-led museum intervention that engages with a local community group to address the sea plastic environmental crisis. In Chapter 2: Reflections on Public Art Collections in Trinidad and Tobago, Daniela Fifi, Chief Curator at the National Gallery of the Bahamas and Nimah Muwakil-Zakuri, Chief Curator at the Central Bank Museum (Trinidad and Tobago) investigate how the history of the collection at the Central Bank Museum lies at the intersection of cultural innovation, decolonization, and creolization of Caribbean culture.

Melissa Forstrom, Assistant Professor at Purchase College – State University of New York discusses in Chapter 3: Innovation in Interpretation: Museological Responses to the Travel Ban, two museological responses to the Muslim travel ban in New York City, highlighting the significance of interpretation as a tool for social engagement in museums.

Taking a historical approach, Ndubuisi Ezeluomba, the Francois Billon Richardson Curator of African art at the New Orleans Museum of Art in Chapter

Social Responsibility, discuss the opportunities and the challenges that AI technologies bring to museum collections and visitor data. They suggest that museums need to create a new model for data management, which is socially focused and ethically robust. Moreover, the chapter highlights the need for museums to work collaboratively to mitigate the biases and negative cultural impact of algorithms.

The third part of this book consists of three chapters, investigating innovations in diversity and inclusion practices in museums. The need for more diverse and inclusive museums is not just a moral issue; it is essential to the effectiveness, sustainability and survival of the museum as an organization. Museums that lack diverse voices risk the ability to thoughtfully collect and interpret the experiences and perspectives of diverse communities. This leads to a lack of engagement from and alienation by a broad segment of the community. As a result, the museum's capacity to bring successful innovations that create social value (i.e. social innovation) in the community diminishes.

In Chapter 10: Interpreting LGBTQ Histories at the British Museum, Stuart Frost, Head of Interpretation and Volunteers at The British Museum details the collaborative community-led and non-curatorial based development processes of the *Desire, love, identity: exploring LGBTQ histories*. The first of its kind, this exhibition was both in a designated gallery space and interventionist in the permanent galleries and was conceived as a catalyst for change and innovation with the museum.

Amy Landau, Director of Interpretation and Education at the Fowler Museum UCLA and Harold Morales, Associate Professor at Morgan State University and the Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and the City in Chapter 11: Museums and Cities as Labs for Collaborative Action (Museum Co-Lab) calls for partnerships between historically Black colleges and universities and primarily White institutions in designing a museum studies initiative. Foregrounding student voices, Landau and Morales detail the Henry Luce-funded Art, Religion, and Cities (ARC) initiative and outline a vision for engaging museums as labs shared between HBCUs and PWIs in institutions and Primarily White Institutions (PWIs) in different cities for collaborative action.

In Chapter 12: Performances in Museum Spaces: Exploring the Complexities of the Human Condition, Ilyanette Bernabel, Curatorial Assistant at the Longue Vue House and Gardens (New Orleans, Louisiana) investigates the fascinating world of performance and how it can bring an understanding of the human experience, encourage transformational dialogues, tackle controversial issues, and engage diverse audiences in museum spaces.

Part IV: Institution-Wide Innovation consists of five chapters, two of which (Chapters 16 and Chapter 17) deal with innovations inspired by the impact of COVID-19 on museums. The innovations discussed in this part intersect with pressing issues in contemporary museology, including, for example, repatriation, decolonization and sustainability of museums.

Robert R. Janes, Visiting Research Fellow in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester and the founder of the Coalition of Museums for Climate Justice (Canada), argues in Chapter 13: Humanizing Museum Repatriation that repatriation makes museums stronger institutions. He demonstrates through several examples from the museum field that the enduring values of trust, respect, and



4: The Development of the Exhibition of African Art in American Art Museums: Strategy for Engaging Recent Repatriation Debate about the Cultural Property of Benin, elucidates the social innovation in historical representations of African art exhibition and scholarship, especially the Benin bronzes in the United States and Europe in relation to the current debates of repatriation.

