

The University Museum as Public Laboratory Sally MacDonald, Director, UCL Museums and Collections

This talk summarises a few thoughts on what makes university museums special, and how they might remain distinctive and relevant. I will refer to examples of some of the things we are doing at UCL. And I am illustrating the talk with some abstract, evocative images commissioned from photographer Sara Bevan (www.sarabevan.com), inspired by two collections at UCL.

Richness of collections

- University museums contain some of the richest and most extraordinary collections in the world, and can draw on an unparalleled set of specialist resources.
- But we have perhaps collectively failed to define what it is that makes them special.
- A recent report by the UK's University Museums Group (2004) commented that many university museums *'lack a clearly articulated role within their parent institutions...and the vision and support to engage creatively with the world beyond'*
- Defining this role and developing this vision are critical steps that many of us still need to take.
- I think the distinctiveness of university museums lies in the relationship between the collections, their academic context, and the physical spaces they inhabit.

Specialist knowledge

- Many museums began as **research** collections; often intrinsically introspective
 - the results of intense study in arcane areas
- Physical manifestations of great minds, mapping new territories
- Some remained as personal study collections
- Others were institutionalized, recognised as university property
- Grew with their disciplines, were legitimized as museums

Collections illustrative for teaching

- Others began as **teaching** collections;
 - illustrative taxonomies
 - exemplars supporting accepted thought
 - practical problems for students.
 - Objects **broken, pulled apart, analysed, explored,**
 - Valued for their lack of completeness.
 - Often only understood by close exploration and handling.

Hidden/ old-fashioned, divorced

- These collections have traditionally been kept in spaces close to their users and the other resources needed to understand them:
 - In offices, seminar rooms, laboratories

- Alongside specialist libraries and archives.
- Where they have become physically separated – usually because a department moves without its collection – they can lose their lifeblood.
- We have many examples of this dislocation at UCL. To give two...
- Our Department of Earth Sciences has recently moved away from its main geology displays
- This is not unconnected to the fact that the current Head of Department sees no real connection btw collection and Earth Sciences research. He can see its relevance to the History of Science, but not to current science.
- And an internationally important collection of pathological specimens is currently walled up in a seminar room, unused since it left its departmental home 20 years ago.
- Almost never have university museums collected primarily for public education, but many have gradually opened up to the public.
- Sometimes this process has also involved a physical and strategic separation from teaching and research.
- While a few university museums manage to retain strong academic links and provide exciting and accessible public galleries, these are exceptional.
- It is more common to encounter university museums where the public are admitted but also at the same time excluded (through incomprehensible interpretation for example).
- So, university museums can be captivating places, but they do not often provide good spaces for academic – public engagement, or illustrate current thought, or epitomize the spirit of innovation that most universities want to project.

Disposal/ repurposing

- How can we re-think our collections, staff and spaces for 21st century?
- In the UK as part of the drive towards professionalism, most university museums have adopted national and international codes and guidelines predicated on the idea of permanence; that museums will keep their collections forever for the public good.
- This has only recently begun to be properly debated (the Museums Association in the UK is currently consulting widely on the question of disposal)
- It is of course highly questionable whether any museum can be said to be a permanent institution or should aspire to keep things forever. It is perhaps even more questionable for a university museum, which should surely aspire to support current research and teaching through its resources, and not simply reflect past academic practices, with no room for anything new.
- UCL embarking on fundamental review of collections, in order to make sure we have what we need in order to support current teaching and research needs, and to ensure we don't keep what we don't need.
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- Reviewing our collections in this way is likely to involve
 - Intense and open discussions with academic and public stakeholders
 - far better specialist networking - transferring collections within disciplines but across institutions where they might be better used
 - exploring interdisciplinary potential – using objects as portals to new disciplines. For instance, UCL museums and collections is currently involved in research bids with the departments of geomatic engineering, computer science, archaeology and anthropology. It seems there is a real interest within these disciplines in exploring the potential for new ways of looking at material culture.
 - The courage to deal with criticism. Disposal is usually presented in terms of loss, but we need to ask what we lose by possession.
- We need to ask what kinds of collections (physical and otherwise) are needed to support different disciplines now. I have been involved recently in discussions with the Head of the Engineering Department at UCL, who wants displays or installations in his department to stimulate his students to creative thinking. He is more likely to want an artwork or a human heart on display in a student common room than a model of a bridge.
- I think in the end it's a case of staking out new territory.
- Shouldn't we be spending our time engaging students and communities with live issues such as climate change, the illicit trade in antiquities or Islamophobia, rather than worrying about conserving bad paintings of past professors?

Curators

- Rethinking what we need from collections forces us to rethink the kind of people we need to activate them.
- With the greater public use of university museums, we have seen a greater professionalisation of staff. More of our staff have public outreach, communication and advocacy skills.
- But working in a university museums I think requires a different skill set to working in another type of public museum.
- We still need subject specialists, but
 - specialists capable of communicating/ evangelising across disciplinary boundaries
 - specialists with depth and breadth.
 - Specialists capable of communicating brilliantly with non-specialists.

Of course these are not the only skills we need but I think they may be critical to our success.

Public Laboratory

- We also I think need new types of spaces where people and collections can interact.

- At UCL we have been thinking for some time now about idea of **university museum as a public laboratory**
 - a place of experiment and grounded research
 - drawing on a rich academic environment
 - yet engaging with a range of internal and external audiences.]
- It's crucial where such a space would be located: seems most logical for it to be at the door of the university, occupying a transitional space.

Representing the unknown

- What should such a space look like?
- We wondered if the ideal university museum might have a 'work in progress' feel
 - where questions and gaps would be highlighted
 - where failed experiments would be displayed alongside those judged a success.
 - And where the public take part in research
- For example, in some of our galleries we've been researching:
 - Public attitudes to audio as opposed to text information, and experimenting with speaking exhibits
 - work on colour 'restoration' through projection

Experimentation in public

- This raises all sorts of questions about how to present results interestingly to those not participating
- How to provoke thought about thought itself?
- How to convey uncertainty through a solid object.
- And the question of how museum collections might interact with disciplines for which physicality has been peripheral (such as law, philosophy)
- Again these are areas which I think university museums must explore. We have to be able to present doubt and debate in an engaging way.

Blurring of boundaries

- Many university museums blur boundaries between public and private worlds. This usually happens because the public have been allowed into what is essentially a work space.
- In the public laboratory we might take this blurring to a logical conclusion, and provide new ways in which members of the public could interact with academics.
- We might look at the classic community arts model, where a person begins as an observer, then moves towards participation and finally performance.
- Could this be adapted to a scenario where a visitor becomes a student and then a teacher.
- It would mean creating spaces and programmes which encouraged these transitions.

Provocative

- So the public laboratory could be a provocative space, provoking debate and dissent, conversation and laughter. It could address issues of current research and concern;
- It could foster interaction across disciplines, between the wider museum and heritage sector and the general public.
- It could be a place of unexpected juxtapositions
- And a place of vision

Future possibilities

- I've tried to suggest that in the public laboratory we might see our collections as transitory, our staff as experimenters, our spaces as dynamic
- At UCL we are reviewing its collections, restructuring our staff, and attempting to create a new building, incorporating some of these ideas, to house some of our extraordinary collections.
- The overall aim is to ensure that UCL's historic collections better serve the core mission of the university, and are not seen simply as relics of its prestigious past, but as essential tools for its future academic success and sustainability.
- We are only a little way along this road and would really welcome discussions with anyone who thinks they may be heading in the same direction.