

## **‘It wasn’t all bad’: representations of working class cultures within social history museums and their impacts on audiences**

*Elizabeth Carnegie\**

*Sheffield University*

### **Abstract**

This article examines the complexities inherent in creating social history displays which honestly represent communities whilst at the same time remaining sensitive to participant’s needs and fears of exposure. It considers ways in which oral history collecting to inform displays is subject to self-censorship, community collusion in ‘stigma management’ and the curatorial decision making process of local government officers. Drawing on material collected for the People’s Palace Glasgow and elsewhere it analyzes the ways in which individual responses are used to create notions of community identity, within the framework of the social history museum as voice of local government. Lastly it considers the impacts of such histories on local, tourist and diasporic visitors when the context for such memories (and indeed objects) has been changed by their relationship to the museum.

**Key words:** People’s museums, curating dark memories, community identity, visitors/tourists

People are the real makers of what a city or place is. The first thing that a city must have is a museum for its people. Really touching and animating place. It takes care of all of the little voices that are difficult to listen to when you are taken by all the noise of the city...Thank you for this.

(Visitors Book Comment, non-local visitor, People’s Palace, 2003)

Why, oh why does this museum make so much of Billy Connolly? He is vulgar (more than suggestive). More could surely be made of Stan Laurel – was he not a Glaswegian? On the top floor (I think) one of the small glass cases contained boxes of DUREX, TAMPAX & such things. Why? I saw no reason or explanation. Are they intended to arouse children’s curiosity? Very odd! In haste-must get this posted. Ghastly picture on cover! Woman seems to have cat’s whiskers.

(Comment Card, over 70 year old, local visitor, 2003)

### **Introduction**

Within the public space of the museum, memories are triggered through people’s real or assumed relationship with the objects, events and images they are witnessing (Attfield 2000). If museums are places at which to reflect on what it means to be human, memories unrelated to those being projected in museums will be released and explored within the ‘dream space’ (Kavanagh 2000) of the museum. As Kavanagh (2000) argues, museum products are dependant on access to memories, and therefore by definition, visitors.

As the visitor comments cited above illustrate, the question of how people experience the past within this 'dream space' is determined by their relationship to that past (Kavanagh 2000). Local visitors claim ownership of that past and the right to shape it, whereas visitors to the city respond to perceived truths about that past. Both comments reveal the fluid nature of memories based as they are on understandings of the past. This means that memories are not chronological (Samuel 1981, 1996, Thompson 2000, Hodgkin and Radstone 2003) and, moreover, that the museum also needs to be understood as an expressive medium (Kavanagh 2000), where visitors respond according to how they see and shape themselves within the world (Thompson 2000). Indeed visitors fulfil the role of witness (Taubman and Carnegie 2003), whilst undertaking the social role of visitor.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I wish to explore the nature of this 'dream space' or to put it another way I want to analyze how the ownership of memories affects both curatorial decisions and visitor responses to the expression of those memories. In order to do this I will consider the complex process of selecting and interpreting local histories. What makes this process so complex is the need for museums to arrive at versions of the past and present which are acceptable to mixed audiences of tourists and locals and which, at the same time, meet the political agendas of local government and staff. Central to this debate is the social, ethical and political role and responsibilities of local government funded social history museums. I will approach these issues through one key case-study the People's Palace in Glasgow with other examples drawn from the People's Story in Edinburgh and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

I will begin by exploring community, visitor and tourist responses, and then consider the role of the *imagined* tourist's response. I speak of imagined response for two reasons: (i) because curatorial decisions require that assumptions be made about audience expectations, and the visitor's ability to deal with dark domestic histories (Lennon and Foley 2000) and (ii) there is the need of local communities to preserve dignity and pride when such histories can create a sense of shame or even denial. However, these institutions need to interpret the everyday lives of ordinary people in such a way that displays contains central, recognisable, emotional and generic truths (Clark 2003, Radstone 2003) without offending and alienating local audiences.

### The 'People's' story?

The People's Palace, the People's Story, Edinburgh and the People's History Museum Manchester all have 'people' in their names, a reference to their distinct intended role as custodians of the ordinary people's history. As local government institutions they create subjective publicly sanctioned versions of the past (Evans 1999), creating a disparate range of public representations (Radstone and Hodgkin 2003) which are interpreted for and on behalf of that public through personal stories, and where possible in people's own words. Individuals who participate in creating these histories whether as interviewees, as members of formal focus groups or through informal community consultation, often have mixed views about what stories are appropriate.

The People's Palace, in common with these other museums, seeks to highlight social issues within the displays, an approach that can offer an uncomfortable or even distressing visitor experience. The displays have been designed to provoke emotional responses. As individuals bring their own emotional responses to the displays, it is hard to predict how people will respond and indeed as reminiscence work has shown (Clark 2003, Crumley 2003), seemingly innocent objects and memories can provoke strong emotional responses in people for whom they act as memory triggers.

