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**The Happy Museum Project 2011-14**

**Will we ever learn?**

**by Tony Butler, Founder Director**

In March 2009 I was planting a tree when I received a phone call from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation inviting me to present an idea to its Breakthrough Fund committee. The Breakthrough fund is a unique initiative designed to support creative entrepreneurs in the arts. This was also – a month before we met our children for the first time.

I’d worked in museums for about 11 years during which time we had seen nothing but growth in the sector. Most UK cities had new or refurbished buildings and cultural development seemed to go hand in hand with economic regeneration. Economic growth seemed the only true driver for societal well-being. For every Birmingham Library there’s a Selfridges, for a Museum of Liverpool there’s a Liverpool One.

The combination of Regeneration and Culture is seductive to us. Perhaps the development art and heritage legitimises our commitment to consumerism. Virtually every town and city in the UK had a new museum by 2009. With more money we could do more stuff for more people. In my new role as Director of Derby Museums Trust I find myself making the same arguments to funders as we seek to gain support for an ambitious co-produced programme to develop Derby’s Silk Mill.

Yet might we be mindful of the words of Satish Kumar “Materialism degrades matter, museums rise it up” when we conduct our next economic impact study.

In 1972 the Apollo 17 mission took a photograph of the Earth now known as the Blue Marble. This is one of the first colour pictures taken of the earth from space. It represents the first time man was fully confronted with the fragility of the Earth amid the vast expanse of space. It was a clear message of the finite nature of our home planet and the moment has been credited with the birth of the modern environmental movement – with Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace established around the same time.

Nearly half a century after this photo was taken, however, we continue to treat the planet like there is no tomorrow. We have entered a new geological era – the Anthropocene – an era defined by the impact of humanity on our ecosystem. Impact which includes climate change, loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification, soil degradation and resource depletion.

Underpinning much of this impact is the exponential growth in our levels of consumption - which are driving us beyond the natural limits of our planet. Research by the **Global Footprint Network** suggests if consumption levels worldwide were the same as the current rate of the UK - we would require the resources of 3.5 planets to meet our needs.

But economic growth – or GDP – is currently the way we measure societal progress. However it has some crucial flaws. It encourages resource depletion through a focus on growth - and can’t differentiate between spending on good things (like education) and terrible things (like the rebuilding required after a natural disaster). It doesn’t measure services that nature provides, such as fresh water, or those without a market price, such as raising children. As Robert Kennedy once put it, GDP measures everything “except that which makes life worthwhile.”

Our obsession with growth wasn’t matched with a desire to redistribute the proceeds of prosperity more equally. The gap between rich and poor has grown faster in the last 15 years than at anytime during the previous 100. [A Tale of Two Britains](http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/a-tale-of-two-britains-inequality-in-the-uk-314152), a study published by Oxfam in March 2014 showed that the top five richest families in Britain worth more than bottom. My children are likely to be the first generation in modern times to be poorer than the preceding one.

Yet we still live in a society of relative abundance. We have reaped the short-term economic rewards of exploiting our environments, natural resources. As liberal economist Robert Skidelsky notes “the western economy has given us wealth beyond measure, but has taken away the chief benefits of wealth, the consciousness of having enough.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Whether it was Robert Putnam describing an atomised United States in Bowling Alone, or Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson proposing that more equal societies do better in The Spirit Level or Joseph Steiglitz’s highlighting the moral and economic costs of the Price of Inequality – conventional economic and social responses to long term challenges are insufficient.

We pay lip service to the environmental impacts of increasing wealth. Our infinite capacity for curiosity for the new means we ignore environmental limits. Our attempts to tackle climate limited to reducing carbon rather than understanding the wider impacts of conspicuous consumption, soil degradation and ocean acidification. Sustainability means understanding our ecology as a whole and that involves connections that people have with their surroundings and each other.