Seth Ellis, Senior Lecturer at the Queensland College of Art in Chapter 5: Embodiment at the Edge of the Archive: Private Audience and Public Experience, outlines the *This is My Heritage* exhibition production process at the Queensland Museum (Brisbane, Australia) through the lens of metonymy and homomateriality. Importantly, this innovative process supported Indigenous Australians to mine the Museum archive and display object and stories which have personal meanings.

In Chapter 6: Curating objects transculturally: an innovative exhibition trail at the Museum für Islamische Kunst Berlin, Sophia Vassilopoulou, an Islamic art Historian and a fellow at the Berlin Graduate School of Ancient Studies, describes her work on the innovative interpretative intervention project *Objects in Transfer* at the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin. Embedded in a multidisciplinary, multipartner academic and museological environment and years in the making, *Objects in Transfer* elucidated the limitations of static museum categories through a transcultural object biography approach.

The three chapters in Part II tackle the intersection of social innovation and digital. More specifically, this part investigates how digital teams in museums can be mindful of the community needs and contribute to the well-being of society; therefore, achieving the museum's role as a social innovator. Highlighting this link between digital and social innovation can make the difference between two categories of digital work; one is thoughtful and mission-based, and the other is superficial and merely inspired by a fascination with new digital trends. Within this context, Nik Honeysett, Chief Executive Officer of Balboa Park Online Collaborative, unveils in Chapter 7: Sustainability, Resilience and Growth through Digital Innovation how digital, through informed strategic planning, innovative thinking and thoughtful investment, can create a sustainable and resilient museum that ensures a greater level of equity, continued relevance and greater impact to a more diverse audience while maintaining a positive effect on the museum's fiscal position.

In Chapter 8: A Multipronged Approach to Digital Content and Accessibility at the Lubbock Lake Landmark, Megan Reel, Jessica Stepp and Eileen Johnson at the Lubbock Lake Landmark and the Anthropology Division of the Museum of Texas Tech University explore how the Lubbock Lake Landmark, an archaeological and natural history preserve in Lubbock, Texas, was able to expand interpretation and accessibility through digital initiatives and in-gallery interactives with minimal resources. Its strategy included the design of digital products, content as a means to expand inclusion, tackling technology access barriers, community programs to increase comfort with technology, and access to collections.

Onagh Murphy, Lecturer in Arts Management, Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship, Goldsmiths, University of London and Elena Villaespesa, Assistant Professor, School of Information, Pratt Institute, in Chapter 9: Innovation, Data and

interdependence, upon which authentic relationships are based, begin to reveal themselves as museums replace their assumed authority with both vulnerability and humility.

Chapter 14: The Ontogeny of Museums: What's Your Institution's Future Path? by Kathryn Matthew, Doctor of Design Distinguished Fellow at Louisiana State University, College of Art + Design and the former director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, presents a model that projects the organizational growth of a museum, which helps that museum visualize, manage, evaluate and plan effective strategies for financial stability and creating social value in the community.

Pan Luo, Associate Research Fellow in Department of Research, The Chinese National Museum of Ethnology, David Francis, Research Associate at UCL on the AHRC-Newton-funded project *Craft China* and Lisheng Zhang, Postdoctoral Researcher for the UK-China collaborative project *Craft China* in Chapter 15: Crafting Chinese Ethnic Minority Heritage: Innovation in the Chinese Ethnology Museum discussed innovation in Chinese museums. Specifically examining *Tradition@Present* at the Chinese National Museum of Ethnology, which breaks with the linear or static narratives of ethnic minorities in China by foregrounding contemporary fashion objects.

In Chapter 16: How a Pandemic Upended "Business As Usual" For Museum Associations and How They are Rising to the Challenge, Eric Longo, Executive Director of Museum Computer Network (MCN) explains how many museum professional organizations, which supports thousands of museum professionals, were caught completely off guard when the COVID-19 pandemic first hit in March 2020. Yet, many of these organizations demonstrated extraordinary innovative capabilities as they quickly devised alternate ways to still proceed with their annual conferences by literally retrofitting them to an online experience. Longo explores how the conference experience during COVID-19 may have a lasting impact on museum associations' business model.

Holly Harmon, a museum education and interpretation professional in Chapter 17: Innovative Museum Responses to COVID-19: Serving and Strengthening Communities, details two "waves" of innovative solutions that museum undertook in order to maintain connections with both local and more widespread communities.