Shortly after the People's Palace opened new displays to commemorate its centenary year in 1998, a Museum Assistant informed us that a visitor was openly weeping on the gallery floor. When approached the visitor had admitted that he was moved to tears by the display *Mr and Missus*, and more specifically, by a passage quoted from a life history interview recorded with Mary, a battered wife. This quote, the man went on to say, could have been written by his mother.

I had 47 years in fear: I used to lie out in the stairs 'til he went to sleep before I

got in the window. My family used to ask why I stuck it, I stuck it for them. Nobody could take you in.

Mary, Life Review interview with E. (Carnegie, 1996).

The inclusion of this quotation within the displays had represented a compromise for staff and reflected some judicious pruning of the interview material to minimize the impact on visitors. The original and complete text, which was deemed suitable for publication in the woman's history book was developed from the material collected for displays (Clark and Carnegie 2003) was:

I had 47 years in fear. I used to lie out in the stairs 'til he went to sleep before I got in the window He wouldn't let you sleep. He used to come in at all hours in the morning and I always knew when he was coming in and I had to get his tea on and if he was drunk and you were dying to go back to sleep he wouldn't let you. He kept bashing you on the back of the head. If you had a headache it didn't make any difference to him. You still had to have intercourse. The only time that I had freedom from him was when he died in 1973 because I had to be in the house for him to get his dinner and you would have to have intercourse at odd times. ...I would bring his breakfast into his bedside and he would lift it up and throw it down the pan. My family used to ask why I stuck it, I stuck it for them. Nobody would take you in.

Mary, Life Review interview with E. Carnegie, 1996

During her interview Mary's hands played out the actions as she remembered her treatment by her husband in a loveless marriage. She said she had waited all this time to tell her story. It may well be that she had recounted her life story on previous occasions, but what she meant was that she had waited a long time for her story to be listened to by an official of local government, albeit a representative of that most respectable of organizations, a local government funded museum.

The priority for Mary, in providing the museum with a version of her history, was to focus on her dark memories which stretched back some 40 years.. Mary thought it was important that the dark histories of domestic strife be included within museum displays, and through her personal memories the museum was able to raise general issues about gender, power and the role of government institutions in challenging unacceptable behaviour in society.

We, as curators, were concerned that the inclusion of this material had triggered such a strong emotional response in the visitor, an expatriate Scot on a brief visit to the city. It can be argued that the museum, as a public space, is an inappropriate forum in which to release strong emotions. There is also the possible problem that people whose history and present existence is being reflected in displays might not be comfortable expressing their painful emotions about their lives in public. Despite these possible problems we were, however, pleased with visitor's reaction as he gave us an initial indication that the displays succeeded in emotionally engaging visitors and in creating a forum for them to personally explore their own responses and relationship to the material contained within the galleries.

What this display illustrates is that individuals like Mary, become conduits for a *public* view of *intimate* history (DuBois 2000). They become both exhibits and visitors and as such, they are subject to the impacts of their own histories as their accounts pass from the original contexts of interviews to those of the museum. This scenario can be illustrated using another example from the People's Palace.

On one occasion a woman and her thirteen-year-old daughter were walking round the museum, when they paused at one of the domestic life displays, *A Guid Night In*, which covered the subject of home-based leisure activities. Amongst the old draughts set and card games is a picture of an Ann Summers Party (selling sex toys and lingerie). The photograph featured a wife sporting a furry 'posing pouch' intended for her husband. Also appearing in the photograph as looking on, laughing and clapping was the woman who, as museum visitor, was now accompanied by her daughter. What was intended as an educational, and probably rare, family outing to a museum associated with the historic past, now threatened to undermine the moral authority of the mother in her relationship with her teenage daughter. She complained.

A year before this incident I had gone to 'collect' the party armed only with a camera and cheap wine. The party was held in a flat in Easterhouse, a post-war housing scheme in Glasgow, and was one of many being held in Glasgow in that period before such products were readily available in high street stores (Carnegie 1996). I left after an hour fearing that my presence would inhibit the scene. I was also an outsider and keen to keep my clothes on. This was not my first party. I had, however, left the camera behind for their use and, when the pictures were developed, we experienced our first ethical dilemma. Only the posing pouch image was useable in a 'family' museum but what should we do with the others and the negatives? How could we, as representatives of a government funded institution, ensure they could be kept safe from exposure, if indeed such items should be kept? In the end we sought and gained permission from all parties present to use the one image and we returned the other images and negatives to the party host.

