**Museums 2020 – response from the Happy Museum project**

The Happy Museum Project welcomes the Museums 2020 consultation as stimulus to a wider and deeper consideration of the role of museums in both their current and future context and of the difference they make to individuals, communities, society and the environment.

Launched in April 2011, and funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Arts Council England, the Happy Museum Project (HMP) provides a leadership framework for museums to investigate a holistic approach to sustainability and wellbeing.

We would like to respond to the original consultation paper, and subsequent responses, in four areas; The Wellbeing ‘agenda’, Wellbeing in the context of sustainability, Measuring what Matters and Museums in their Communities, Activists in Civil Society.

**The Wellbeing ‘agenda’**

In its response to the Museums 2020 paper the Collections Trust rightly observes that the paper should speak to ‘longer-term agendas than those which occupy the current administration.’ However would take issue with the subsequent observation that thinking around wellbeing and happiness are limited to or driven by ‘specific short-term policy agendas about which the current English Government itself is unresolved and which have relatively little traction with the Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They are also agendas which belong to a specific type of Government with a specific view of the relationship between the individual and the state.’

The HMP, along with academic and policy thinking in fields as diverse as health, economics and environmental sustainability, is investigating wellbeing as both a focus for, and a potential measurement of, what *really* matters to us as individuals, communities and societies. Many believe the growing research and practice in this area is worthy of attention irrespective of whether they have traction with current political agendas. The New Economics Foundation’s ‘5 Ways to Wellbeing’, which underpins HMP thinking, was developed as part of the UK Government’s Foresight Programme established in 1993 by a Conservative government and published in 2008 under a Labour administration. More recently, the Young Foundation’s work on wellbeing and resilience shows how the role of wellbeing is part of the fundamental issues of our time, which - it would not be stretching the point to say – are about survival.

There is a common misconception that ‘wellbeing is just about personal happiness which is entirely subjective’. This is borne out of work recently carried out by the [Office of National Statistics](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171766_272294.pdf)  which uses a methodology based on Subjective Well-Being. This is but one methodology, and the one the UK government has chosen.

As Robert F Kennedy said in a speech to the University of Kansas back in 1968, ‘The gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials ...it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.’

**Wellbeing in the context of sustainability**

Whilst we support the inclusion of both societal wellbeing and the environment as key issues in Museums 2020 we would like to see some consideration of these two areas as two sides to the same coin and alongside the issues of economics and resilience.

Museums have innate qualities which can inspire a re-imagined society that values co-operation and stewardship of our surroundings as much as it does economic growth or other more traditional measures of societal well-being.

At the Museum Associations Conference in Brighton in 2012, Caroline Lucas the UK’’s first Green MP quoted extensively from the paper, *The Happy Museum – a Tale of how it might turn out alright*, 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.

HMP takes a view of sustainability which looks beyond financial and resource management and considers museums’ role as stewards of people, place and planet. Within this wider context it considers what the role could be for a museum which supports institutional and community resilience in the context of global financial and environmental challenges.

The importance of linking thinking on wellbeing, environment and the economy can be found a review of the first ever UN Conference on Happiness [HERE](http://bit.ly/Hwra6d) and in relation to the lack of joined up government thinking [HERE](http://bit.ly/QzPpad).

**Measuring what matters**

Measurement features heavily in discussion of Museums 2020. The following question was posed in one online discussion. ‘What should museums measure, should they look beyond their ‘physical, geographical and societal context’ for ideas on what and how to measure impact?’

Action-research has shown that measuring what matters is not only one of the most important principles to HMP commissioned organisations, it is amongst the hardest expertise to learn. There are two elements of tension. As always with evaluation, museums don’t want to interrupt an experience that is trying to foster wellbeing, by asking questions that seem intrusive. And anyway, would the answers convince others, particularly funders? Or is it better to focus on national academic research?

Museums can answer this by making sure that the purpose of measuring what matters is two-fold – both to prove our worth and to improve our impact. This means we need to ask about not just what happened, but why it happened, balancing locally owned enquiry with national evidence to back it up. As such this becomes part of the adult, mutual relationship museums are trying to make with communities. And it is far more motivating for the workforce and participants if they see that their feedback will directly improve their own experience.

Secondly, the *way* we measure matters too. Here there are prescient examples of museums commissioned by the Happy Museum using techniques that are in keeping with their content and audience, like the Mood Tree for audiences to pin leaves that colour-match their mood at the Story Museum; Where do I stand? on a line marked out in a room that asks staff about how society values success, at the Lightbox; or systematic observation (every fifteen minutes, against an agreed code) that Manchester Museum visitor services staff use to both populate their social media and learn what’s not working.

**Museums and their Communities, Activists in Civil Society**

A museum’s view of communities as active partners depends on whether they see themselves primarily as civic institutions or part of civil society or both.

The Civic Realm is defined as ‘the local state’ comprising of organisations and institutions governed by political representatives. Here citizens participate in groups like local health boards, school governing bodies and perhaps in a museum’s case, user panels. By contrast Civil Societyis characterised by voluntary action undertaken by citizens independently.

Two centuries ago Alexis de Tocqville famously described a thriving United States characterised by ‘free voluntary associations which strengthen civil society by creating habits of the heart.’ Typical organisations might be local development trusts, social enterprises, faith groups or co-operatives. As the UK state shrinks under the Coalition Government, these bodies begin to play an increasing role in bridging social capital and tackling inequalities in communities.

The distinction between the civic realm of the state and the civil society of the citizen is important

Notwithstanding the most progressive of founding values, all civic institutions, museums included are the reflection of the dominant political or social order. There is a certain discomfort in seeing a museum indulge in civic pride to the extent that they seem to be hand maidens for the local tourist board or when they appear to be a little too aligned to a governments desire to foster national identity.

In contrast to the defined structures and layers of accountability of the local state, civil society is a muddle. It comprises of groups of people, sometimes sharing, sometimes opposing, sometimes indifferent to each other. It is a space organised by the habits and intelligence of collective action.

HMP does not believe a small state is the primary means to increase freedoms and resilience of communities. Civil society doesn’t operate in a vacuum and is strengthened by a state which trusts it as an active partner. Likewise the state alone can no longer tackle pressing environmental and social challenges, like child poverty, alone. It needs co-operatives, campaigning groups and collectives to deliver at local level.

In order to work alongside communities as active partners, museums should learn behaviours from civil society. This requires systemic change; opening up governance, allowing self-actualising networks to replace structures and strategies, stimulating social innovation and collective intelligence rather than tried and tested methodologies. If museums use all these assets to create inventive and imaginative programming they’ll then place their institution within the hearts of their communities.

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