The 17 chapters that constitute this book cover a wide range of topics, institutions and theoretical frameworks. However, we recognize the limitations of this work as it is unfeasible, as a matter of practicality, to include all the innovative work that is being done by many museums, large and small, worldwide in a single publication. Therefore, with this book, we encourage more research in the area of museum innovation as it brings considerable value to the scope of museum work as agents of social change.

Recognizing the limitations stated above, this volume presents a thought-provoking collection of essays by a diverse group of scholars, including established, mid-career and emerging museum professionals and academics. It reveals the power of museum innovation in addressing some of the pressing social and environmental issues of our time, from a deadly pandemic to social unrest and environmental crisis. We hope that this book serves as an inspiration for our colleagues in the museum sector, including curators, educators, administrators, board members,



directors, collection managers, volunteers and everyone who participates in museum work, to refute the notion of museum neutrality and embrace museums' role as social innovators. Although it is not hard to detect the legacies of the museum's early colonial histories, we believe that museums do hold power to evolve (internally) and promote a more just and inclusive world.

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## PART I

# Innovation in museum collections, narratives and exhibitions

# YOUTH AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AT THE AMGUEDDFA CYMRU – NATIONAL MUSEUM WALES

*Jade Baurley and Sarah Younan*

Creative and empowering youth engagement can be a vital component of museology and museum education because it can drive forward socially engaged museum practice and help museums have a greater societal impact, which we consider to be an important element of the civic mission of museums. This chapter investigates how youth-led environmental activism at Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales (AC) helped to drive forward and implement change. This chapter focuses on the development and execution of *No Môr Plastic (NMP)*, a youth-designed and youth-led intervention of marine gallery spaces between July 31 and August 12, 2018 to tie in with Maritime Awareness week. For *NMP*, the young people decided to take on the topic of plastic pollution, which was achieved through working collaboratively with the community-led charity Surfers Against Sewage and the locality of the South Wales beaches where the trash was collected. This project was part of Hands on Heritage (HoH), the Wales-based strand of the National Heritage Lottery (HLF) funded Kick the Dust project, aimed at increasing engagement of young people within museum spaces with a focus on empowerment, creating change and increasing diversity.

This chapter explores the work that underpinned the *NMP* intervention and the co-productive approaches that were used. For *NMP*, key staff worked closely with the youth forum (YF), a pre-existing youth engagement group established by the learning department in 2014 but who did not have decision-making powers or influence. The innovation that frames this discussion is the experimentation conducted with key staff in AC to plan and execute the *NMP* intervention with young people in the lead. Counter to traditional museum exhibition planning, museum staff followed the wishes and ideas of young people, handing over ownership and control. We are interested in the potential shift of authority and influence to community groups and its influence on the social future of museums.

A gap exists in research concerning empowering youth engagement practices within museum spaces. This is partially because academic research on these spaces

importance; the intervention was timed to coincide with the Welsh Year of the Sea<sup>1, 2</sup> (2018) and Maritime Awareness Week (June 23–30) in particular. Finally, at the time, protests by the environmentalist group Extinction Rebellion took place in front of the National Museum on a public field and were attended by many members of staff as well as the youth forum. All these factors combined helped to place the *NMP* intervention and shape the identity of this project.

Museums can be thought of as community platforms for young people to experience and enact their citizenship (Paynter et al., 2018). This approach recognizes the varied values that museums offer and contain as sites of memory and identity, while providing a method for which young people can be heard. This directly challenges the typical audience/viewer relationship in museums by encouraging young people to use the space. We have been inspired by authors such as Emma Waterton who actively researches and challenges the established approaches to heritage and inclusion and considers the power relations at play within museums (2011). This research develops and informs internal practices so that it can evolve to create social sites of activism.

### The No Môr Plastic intervention

Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum of Wales (AC) green-lit an experimental large-scale project in youth work with the launch of its National Heritage Lottery funded Hands on Heritage project in 2017. Hands on Heritage is the Welsh strand of a UK-wide ambitious four-year project by the National Heritage Lottery Fund aiming to empower young people and get them involved in the Heritage sector.