In the meantime the mother visiting the museum with her daughter had experienced a 'forgetting' and had, it transpired, had a recent argument with the party host. Most crucially though, she felt the context for the image had changed, and the problem for her was its inappropriateness as an exhibit for *the* history museum in Glasgow, which was held in great affection by local audiences (including locals who were consciously non-users) to 'make a fool of people'.

Yet she had given her permission for the image to be used and as such the museum owned the image and had the right to use it as it saw fit. The question appears to be this: should this mean that permission is granted forever so that people do not have the right to have their history, past or present returned to them? Might we not, here, want to think of a right of return, of the right to return the public history to the private and hidden? In short, can the People not be allowed to change their minds? The image in question is still on display. Meanings, including our understandings of mediated memories, are dependent on their contexts. Museum collecting policies which govern matters of memory must respond to debates about whether memories can be collected in the same way as objects and can therefore be owned remains a subject for debate today.

At present the ways in which museums formally gain consent from informants gives rise to the danger that staff may expose people as individuals, or as is often feared, publicly sanction and reinforce cultural stereotypes. Thus, personal memories usually collected in the domestic context or in small focus groups are essentially intimate recollections which, when the context changes to the museum and display setting, are presented as public social documents. This can seem to be alarming for many participants in interviews.

There can also be issues with informed consent (Dyck 2000). Collecting memories from people at the margins of society may well seem to promote the aims of social inclusion but informants may not be fully aware of the consequence of their participation when the context is changed from the original interview situation. They may not even remember having given consent or remember what they said. A good empathetic interview is conducted like a conversation and the eventual output of the interview, the museum display, is not as yet a reality and people may say more than they intended or thought (Conroy-Baker 2000: 37). For example, a sex worker and drug user interviewed for the *2000 Glasgow Lives* readily gave her consent for her interview to be used. However, when she later came into the library that was hosting the display she was less happy to view her history which was now part of a computer interactive, available to everyone. She withdrew consent. In this case the museum withdrew her material. It is clearly easier to change a computer interactive than a fully developed display but this example also highlights how the curatorial decision making process will vary from person to person when and where there is no clear policy.<sup>3</sup>

Photographs, like memories are increasingly used to interpret displays and as such are also likely to be understood within the context in which they are being displayed. Such uses can, as with life-history material, also create ethical debates and dilemmas. In one case photographs selected randomly for the text panels of a touring exhibition, *From Here to Maternity* (a multi-cultural, interdisciplinary exhibition about pregnancy and childbirth) led to one image of a child being put on a panel dealing with child abuse through the ages. Her parents, who were devout Moslems, came to visit the exhibition, expecting to feel the pride of inclusion in Glasgow's present, and left feeling betrayed that their daughter had been associated with bad parenting

at a time and place which was not even a part of their history.

In that case the image was removed and another lesson learned. Contemporary images, like memories, change as the context changes and composite and created meanings can create unexpected tensions. The potential for incidents of this kind remain, when there is any attempt to construct displays, which aim to go beyond the image to suggest meanings, that will challenge, provoke and reflect and reject contemporary standards, attitudes and fashions. The case study examples outlined above deal with sex, violence and attitudes to race, subject areas, which require careful consideration and sensitive interpretation, and as such may always prove problematic. For some local audiences the admission of poverty or an acknowledgement of the existence of domestic violence or child abuse can also be hard for them to accept as a part of their public history.

Memories then within the museum context are used to 'create a unified story of who we are... not with one's current identity but (through) the generative process of sense making from which numerous possible life stories might arise' (Eisenberg cited in Arnould and Price 2000: 159). The People's stories are constructed to challenge and reform ideas about social stigma based on class and lifestyles. Stigma, which is according to Erving Goffman, an 'undesired differentness from what we had anticipated' (Goffman 1969: 15) must be directly confronted from both sides (Byrne 2000: 14). In relation to people's memories this suggests that individuals who know (or fear) themselves to be stigmatized by poverty, profession or abuse will be careful about how and what they say for fear of disclosure or exposure. Thus 'stigma management' has a direct impact on the memories which people consent to share and therefore on the shaping of displays.

### **The curator's story**

Social history is a relatively new museum discipline, dating back to the later half of the twentieth century (Merriman 1996). Such museum displays do of course reflect the practices of the staff that create them. It may be noted that staff are also affected by the material they work with, and while they will have been trained in collections care and management, they are often ill-equipped to deal with the impacts of dark histories on their own lives when witnessing their effects on others. Equally, as Roper (2003) and Dyak (2000) argue, museum staff need to accept that their own perspectives, attitudes and subjectivities will determine the content of community consultation and this is particularly true of the interview process. Social history curators are keen to push boundaries and not just in terms of what kinds of objects are collected, and displayed. They are concerned with how things are interpreted so that they can allow for an emotional engagement with human stories behind the ownership, use and symbolic meaning of the objects.