The Injustices of the world aside, much could be learnt from Psychology. For many years at Museum of East Anglian Life I witnessed the pleasure and well being volunteers and vulnerable adults derived from doing something meaningful, surrounded by new friends. They were experiencing what Mihalyi Csíkszentmihályi describes as *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. People are happiest when they are in a state of *flow*— a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand. For them time stops.[[2]](#footnote-2)

So I think there’s a choice that we museum people make. To paraphrase Brecht do you want your museum to be a mirror to reflect society or a hammer with which to shape it.

To me Happy Museum was not a means to highlight impact of museums could have on the community, but to suggest that they articulate a new and equitable vision of a good society.

A few years ago I spent a day with Ian Tuckett the CEO of Coin Street Community builders, one of London’s largest social enterprises (it was they who kick-started the regeneration of the London South Bank in the 1980s). He told to me always ask myself “why is it broken how can I fix it?”

So first we asked the New Economics Foundation to fix it.

Whilst I was director of MEAL I was greatly influenced (as have many museum folk I know) by the work of their Well-Being team under Nic Marks. Their [Five Ways to Well-Being](http://neweconomics.org/projects/five-ways-well-being) – connect, be active, keep learning, take notice and give has been well used by many socially engaged cultural organisations in recent years.

I also involved like minded folk People United, Flow Associates, Maurice Davies, Laughology and Culture Unlimted.

In 2011 the Happy Museum was launched at the October Gallery in London with the paper [*The Happy Museum, A Tale of How it Might Turn Out All Right*](http://www.happymuseumproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/The_Happy_Museum_report_web.pdf)*j*

At the Museum Associations Conference in Brighton in 2011, Caroline Lucas the UK’’s first Green MP quoted extensively from the paper, she noted that ‘Apart from the ubiquitous gift shop strategically positioned by the exit, museums have little to ‘sell’ to their visitors but understanding and enjoyment. In a world that seems saturated by advertising, a trip to a museum is an opportunity to find sanctuary from commercial messages. ‘

Museums’ function as social spaces is significant. With recent trends seeing city space being increasingly transferred to private ownership, museums are an important bulwark against the erosion of the public realm. For many people, a museum visit is not a solitary activity but an opportunity to spend time with family or to meet up with friends. Jude Kelly, artistic director of the Southbank Centre in London, has described the centre as first and foremost ‘a place for encounters’.

Museums encourage visitors to be psychologically ‘present’, with attention focused completely in the here and now and on the aesthetic qualities of things. Experiencing this kind of involvement is not only enjoyable in itself, but is associated with wider psychological benefits.

Reciprocity and ‘giving back’ to others promotes well-being for people of all ages. A shift in focus from being didactic educators to ‘co-creators of well-being’ will enable a more active and engaged role for the visitor. Opportunities for volunteering, can directly influence the well-being of individuals by leaving them with a sense of self-worth and status. Motivated and valued people inspired by a museum are more likely and better equipped to get involved with civic life within their own communities.

As with any self-respecting movement or campaign we proposed that there eight principles which we then modified to six, behind a Happy Museum

***Create the conditions for well-being****.* Museums were uncomfortable with the notion that they exist to make people happy - they challenge, excite and induce anger and sadness too. Well-being is more than smiles or positive emotion but about the quality of our lives and relationships. A Happy Museum will explore how to create the environment for these to flourish

Find ways to have more **mutual relationships** with your communities, supporters and visitors. Explore how museum staff and public can work together, with different expertise but equal status, to achieve common outcomes such as making a sustainable locality in which to live and work. Learn from voluntary organisations and social enterprises to try out new models of working with people.  Consider the possibility of becoming a mutual organisation, or of running your organisation as a co-operative

Museums enable individuals and communities to **learn** together. Museum learning is already all the things much orthodox learning is not: curiosity driven; non-judgmental; non-compulsory; engaging; informal; and fun. The people needed in the future will be resilient, creative, resourceful and empathetic systems-thinkers, exactly the kind of capacities museum learning can support. Museums could lead in developing our understanding of why and how education needs to change to bring about these capacities.