The aims of the project include creating new opportunities for young people, and empowering them to actively reshape heritage content, spaces and institutions, providing young people access and ownership of the museum and involving young people in governance and decision making. The project aims to be sensitive to the barriers to participation that young people can face in traditional museum engagement as well as providing richer engagement opportunities that put power in the hands of young people. As discussed earlier, an important element of HoH is giving young people status and power within museum spaces that have not traditionally been enjoyed by this demographic.

The HoH project launched with a series of creative workshops that encouraged young people to informally express their ideas, interests and opinions. Very quickly, themes important to young people began to crystalize from these creative consultation activities; LGBTQ+ experiences, social justice, lived experiences throughout the ages and, at the very top of the list, environmental challenges. To take this theme forward and pilot new ways of working with young people in museum spaces the *NMP* intervention was launched in 2018. This was the first grassroots activist and artistic intervention initiated by and realized with young people in the museum galleries at AC. To give the intervention a national context and make it pertinent, it was installed in time for Maritime Awareness Week 2018.

This project was innovative for AC practice as it put decision making in the hands of young people. From the outset, the project was designed and driven directly by the



often focuses on the facilitator perspectives of workshops (Burritt, 2018; Surface and Ryan, 2018) which, although valuable, can risk neglecting the relationship that young participants have with museum spaces and can de-emphasize their potential for autonomous action and production. Laurajane Smith, a heritage and museum studies scholar, argues that audiences and participants are not “empty vessels” that enter museums with the intention of being “filled up” with culture, and if this is not recognized there is a potential detriment to the field of knowledge (2006, p.32). As such, within our own work, we aim to focus awareness on the participants’ subjective realities and consider how their individual life experiences motivate them towards building a relationship with museum sites.

Research by cultural policy academics such as Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett (2010; 2020) considers the potential of culture and heritage to enable social change and its subsequent reflection in cultural policy. What is striking about their research is the acknowledgement that heritage and culture has equal potential to harm as well as to benefit. This is especially relevant to museum practices, as the current norm can be a deficit-approach to audience diversity and equalities (2020, p.394). This behaviour assumes that groups that are in the minority of museum audiences such as young people and other minoritized communities require assimilation into the museum’s intended delivery, rather than encouraging museum staff to address the inequalities and power dynamics within their spaces (Smith, 2006; Belfiore, 2020). To change this requires large-scale and long-term action, structural and cultural change. The HoH projects aim to address issues of power imbalance and institutional culture by focusing on empowering young people, an audience museums often consider “difficult to engage.” Instead of this traditional top-down approach to cultural engagement, HoH takes a grassroots approach with key museum staff members acting as supporters and enablers as opposed to decision makers, and thus putting more power in the hands of people and communities that are stakeholders in museums, but haven’t traditionally been empowered audiences.

Museum sites offer unique challenges and opportunities for engagement. They are geographically bound in the local community but they can house national and international grand narratives. This interplay of scale has been considered by Paul Widdop and David Cutts (2012) and David Harvey (2015) as an under-researched facet of museum participation and engagement. Cutts and Harvey consider the importance of geographical as well as metaphysical “place” (i.e. identity, memory and culture) as important elements in the critical impact of heritage on audiences. Place, especially for museum audiences, matters, both in its physical location as well as its embeddedness in the local community and are the narratives that are presented grand and nationalistic, or are they based on local cultural memory? We understand this in relation to our sites, which span seven locations across Wales and present unique opportunities and challenges as the tone of these narratives varies considerably. The HoH project spans all locations, but each site has a different relationship with its local community based on the place-based narratives in each site that often require tweaking the practical approach to empowering audiences. The *NMP* intervention which this text investigates responded in particular to the physical location and infrastructures of the National Museum Cardiff, in particular its natural history displays. The placement of *NMP* within a specific time frame was also of

young people involved through the museum's youth forum; a bi-weekly gathering of young people interested in heritage established in 2014, but had not previously been able to influence practice or gallery outcomes. The subject of the intervention was chosen, developed and executed by the young people with the assistance of curators and technical staff. The project put young people in the lead and gave them decision-making power within the museum space with the support of key staff members.