Inevitably, this approach means that staff are still taking decisions on behalf of the institution, on behalf of the visiting public (Pearce 1997). These decisions determine what is deemed appropriate to display, when and how and thus impressionistic histories and present contexts are created and recreated sometimes to carry moral messages and sometimes to challenge received wisdom about the nature of morality in society. Giving 'power to the people' does not mean relinquishing responsibility (or power) but providing a knowledgeable framework from which to develop social history in partnership with communities. Problems arise however when communities do not seem to prioritize the same issues, themes or concerns as curators and when decisions need to be taken which will also meet institutional requirements.

### **Which people, whose memories?**

For many museums oral history collecting is a key part of the community consultation process and allows participants to have a voice within displays rather than simply provide material to inform the development process. The People's Palace sought to collect memories reflecting the life experiences of ordinary men and woman but also elected to focus on certain individuals in the public eye whose lives had been formed and shaped by Glasgow. Local visitors are particularly concerned about which individual celebrities are chosen for inclusion in displays, as they seem to become ambassadors for the city. The opening quote which refers to the comedian



and actor Billy Connolly generates a mixed response from audiences. Likewise a display devoted to Glaswegian authors, which featured Jimmy Boyle, a convicted murderer who was successfully rehabilitated through Barlinnie Prison Special Unit evokes strong reactions. Local visitors to the display spat on the display case, and tore and eventually destroyed, the image and label. Gang warfare is an undeniable part of Glasgow's history, and indeed its notoriety, but locals felt that his inclusion as a writer and sculptor, rather than solely as a criminal in the *Crime and Punishment* displays, was to celebrate his past, rather than condemn it, and that was deemed an unacceptable way to represent a side of Glasgow to tourist audiences.

The inclusion of 'dark' memories or of those memories of individuals of whom the 'People' disapprove highlights the fact that even when censored, such displays inevitably carry the authoritative stamp of local, and in some cases national, government (Pearce 1997, Merriman 1991, O'Neill 2002). There is an added tension in the debate, in that the public face of local government organizations reflect the inner turmoil of large institutions in the throes of slow and painful change, facing not just changes in funding and increasing public accountability (Moore 1994), but changes in what is deemed to be the public role of museums (Sandell 2002). Curatorial staff adapting to new ways of working with the public might be struggling with feelings of powerlessness whilst at the same time being charged with the duty of empowering their communities (Gurian 1995).

### Constructing the People's stories

Within the modern social history museum visitors might be forced to view, for example the dark side of urban life, where once it would have been hidden. Individual memories, like individuality itself, need to be constructed within a social framework (Attfield 2000). In so far as they become museum memories they are able to promote, define and create ideas about the nature of community. Authenticity often matters less than perceived truths. Often 'memory has more to do with the "creation of meanings" than with what exactly happened in the past (Allesadro Portelli cited in Field 2006: 34). Field goes on, 'the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that "wrong statements are still psychologically "true" (Field 2005:34). In this way he also acknowledges that 'life stories are not necessarily incomplete, the sense of self not whole, unless completed through myth' (Field 2005: 39). People's Museums memories create and recreate a sense of 'pastness' through drawing on the hero myths and mythologies of place which single out those post-industrialized cultures from elsewhere. Museum memories can be used to project ideas about culture and identity and through that citizenship, promoting for example, notions of responsible behaviour within society (Ison 2002).

No matter the hand that writes the label, museums are not innocent or ideology free (Pearce 1995, Hooper-Greenhill 1997, Sandell 2002) and the argument would appear to be whether or not such agendas are acknowledged when they are implicit in the framework of the organization. It is true that they are sometimes acknowledged. For example, Mark O'Neill, Head of Glasgow Museums defends the decision to include domestic violence material in the refurbished Kelvingrove, Glasgow's flagship museum because:

It will recognise the actual life experience of a substantial percentage of women who have experienced domestic violence. Also one of the reasons that people do not feel welcome in museums is that they can seem to be for people who belong in wider society. People who have been victims of abuse often feel ashamed and that they do not belong. Acknowledging their experience in the museum may enable them to feel they belong in the museum, and it is easier for them to feel the museum belongs to them. (O'Neill 2002: 23)

These arguments are not limited to the interpretation of urban life. For example, O'Seaghdha considers the case of the Museum of Country Life in the Republic of Ireland and its inability to show that... 'folk did not live in the folk parks untouched by power, conflict and pain'. This, he goes on, '.... represents a failure of political and intellectual nerve as well as imagination' (O'Seaghdha 2002:19).