Happy Museum introduces the notion of ***stewardship***. This term can encompass both the natural environment and museums’ function as keepers of material culture. In an environmental context, stewardship applies to the notion of responsible use and protection of the natural environment through conservation and sustainable practices. Happy Museum suggests that collections and the environment are the same part of the ‘Museum ecology’ – its cultural and natural resources

***Be an active citizen*** challenges individuals to be more active within civil society (and includes individuals working in museums as well as their communities) Using what they learn from connections within their communities, the work of museums should better reflect current trends and issues which affect people’s daily lives. Active citizenship also relates to awareness and understanding of connectivity across the world, seeking international associations to contextualise local issues (and vice versa). This, as one participant noted ‘creates an opportunity for Happy Museum participants to put their personal beliefs into influencing organisational change’.

We felt the best way to establish these ideas was to create a community of practice. We’ve supported 22 museums to experiment, take risks and reflect on their impact on society and their ability to do good. The projects have been joyful, unexpected and meaningful. Some influenced the way their organisations thought, many inspired those delivering them, almost all impacted positively on participants.

There have been fabulous projects:

* A pharmacy made of recycled paper dispensing well being treatments in the museums suggested by local people – The Beaney Canterbury
* A winter cutting garden in Lambeth exploring the ethics of the flower trade – The Garden Museum
* A safe space, conversation hub with homeless charity in London -London Transport Museum
* A comedian in residence in Northumberland – Woodhorn Museum
* The notion of remaking a museum with the next generation of hackers and makers in Derby – the Silk Mill, Derby
* The creation of Young sustainability champions in Torquay – Torquay Musuem
* Establishing an enterprise with young people using traditional skills in Mid Wales – Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth

For many of those involved the experience of the projects had a profound effect:

Participants said…

*Working on this project has made us realise that environmental sustainability is at the heart of the story of the museum tells about the development and change in the local community and is important for its own sustainable well being*

*It gives people context for their experiences and offers alternatives to currently and locally prevalent attitudes and ways of life.*

*The giving back of the planet to our children is the project of the day and the happy museum addresses it*

Amidst all the creativity was desire for our philosophy to be seen as rigourous and to prove its worth. We were determined to **measure what matters**. In the Happy Museum paper we suggest that counting visitors tells us nothing about the quality or impact of an experience.

To evaluate the impact of the programme we’ve used Logic Modelling or the Story of Change. The Story of Change establishes a shared long term vision and agreement of what difference we want to make. It then works backwards logically to plan what we need to do and how we need to do it and eventually decide in what we need to invest.

Happy Museum’s Story of change was

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Investments**  | **What we do** | **Difference HM makes** | **People who matter** | **Vision** |
| **Work to scale**  | **Our and others’ action research**  | **Wellbeing** | **Personal change** | **Re-imagining museums for a sustainable future by fostering wellbeing that doesn't cost the Earth** |
| **Work to principles** | **Communications, relationships & resources** | **Care of surroundings** | **Organisational change** |
| **Work smart** | **Our and others’ academic research** | **Resilience** | **Sector change** |

Each of the commissions has created their own story of change learning from what works and where the greatest impacts are.

A variety of methods have been used by the commissions to explore the impact of their work locally, including Observational Evaluation (Manchester Museum), Mood Tree and a Happy Tracker for staff (Story Museum Oxford). At the national level, Daniel Fujiwara of the London School of Economics, who has recently published valuation guidelines for the UK Government, has been engaged to start to value well-being in response to cultural activities.

Daniel’s research [Museums and Happiness – the Value of Participating in Museums and the Arts](http://www.happymuseumproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Museums_and_happiness_DFujiwara_April2013.pdf) published in 2013 showed that the value of museums to people’s happiness is **£3,200** per year, per person.

This compares to:

* Being an audience in the Arts **£2,000**
* Participation in Arts activity **£1.500**
* Participation in Sport **£1,500**

Daniel’s work caused a stir, it still remains one of the most retweeted posts on the [@museums\_news](https://twitter.com/museum_news) feed. It found its way into a range of other publications such as the latest Arts Council [evidence review](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/browse-advice-and-guidance/value-arts-and-culture-people-and-society-evidence-review) of the social and economic impact of culture. We saw the research as provocative, showing that a ‘soft’ notion such as well-being could be measured in an econometric way akin to economic impact.