Prior to *NMP*, the YF would often be asked to help with the seasonal exhibitions, but these were often prescriptive and gave little chance for the young people to have ownership over the outcome. It is important to note that museum staff were equally as invested as young people in platforming content around plastic pollution, and that without the help of key museum staff, the youth forum's museum intervention would not have been possible. The youth forum wanted to bring contemporary issues into the museum space. Through a combination of timing, funding and institutional willingness for change, the youth-led *NMP* intervention became possible.

The name of the project is a combination of Welsh and English. "Môr" means "sea" in Welsh; the title is a play on words, which can be read as "No More Plastic" and "No Sea Plastic." The name was workshoped by the young people involved during a YF session, where many names were discussed and selected by the young people by the end. This name was well received by the public and gallery staff, however, it did receive some criticism from the museum's Welsh Language Officer due to the potential of the name to be seen as derogatory to Welsh culture. It was against museum practice to "mix" Welsh and English language elements. However, the museum decided to take this risk and the hybrid title was well received, leading the museum to loosen its restrictions on the use of blended language.

## Working with community partners to complete the intervention

During YF meetings starting in December 2017, young people expressed the wish for the project to have contemporary significance to their peers, and to the wider public, and to be part of a greater environmental movement. This meant there were six months between initial concept discussions and realization of the intervention. Due to a truncated timeline, museum staff realized that traditional approaches of gallery curation and exhibition were not fit for purpose and began considering innovative approaches. This included the realization that the process for rehanging and rearranging gallery displays required too much internal work and were not processes that the young people could directly engage with. Due to this, a decision was made early on that the intervention would add to existing displays that were low risk to the permanent displays. The display would be aided by a small team of key curators and gallery conservators, keeping personnel costs low. The YF also decided that they wanted other young people to contribute, but they understood the barriers that some young people face, such as lack of time, lack of money or a lack of social connections to get involved. The strategy suggested and used to overcome this was creative workshops, aimed at different skill levels and ages, which could be conducted on-site, with charities and in local schools.



Furthermore, a strong ally was found in the charity Surfers Against Sewage (SAS); a charity launched by surfers to help protect the British sea and keep beaches clean. SAS appealed to the young people. At the initial meeting at the museum, it was decided that the charity would help to organize beach cleans and provide beach plastic as the raw material for the intervention. Therefore, all of the plastic used in the intervention was collected from local beaches by SAS, strengthening the local links of the project for the individuals involved. Overall, two cleans at local beaches provided a volume of over 2000 litres of trash.<sup>3</sup> By collaborating with community partners, the display became a narrative concerning the state of local beaches, influenced by the communities that used them who may potentially be visitors to the museum. Also, working with community partners potentially increased the relevance of the intervention by having an increased quantity of volunteers working towards its realization. It also provided extra hands and advertising for the charity as museum volunteers and visitors were encouraged to participate in beach cleaning activities. We consider there to be a high value to both parties in this situation that should be adopted in projects going forward as it helps embed the museum as an active participant in the communities that support it, which may, in time, readdress the power dynamics between audience and authority with museums.

In addition to cleaning the plastic, it had to be treated by the young people to make it appropriate for gallery spaces following museum preventative conservation protocols. This was not an enjoyable task, but was an opportunity for young people to learn hands-on about the procedures museums take to protect their collections. This involved freezing the plastic for several days to kill any bacteria and then a thorough scrubbing. One member said:

It's gross, but you wouldn't want all this gunk and bacteria in the gallery. You don't know what's on this plastic, or what it could damage if we weren't this careful.

*(YF member, 2018)*

While sorting through the plastic waste, the young people had the opportunity to discuss ideas around censorship and curation in galleries. This encouraged informal learning about protocol within museums as well as critical discussions about the societal impacts of these decisions. As they were cleaning they discovered several hazardous and distasteful items such as fish hooks, syringes and tampon applicators in the plastic collection. This opened up frank discussion about whether these items should be put on display, and if so how it could be handled considering young children made up a large proportion of museum visitors. This highlights that young people are aware of the social expectations for censorship considering traditional museum audiences and they became more aware of the power of curation for what narratives the audience experiences. The young people and staff decided that sharps were to be disposed of appropriately according to health and safety procedures, and sanitary products displayed. We considered this to be innovative to traditional gallery process because the final choice was given to the young people. Although the young people agreed with museum practice with regard to the disposal of sharps, it is likely that gallery curators would have disposed of the sanitary products as well. The young people felt that this was an important element of their environmental message

and didn't want to treat feminine products as shameful. After preparing the plastic, the young people moved on to using it as a creative resource, to create interventions and fantasy plastic sea creatures.