Clearly such displays involve or require memories of the 'discredited' or 'discreditable' stigmatized groups in an attempt to create dialogues but will also be hindered or helped by individual and community 'strategies for containment' (Field 2006:39). 'Dark' memories of

genocide, the Holocaust, or of disenfranchisement and dispossession have often recorded to ensure they are not lost. However can they also be used to heal? Is this indeed a role for museum mediated memories? Field argues that if oral history cannot heal, it can at least help, through enabling interviewees to achieve or rekindle a sense of self-composure (Field 2006: 39).

Creating a sense of ownership or belonging or at least inspiring empathy in locals and visitors is intrinsic to the ethos of the social history museum, and to a “warts and all” view of life. However, for O'Neill the need to interpret the dark side of human nature requires that we

...represent a less schizoid view of human beings, where the creation of beauty and the carrying out of evil deeds are not separated. If one of the purposes of museums is to explore how people across the world are different, and how we are the same, representing human destructiveness as experienced by audiences is a crucial part of the picture. (O'Neill 2002:23)

This creates a dilemma. Should museum staff overrule a desire on the part of public opinion for a 'clean' history so that themes of inequality can be represented? If so, how can they justify these decisions and assess visitor responses? In the case of the People's Palace, these decisions can best be understood by considering its history. In policy terms the People's Palace was an established museum which was opened as a multi-purpose community centre whose target audience was always the ordinary working class people of the East End of Glasgow. It became radicalized over time as the loss of the industrial base forced Glasgow to reappraise its position as the workshop of the world. It can be argued that this radical view of history, which provided the palace's remit from the 1970s onwards, was a form of revisionism which created links with the milestones of the working class movement and repositioned Glasgow as a radical city (for example, the Calton Weavers Martyrs, working class suffrage, Red Clydeside, the Upper Clyde Shipworkers Strike, the rent strike and so on).

However, this view of working class history, which is shared by the People's Museum Manchester and is also reflected in the collections of Edinburgh and Liverpool Museums can also be exclusionary, denying a forum for the largely non-radical lifestyle of the ordinary working class. Equally important for our understanding of the role of these museums is that they often strive to instil community feeling through suggesting uniqueness, just as communities are based on individuals acknowledging a shared experience, past, beliefs or cultural background (Samuel 1996, Thompson 2000), often choosing to define themselves as much by what they are as what they are not. Edinburgh and Glasgow, Scotland's two major cities are just an hour's drive from each other, and are sometimes represented as, or have chosen to be represented as, cultural opposites. Yet in terms of their working class histories, they both share the same social history and are affected by the same social issues. Glasgow has long suffered from its hard man media image, a legacy of its heavily industrialized past, and is today the poorest city in Britain despite its 1990s cultural renaissance (Carnegie *et al.* 1996). Edinburgh, Scotland's capital is the home of the International Festival, and yet has huge social problems borne of bad housing, poverty and unemployment.

The People's Palace and the People's Story both elected to go beyond collecting the material culture of the radical left excluded from mainstream museums, to include displays which reflect the daily lives of ordinary people (King 1985). They therefore collect the memories and the material evidence of domestic or working lives in order to represent the experience of ordinary life. Marriage is treated as a life experience, whether good or bad, a rite of passage as opposed to a mere day. Installations include display panels and other materials which highlight accidents at work and working conditions as well as celebrating the products of labour.

In the case of the dark side of domestic life, these displays do not reflect contested pasts (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003) as is often the case in, for example, interpretations of war (Evans 1997, Portelli 2003). Instead they represent an acknowledged part of everyday life, which individuals, and therefore communities, tacitly accepted was not open for discussion in a public arena (DuBois 2000, Trouillot 1996). They represent the secret histories of communities. Contemporary attitudes and audiences however allow for, or indeed can force, a reappraisal of silences. Dubois argues that '[t]oo often silence is taken for forgetting.... silences are produced

by highlighting the problems which the past poses for people in the present' (Dubois 2000:75) This means that existing collections are required to be re-examined so that modern audiences may find ways to express those silences. For example a key object in the People's Palace collection is the Saracen Head Punch Bowl from the 1760s. It was taken from the decorative arts context of eighteenth-century displays and put into a section on alcohol, known locally as *the Bevy* and the bowl's meaning is now drawn from its, and Glasgow people's, relationship to alcohol. A ceramic asthma inhaler was interpreted not as a sign of Glasgow's industrial past, but was shown as reflecting the continued existence of asthma in a city where in the mid 1990s, one third of the children in my son's South Side play group carried inhalers.

Sometimes this means (re)interpreting what is not there. The Glassford Family Portrait (1800) features a young black slave covered over in the nineteenth century when the current Glassford family grew ashamed of their connection to slavery. Likewise a silver collar in the Burrell collection was labelled 'Slave/dog collar?' and the history of the object as a museum object needed to be explored to understand that object in the past and present. The display of these objects represent or reinforce the view that it is the role of the museum to reinterpret that past so that Glasgow is able to admit what that image reflects; that eighteenth-century merchants made much of their wealth on the back of the slave trade and a fast route to America.