Happy Museums next research programme is the [LIFE survey](http://www.happymuseumproject.org/?p=1988), taking part are all the current commissions and a wider range of museums across the country. The survey will explore how museums create wellbeing, and how significant that wellbeing is. We’ll be able to quantify that wellbeing, which will enable museums to show funders or commissioners the value of what we do. We’ll be collaborating with Daniel Fujiwara again on this project to provide in-depth and rigorous analysis, so as well as creating local evidence we can influence policy makers and funders nationally too.

The research draws together our findings from three years of commissioned museums with other research literature to ask about the wellbeing factors most relevant to museums. We’ve dubbed it the LIFE survey because it asks about

* Learning,
* Interaction
* Feelings and
* Environment and Surroundings

We published our exhaustive [evaluation report last September](http://www.happymuseumproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/HappyMuseum_LearningEvaluationReport_Sep13-1.pdf) which assessed the impact and effectiveness of the Happy Museum Approach.

Whilst noting theoretical influences, it also recommended range of practical actions to help organisations become Happy Museums:

* Share a vision. Work out the Story of Change and put in place leadership to make it happen
* Find out and use every individuals’ potential
* Work across departments and across hierarchies to create wellbeing and resilient teams
* Create clear roles, shared ownership and mutual benefit with stakeholders through a facilitative approach
* Use ways to measure what’s changing that are appropriate to the stakeholder and style of delivery
* Be a host and make the museum welcoming
* Broker honest networks and be a hub for communities, including green groups
* Be ambitious and experimental; allow people to experience and accept the discomfort of change
* Encourage playfulness and social encounters
* Describe wellbeing seriously and make it an explicit aim
* Lead by example in the care of people, place and planet - make stewardship explicit to stakeholders
* Learn the business benefits of being lean and green

Happy Museum has had less than half a million pounds invested in it. Its supported 22 museums, conducted some major research and its advocacy has, in the words of Piotr Bienkowski, punched well above its weight.

It’s fair to say it’s had a clear influence on the Museums Association’s Museums Change Lives. Their twin principles of Wellbeing and Better Places echo much Happy Museum thinking. We have over 3,000 followers on twitter and have presented papers across Europe, to Australia, The US and soon to Brazil.

As it completes its third iteration, Happy Museum will keep asking people in museums how prepared they are to place themselves alongside the rest of civil society to work towards a flourishing, resilient public realm.

I thought I’d leave the last word to a visitor to the Paper Apothecary

*Dear Kim*

*I was feeling a bit low this afternoon when I headed into Canterbury town. And got even lower when I couldn't find any suitable envelopes in W H Smiths. I guess Basildon Bond and the like are virtually redundant these days - they only had office type envelopes or flashy shiny ones?*

*On a whim I headed into our revamped Beaney and into the front gallery where I found The Paper Apothecary, made totally from card and paper. What a wonderful, wonderful experience! I shared my 'issue' with the chemist and with a little thought and consideration she retrieved her recommended 'cultural' treatment from one of the numerous drawers - a super drawing and poem by Louis from Parkside School (thanks Louis). Her assistant wrote down the 'treatment' for me and directed me to the People and Places Gallery to see the painting I'd been prescribed to look at (that had inspired Louis) and place it in my memory.*

*'The Angel over Canterbury' by Sara Wicks was already familiar to me but it was delightful to see it again with fresh eyes.*

*In the process, I got talking to another client visiting the Apothecary and we ended up exchanging email addresses.*

*I left The Beaney in a far more buoyant mood and walked back by the river with a spring in my step.*

*If you haven't been treated by the Paper Apothecary yet I'd certainly recommend a visit - and soon, as it will be shutting on Sunday.*

*Many thanks to those involved in this really interesting project*

*Sue X*

1. Robert and Edward Skidelsky, How Much is Enough Allen Laine 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi Flow, the Psychology of Optimal Experience Harper and Row 1990 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)