To enable wider participation in these creative activities, the YF were also directly involved in co-facilitating workshops with wider groups of young people. Aided by museum staff members, this allowed more young people to participate in the project across different ages and ability levels, as well as those facing barriers to longer term participation, like time commitments and travel issues. Some workshops were conducted at AC and others were conducted off-site such as with charity groups and schools. These were conducted with key museum staff members; YF members were able to assist but many were in full-time education, which clashed with the workshop delivery. The outcomes from all external workshops were included in the intervention, in the specimen room, as well as the "floating trash" suspended in front of the basking shark model. These artefacts included plastic jellyfish, sharks, turtles, mermaids, kraken and more. Young people were informed about the project and how their contribution would be used during workshops, and made aware of the intervention dates, which encouraged a number of them to plan museum visits with their families.

### Littering the museum

The *NMP* intervention was installed across several display areas in the museum with the help of two key museum staff and ten YF members, during a feverish evening of activity involving forklifts, last-minute plan changes and all hands on board. A lot of the "littering" of displays was done intuitively and spontaneously, deciding what went where in the moment rather than working to an entirely pre-planned vision. This "thinking on our feet" approach was enabled by the presence of a museum curator with responsibility for the conservation of natural history, who was able to give advice and sign off on decisions in the moment. "Are we really allowed to do this?" was a question repeated several times by the young people, which could represent the level of authority that the young people associated with museum spaces. The result was an installation which spread across all maritime displays at the museum, spreading across five rooms and two floors of the museum, littering them with plastic and spreading a new layer of content and meaning that addresses environmental issues.

For the next two weeks, as visitors entered the natural history galleries from the main hall, they were greeted by the "Sandy Beach" diorama, which had been littered with colourful beach plastic and transformed into "The Polluted Shore," the names chosen by the YF and created into bilingual labels for the displays. Colourful beach plastic such as bottles and broken toys, lost sandals, bottle caps and (thoroughly cleaned) tampon inserters attracted the curious hands of toddlers and kept their parents busy. The YF decision to remove sharps proved itself correct as although gallery regulations required the additions to be out of reach of the general public, visitors were observed touching elements, especially those on "The Polluted Shore" as this is a low diorama, which is accessible to children. The intervention was manned by gallery assistants as well as YF members who volunteered

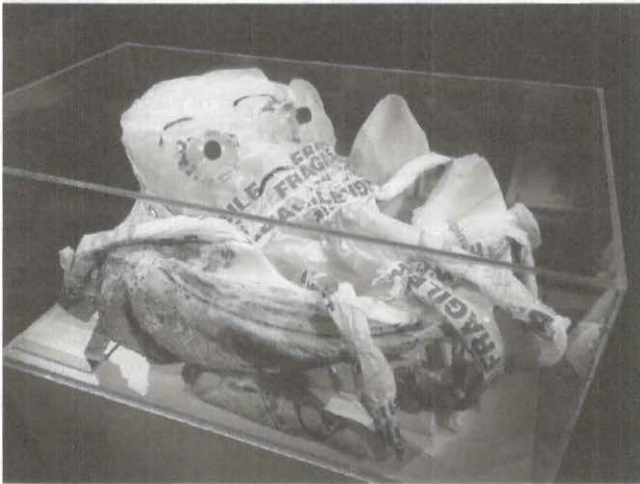


sporadically and had a badge-making station to engage visitors and create an opportunity for them to discuss their work on the project.

As visitors looked up from the beach diorama, they saw the life-size model of a basking shark inside a suspended cloud of plastic. Up the stairs and into the sea life specimen room, glass cases and wall-mounted cases contained an array of imaginative plastic sea creatures alongside the usual taxidermy, fossils and models. These were the plastic sea creatures made during youth workshops. A glass case housing a large shell was filled with a two-meter-long octopus, created from plastic bags (Figure 1.1).