This re-reading of objects or retelling of stories in the present does not ensure that silences are forever broken. As Field argues in regard to the District Six Museum in Cape Town

'All remembering and transmission of memories are selective which means that 'regeneration' will leave new silences and issues to be confronted in the future. There is neither healing nor redemption in regeneration, only possibilities for improved living' (Field 2006: 41)

As Field reminds us social history displays are also a product of their time and context and meanings are fixed only in the present moment although museum displays tend to be more fixed in time than other media as will be discussed below.

### Consuming the People's stories

Museum displays differ from other mediums such as television, or newspapers in that they are rarely able to be time sensitive and are slow to respond to change. Static displays such as those in the People's Palace can last upwards of 15 years and may be viewed in that time by millions of visitors, many of them brought there by locals, and many of those visitors represent new generations of expatriate Scots seeking visual evidence of their own family history. Their memories will have been shaped by previous generations, other media such as television, family albums and their own imaginations (Crumley 2002). These memories may be good and bad, and accordingly, visitors will expect these memories to be reflected in displays.

If audiences, and especially local audiences, are to feel a sense of ownership of the cultural histories and ideologies contained within displays they need to agree that what they are experiencing is a reflection and version of events they feel is true for them. It is sometimes assumed that in determining the contents of displays museums curators and staff are fearful of the loss of power that consultation brings. Susie Fisher, spokesperson for the Association of Qualified research, maintains that:

Visitor research can stir real terrors amongst the powers that be: "Will I be forced to change?" "Will I be criticised in the eyes of my peers?" .... Visitor research has come to be associated with judgment - success or failure, praise or blame. Think of it like this: you want to communicate the stories that give your collections meaning. To do so successfully you will need to understand your visitor's agenda and what kind of ideas connect with them. You will want to respect that agenda. (Fisher 2002)

This approach to inclusiveness through consultation takes no account of O'Neill's conviction that we can only bring about changes in society when we are able to view ourselves as products of our cultural influences so that we are able to embrace the good and bad to understand the whole. Equally, whilst many museums are working to combat social inclusion through creating



exhibitions and events with for example, those groups most excluded from society, drug users, abusers, and the homeless (Sandell 2002; Newman 2003) these in the main remain outwith the mainstream for the reasons O'Neill outlined.

Community consultation in social/local history museums is inevitably concerned with gleaning individual group or 'folk' memories in order to build up a composite picture of how the past was experienced. Individuals who agree to be involved in the evaluation of potential themes on behalf of communities are quick to recognize their role as community ambassadors, and readily self-censure when acting on behalf of them. 'Oh, but it wasn't all bad' becomes the standard *individual* response to the fear of group whinging, as much as it reflects a central truth.

Where public opinion is more conservative than that of the curators, as we found with current displays in both the People's Story and the People's Palace, a compromise can be hard to reach. Museum staff (who are, of course, a voice of local government) may be keen to raise issues and to change things. Or, sometimes they may be inclined to challenge the role of government funded institutions, which they believe are well placed to act as agents for social change. Do staff acting as the voice of local government, overrule that of the community, for the common good (Clark 2003) and, if so, is community consultation and audience development only worth undertaking as Fisher (2002) implies, if the organization is going to genuinely listen and respond to audiences?

Some 200 oral history interviews formed the basis of the community consultation in Glasgow and the material on domestic violence, poverty, incest and health and hygiene informed the displays. Quotes from existing publications were used as a last resort to illustrate, for example, gay and lesbian histories where we failed to find any couples willing to be profiled. In this way many of the difficult subjects were introduced in the form of local people's own words although the texts were obviously subject to an editorial process.

At the People's Story Edinburgh, staff worked closely with reminiscence groups, the Workers' Education Authority and the Living Memory Association, to build up an archive of memories that would humanize displays. Focus groups met once a week and objects were used as memory prompts and each week they discussed a different theme and the sessions were recorded. These sessions were then fully transcribed and given back to each individual for comment and approval (Clark 1991). Certain individuals were profiled and modelled for exhibit as three-dimensional representational figures. This 'living memory' approach ensured goodwill from a loyal group of individuals who then ceased to be critical about the displays content.

Consultation can be used to determine the themes that local would like to see, or would like visitors to see depicted in displays, although these will vary according to the age and gender of those people interviewed. The majority of people involved in the People's Story process were elderly women and inevitably, their memories reflected a view of life, and attitudes towards the domestic arena, which would not be shared by younger women.

