At the Happy Museum Symposium 2012 a gathering of interested individuals wrestled with the following question:

“in the light of global challenges such as climate change, resource scarcity and financial instability, can museums rise to the challenge of supporting our transition to a higher-wellbeing, lower consumption society?”

The event has already been the subject of much online discussion summarised in a blog for the Guardian by Project Director Tony Butler [HERE](http://longnow.org/).  A full report of the event will be published on the [Happy Museum website](http://www.happymuseumproject.org/) shortly.

A theme that re-occurred during the two-day event was the potential tension between museums as collectors and preservers, even ‘temples’ of our material culture  - and the need for a shift in societal attitudes towards that same culture, a shift from our current growth-economy driven levels of material consumption to a more sustainable model.

Delegates questioned what role museums could hope to play in such a shift without detraction from their core role in collection, preservation and stewardship of our collective material heritage?

One of our guest speakers, Paul Allen from the [Centre for Alternative Technology](http://www.cat.org.uk/), took a pragmatic view suggesting that we do need some material ‘things’ to help us live, and the ‘things’ held in museums have lasted sometimes hundreds of years.  Often they illustrate local manufacture and materials, simplicity and appropriateness of design and ease of repair.  He observed that our current dilemma is caused by short lived, impossible to repair, high embodied energy, made thousands of miles away ‘things’.

As he said:

"let’s not bin the milk churns, mangles, clogs, penny farthings and top hats, but let’s make sure the curation we use frames them in a 21st century mind set – I’ve never felt museums promote materialism, though it is possibly a conversation each museum should have amongst its curators."

This thinking led me back to recent research into the importance of engaging with our cultural values if we are to encourage a shift towards a higher-wellbeing more sustainable society. The values that motivate us and which are the driving force behind our attitudes and behaviours.

A group of major NGO’s (WWF-UK, Climate Outreach and Information Network (COIN), Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), Friends of the Earth (FOE) and Oxfam) under the banner of ‘Common Cause’ produced a groundbreaking report –‘[The Case for Working with our Cultural Values](http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/common_cause_report.pdf)’ (WWF 2011)

The Common Cause Working Group expressed the view that:

“Whatever the recent successes of civil society organisations in helping to address these [societal] challenges, current responses are incommensurate with their scale. It is increasingly evident that resistance to action on these challenges will only be overcome through engagement with the cultural values that underpin this resistance.  In trying to meet these challenges, we must champion some long-held (but insufficiently esteemed) values, while seeking to diminish the primacy of many more “self enhancing” values which are now prominent – at least in Western industrialised society.”

The values that must be strengthened – values that are commonly held and which can be brought to the fore – include: empathy towards those who are facing the effects of environmental crises, concern for future generations, and recognition that human prosperity resides in relationships – both with one another and with the natural world. Undoubtedly these are values that have been weakened – and often even derided – in modern culture’. (The Case for Working with our Cultural Values - Introduction)

The recently published [Common Cause Handbook](http://www.google.co.uk/#hl=en&xhr=t&q=common+cause+handbook&cp=16&pf=p&sclient=psy-ab&biw=1110&bih=576&source=hp&aq=0&aqi=g1g-v3&aql=&oq=common+cause+han&pbx=1&bav=on.2,or.r_gc.r_pw.,cf.osb&fp=d1162d2a0eb80b06)  investigates how our values can be influenced by engagement and experience - summarised as follows.  Over time, repeated engagement of values is likely to strengthen them.  Our lives therefore provide continual opportunities for – and constraints on – the pursuit and growth of certain values. In addition, experiences themselves are not value-free and our experience of various aspects of our society will help strengthen particular values. Community centres and churches, trade unions, libraries, indeed museums – institutions that we share and recognise as promoting the common good – may increase the importance we place on equality, social justice, or friendship.

Indeed museums can take some comfort from being, in many cases, a sanctuary from commercial messages - as the [Happy Museum Paper](http://www.happymuseumproject.org/the-happy-museum-paper-and-manifesto/the-happy-museum-paper) identifies:

“Notwithstanding the ubiquitous gift shop strategically positioned by the exit, museums have little to ‘sell’ to their visitors but understanding and enjoyment.”

and

"In a world that seems increasingly saturated by advertising, a trip to a museum is an all-too-rare opportunity to find sanctuary from commercial messages.”

Meanwhile extrinsic and security motivations may be strengthened through competitive work environments; advertising appealing to status; the focus of the media on perceived enemies and national security; and the portrayal of financial success as ‘achievement’ – reflected in rich lists, GDP as the primary indicator of a nation’s success, celebrity and fashion culture.

The Handbook goes on to identify that:

“Our experience of particular institutions and policies (themselves shaped in part by societal values) can change or reinforce our perceptions of ‘what is possible, desirable and normal’: a process known as ‘policy feedback’. Anti-discrimination laws, the right to roam, free museums and state pensions may provide opportunities or constraints that promote intrinsic values. Exposure to the institutions of consumer culture may also represent a form of ‘policy feedback”.

Engagement with the history and traditions of our material culture can help to engender a deeper personal sense of place and heritage.  Engagement with our heritage also helps to widen our temporal frame – identified by the [Long Now Foundation](http://longnow.org/) as an antidote to today’s faster/cheaper mind set and a way of helping foster responsibility for the longer future.

As NEF Fellow Andrew Simms noted in his presentation at the Symposium, considering our heritage allows us to do away with the ‘Myth of Permanence’ with which we view our current world.   Andrew spoke of past examples of societal ingenuity and questioned ‘what can we learn from the past about eras of rapid transition which can inform our current living experiment’

I was left pondering how museums could use their stewardship of our material heritage to best effect?  Without ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’, without expensive, carbon intensive re-structuring of buildings or exhibitions or indeed without abandoning the material altogether - what could museums need to do in order to help effect a shift in values and perception of our material culture?   This implies a more ‘instrumental’ approach than some might be happy with, but given the scale of challenges our society faces can our public institutions afford to ‘fiddle while Rome burns’?

How could we encourage a visitor to view the same object, in the same glass case, treated with the same reverence - in an entirely different and perhaps more beautiful light?

Hilary Jennings
Associate, Happy Museum Project