Additionally, freestanding pledge boards were designed by the YF for this room. The four-sided boards asked questions of the visitors and highlighted small but positive actions that could help people make a difference. Pens were provided for visitors to sign achievable pledges such as "I'll take my own bags to the shop." Despite initial hesitation by curators ("Visitors might draw on walls! They will leave rude messages!") the YF had insisted on this interactive element as important to the museum being active with its visitors. Many visitors left positive messages and signed pledges. Some wrote about their worries and fears (Figure 1.2). On one day a crude drawing appeared on the boards, another day an Islamophobic message was left, but these were quickly transformed into drawings of fish by YF members who regularly visited the galleries to check up on their intervention. These interactions from the YF were in addition to the badge-making station and the YF members would drop in with friends and family to show the intervention and to observe how their work was received by museum visitors. This demonstrates that the YF felt a high degree of ownership and responsibility for the display.

From the taxidermy room, visitors continued towards the whale room, which contained the crowning piece of the intervention; the skeleton of a baby blue whale, and taxidermy of a leatherback turtle. The leatherback turtle was found washed up on



**FIGURE 1.1** A glass case housing a large shell was filled with a two-meter-long octopus created from plastic bags.



**FIGURE 1.3** Installation of plastic next to turtle taxidermy.

museum had already been engaging in seeking improvements to heating systems, café and gift shop offers, pension schemes and the ethics of accepting donations. However, the *NMP* intervention provided a welcome public platform for displaying museum commitment to sustainability and taking a public stance. It reinforced a sense of urgency and commitment among museum staff as well as the YF. Indeed, on September 18, 2019, AC publicly declared a global climate and ecological emergency and reconfirmed its commitment to reducing its carbon footprint. The YF and young climate champions continue to engage with museum sustainability boards, and help to keep pushing for more, and for more radical, actions. Based upon the lessons our team learned from *NMP*, on how to be innovative within existing museum practices as well as working with minority groups, we make the following recommendations as well as suggestions for areas to be researched further through a practice-based approach. We make these recommendations to practitioners enthused about the potential for co-production with communities and audiences in institutions where this is not the norm. We've discussed our practice from a museum perspective but consider it appropriate to other areas where there are challenges concerning empowering audiences and representation.

## Discussion and recommendations

As previously discussed, the “place” of heritage institutions, both in terms of their locality, displays and surrounding communities, is important in considering how to generate innovation and work with communities to bring change. Nonetheless, the *NMP* intervention led us to adopt practices that we feel are transferable to most museums. We want to share these recommendations to the wider field in the hope that practitioners and staff who are acting as change-makers or community engagement coordinators and share our



FIGURE 1.2 Freestanding pledge boards for audiences to leave comments and sign pledges.

a Welsh beach after it had eaten plastic. This information was already provided by interpretative panels, but the youth forum decided to highlight this further by hanging plastic in front of the turtle's beak, as though it was spewing plastic, as overheard from visitors (Figure 1.3). In the adjacent room, the bones of a baby blue whale on permanent display on an elevated plinth rested on a bed of plastic. This display combined two strong visual elements, the plastic and the whale skeleton, driving home the point that pollution threatens even the largest marine life-forms.

## Impact

The intervention served as a stark representation of marine realities. It also directly challenged audiences; the pledge boards, which asked the audience direct questions about their thoughts and attitudes towards plastic pollution as well as asking for a pledge, prompting individual, but potentially effective changes that individuals could make to have a positive impact on plastic pollution, such as reusing bags or not using plastic. This call to action received, for the most part, positive responses from museum visitors and many discussions were witnessed between visitors, especially in family groups.

For museum staff, the intervention provided a chance to showcase publicly their concern for sustainability in museum practice. Staff and environmental boards at the



passion for co-productive approaches with their audiences will find them useful. We understand that neither time nor budgets are infinite, and so we have sought creative and empowering ways to work within these constraints to turn them into opportunities. As such, our recommendations are to:

- Create networks with community partners.
- Build momentum and keep building on successes.
- Grow communities of interest.
- Hand over control.
- Allow real-time decision-making processes where possible.
- Aim to speed up and streamline museum-level decision making.
- Bring senior staff and grassroots groups together, create points of contact.
- Be prepared to experiment.
- Be prepared to break (or bend) some rules.
- Challenge established ways of thinking and the status quo.
- Take a stance.