Themes selected can be at odds with collections or the importance of such events in the history of the area. Potential visitors to the People's Palace all wanted to see displays about World War II, despite the fact that Glasgow had not experienced the extreme ravages of war, which had rocked Clydebanks. But the Second World War remained a key moment in living memory, (and one which allowed for a united and heightened sense of community) and as such could not be denied, and displays were developed accordingly. The 1999 visitor survey conducted at the Palace during the winter months found that the 25% considered that the war section contained their favourite displays. The most popular display and the one for which audiences voted to keep from the previous displays, mentioned by 39% of this sample, was the Single End, a reconstruction of a one-roomed flat, which uses a ten minute radio play and sounds and lights to create a form of object theatre. The play features an old man reflecting on his memories of growing up in a single end, a house that had been 'teeming with life', and charts key moments of his life through childhood, birth of siblings, unemployment, alcoholic neighbours and child death. Although too ornate and *empty* to be realistic, it was designed so that visitors might people it physically, as well as emotionally with their memories. As one visitor put it:

There are two memories I think about in the single end. The time when a neighbour's little girl died and they laid her out on the kitchen table, and

Hogmanay celebrations, when the boats all sounded their horns at midnight.

(Anne, Visitor to People's Palace, 2003)

Anne's two thoughts reflect one sad and one possibly bittersweet memory, as Hogmanay has a particular relevance and resonance for Scottish audiences. In fact, I consciously wrote the Hogmanay part in towards the end of the piece, as I realized we needed a 'but it wasn't a' bad moment. Inevitably there are tensions between curatorial desires and community consultation. Memories are being used to interpret displays, and in some cases to shape them, but curators are also concerned with creating displays which realistically depict history. In the cases outlined above we were able to respond to community wishes. However, the more elderly visitors who were consulted were less keen on seeing displays about alcohol which they felt would let 'Glasgow down'. Yet, we felt that alcohol abuse was seen as central to many of the social and health issues past and present and we went ahead with the displays on that basis. Few of the visitors surveyed in 1999 acknowledged a least favourite display, but of those who responded, 8% (highest figure) most disliked the alcohol abuse section.

It appears then, that in some cases the organization will be influenced by and respond to community feelings, whilst it also reserves the right to take decisions on behalf of those communities and is then dependent on a 'suck it and see principle'. How will the visitors respond? In the People's Palace, as the Jimmy Boyle case study illustrates, unhappy visitors sometimes spit on displays as they often did with a previous display of Catholic and Protestant material. Visitors also laugh out loud at the Glasgow Patter. Spitting, laughter and tears are considered legitimate responses, but their observation is dependant on watching the public in an almost voyeuristic way to determine individual responses, and in most cases the museum is reliant on comment cards to gauge visitor opinion. These museums, then, are the product of community consultation and political, managerial and curatorial decision making and the question remains: do they effectively raise social issues and if so do tourist audiences understand or seek these 'messages' from a museum visit? In 2002, Yi Yhang, working closely with Helen Clark, Keeper of Social History at the People's Story set out to evaluate visitor's responses in order to see whether the museum's approach worked.

The aim of the survey was to sample visitors to get some understanding of who those visitors were and why they visited the museum, and to examine their attitudes and emotional responses to the displays. Visitors were asked if they understood the social role of the museum and requested to rate their responses to the following statements.

I want to know about how people really lived.

I want to know about the lives of women in the past

I want to see poverty

I want to see homelessness

I want to see unemployment

I want to see accidents at work

I want to see ill health

I want to see poor housing conditions

I want to see displays that make me unhappy or sad

The survey took place in late June, and the majority of visitors were tourists. The sample size of 147, with 54% female respondents and 46% male, reflects what is known about museum

audiences that they represent safe spaces for women to go alone or take children and so women make up a slight majority of visitors (Carnegie 1996). The 1999 People's Palace survey cited 55% female and 45% male.<sup>4</sup>

Although the small number sampled at the People's Story reflected a slow start to the season as a likely impact of recent global events, the sample included representatives from every continent. As was expected, the average age of group was over 35 with 96% of the group claiming they were very satisfied or satisfied, and 65% also saying they visited the museum to understand about the past, with 65% agreeing that the thing they liked best about the museum was the 'true story'.

The emotional response statements elicited a similar positive response although the older the visitor, the more comfortable they seemed to be viewing displays pertaining to accidents at work, or in the most general terms were prepared to view displays that made them feel unhappy or sad. The survey results were almost 'too good'. For Clark (2003) they represented proof, that on that day at least, visitors were seeking 'truth' regardless of whether that truth had the power to hurt or at least move them. They were not there to judge or to question whether this version of history was true for them, nor in this case, given the large percentage of non-locals, were they necessarily viewing their own history. Respondents seemed to believe that the museum told the 'true' story of the working class people of Edinburgh and, as such, offered a view of Edinburgh not readily available elsewhere.