When working on larger scale projects with cultural impact, partnerships with local charities and activists proved to be helpful, empowering and widening the impact, relevance and awareness of museum activism beyond its gallery walls. As beach cleans were outsourced to SAS during the *NMP* intervention, the young people's time was freed up to prepare materials and plans for inside the museum. In addition, money was saved on both sides; SAS took the lead on organizing beach cleans, including mobilizing communities and providing transport and snacks for volunteers, while the museum took over the task of recycling plastic and provided an impactful public platform to highlight the positive work of SAS. In a climate of financial challenges to museum practice, such mutually beneficial arrangements can help museums be more cost-effective, while also making new "friends" and building partnerships to promote mutual goals.

This approach was repeated in 2019 through a collaboration between AC, the YF and the environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion. Building on the *NMP* intervention, the YF had secured enough support among curators to be given the opportunity to create a six-month exhibition in connection with Dippy the Dinosaur's stay at the museum.<sup>4</sup> The YF chose to sustain the momentum they built with *NMP* and continue working on environmental themes and created an exhibition from recycled clothes and textiles focusing on the dangers of fast fashion and its contribution to pollution and climate change. Again, open workshops involving wider groups of young people were used to help produce content. These workshops also used soft education techniques to share and promote simple sewing techniques for fixing or altering clothes, promoting upcycling over disposal and again empowering visitors to make positive environmental choices by re-skilling. Again, charities were approached for support, and charity thrift stores such as Barnardo's Wales, Oxfam and Islamic Relief provided bags of textiles as donations, or at greatly reduced costs. In addition, swap shops were held to promote more sustainable ways for people to be fashionable. The exhibition was well received and further established the YF as a youthful and conscientious voice of the museum.<sup>5</sup>



## Conclusion

The *NMP* intervention demonstrates the potential of a grassroots approach to museum programming. It did this by suggesting a youth-led framework, supported by key staff members. This project provided informal learning opportunities to young people both within the museum site and externally through community partnerships. The project tried to reach and impact as many young people as possible and this was done by hosting several workshops with a variety of skill levels and outcome aims within the museum and sending to schools and communities to partake in, and by allowing both long-term and one-off engagement. We addressed the power norms of curation and display by utilizing many of these outcomes in the final intervention display. A strength of this approach is that it is relatively fast – six months from concept to completion – which preserved momentum and passion for the young people. The project worked directly with conservators and curators to ensure gallery safety and tailored the approach to require no rehanging or display changes, instead weaving the intervention around permanent display elements.

We propose this as a format to be tested further and potentially adopted by other museum sites. We have attempted to present a critical view of the process as there are areas that could be improved for future projects, reflected in our recommendations. This project worked within the established working processes of our museum site with the aim of building more diverse and impactful museum spaces. Our focus is upon young people but we consider this approach valid if it were tailored towards other groups that have had low representation in museum spaces.

## Notes

- 1 This was a tourism drive to encourage visitors to the Welsh Coastline, see WalesOnline for more information: <http://yearofthesea.walesonline.co.uk/index.html>.
- 2 See also <https://advisor.museumsandheritage.com/news/dippy-display-national-museum-cardiff-tail-end-uk-tour-nears/>.
- 3 After the intervention, care was taken to dispose of the plastic sustainably; some of the exhibits were given a second life through an exhibition at the Oriel Y Parc gallery, a partner institution of the museum. The rest was recycled responsibly.
- 4 See also <https://advisor.museumsandheritage.com/news/dippy-display-national-museum-cardiff-tail-end-uk-tour-nears/>.
- 5 See also this review of the project by a young person: <https://museum.wales/blog/2020-02-06/Dippy-About-Nature—Combining-Dinosaurs-With-Climate-Activism/>.

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Images of the *No Môr Plastic* Intervention ©Amgueddfa Cymru

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