The People's Palace versions of the truth and visions of the city of Glasgow offer a more brutal view, a consequence of the greater scale of Glasgow and the personalities of the staff and management producing displays, and it would be interesting to see whether a similar survey in Glasgow produced similar results. What the visitor comments seem to suggest is that sophisticated modern audiences are able to accept versions of the harsh realities of life within cultural institutions, either as revealed histories or present day attempts at exposing the excesses and inequities of modern life.

Such surveys, and indeed exit questionnaires, only reach those people who are already in the museum and this is acknowledged by the number of organizations actively targeting non users, or in the work of outreach services (Newman 2002, Sandell 2002) which take exhibitions out of the museum and into community and shopping centres or local libraries. However despite attempts by both these museums to be about, and largely for, local audiences, or to reflect local lives to tourists, the typical visitor is not necessarily someone whose life in the present is being represented. In terms of 'socio-economic groupings' The People's Palace survey found that 79% of visitors were ABC1s despite the museum's being situated in the East End a profile not dissimilar to that of the National Portrait Gallery (Hargreaves 1997).

Given the nature of displays and the intended audience, these are the *wrong kind of visitors*. But does the nature of the displays actually determine who visits, or is there a typical museum visitor? Visitors to both museums seem to suggest they are visited by the museum visiting classes, educated liberals responding to the history of the other. As the definition of dark tourism is limited to those events within living memory (Lennon and Foley 2000) such visitors may well be actively seeking out 'dark' experiences.

Might a construction of the past and present of the higher socio-economic classes, which considered them victims of centuries of tragically, misguided capitalist views and visions be an acceptable reading for them? If not, is it any wonder that communities seek to protect themselves through trying to influence displays through the use of selective memory, or by actively not visiting? Is the social history museum in danger of replacing the monuments to the Empire through eroticizing and exoticising the working classes under the guise of empowerment?

### Conclusion: power to the People?

In conclusion, the 'dream space' of the museum reflects the social, cultural and political values of the institution, staff and community advocates, whilst aiming to either reflect the perceived needs of the imagined visitor or to reform their opinions. The impacts of the displays will depend on the relationship of the visitor to the issues being interpreted.

At best this is a compromise between ideologies, as museum displays, and specifically the current permanent displays in the People's Palace and the People's Story, reflect the

tensions that exist internally between staff and their relationship with the value-laden institution; and externally between staff and audiences. Tensions also arise between curatorial staff and support staff (who are invariably drawn from local communities and the first point of contact for visitors); staff (who as representatives of institutions represent authority and for some power), and community advocates (who represent lived experience and can become guardians of community history and silences); and between the expectations of local and tourist audiences.

As has been explored in this article, local audiences may actively seek to protect their communities through participating in the curatorial process, by withholding participation, or by offering censored and selective views of their history or present. Others may use the forum of the museum as a way of exposing or exploring personal pain or political ideals. Staff are not impartial conduits of history or cultures and curators of the People's Palace have sought to develop displays, (and indeed conference papers and articles), that explore their personal life experiences or political commitments. As I have outlined here, the urge to explore issues felt at a personal or political level can result in staff pushing against the boundaries of the institution, leaving certain audiences uneasy and exposed and alienating some potential audiences.

Local government museum collections will be reappraised or suppressed, and visions and versions of history highlighted, to meet the social, political and moral agendas of the times. The imagined visitor is fashioned to meet this political agenda and as such she/he becomes the benchmark for what is deemed appropriate to display. The visitor surveys outlined above suggest that the likely *actual* visitor is a tourist, and evidence of visitors surveys suggest that many are what I might deem '*class tourists*', people who are either interested in the history of the other, or else have come from the background or similar background to that being interpreted, and who have left it behind, through for example education or emigration. Such a visitor is searching for proof of their own, their parents' or their grandparents' past in the form of historical truths. That truth is subjectively constructed serves only to further muddy the waters.

The complex structure of the social history museum with its relationship to the history and ideology of museums, and with local government policy, and the dictates of national government, confirms that power is also a construct and that staff reflect those values more than they shape them. Contemporary curatorial practice aims to include audiences in various ways and stages of the development, interpretation and often management of the displays, but as in the case study examples outlined above, whilst their opinions will be heard and their memories recorded, even within the people's museums, decisions will be taken which ultimately reflect the institution.

Received 26 September 2005

Finally Accepted 2 May 2006

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article also presupposes that the term tourist is being applied to visitors who do not directly live within the community being interpreted but acknowledges that locals become tourist/visitors when re-visiting their own memories when they become part of the public history of displays.
- <sup>2</sup> I was part of the curatorial team at the People's Palace from 1991-8.
- <sup>3</sup> At the time of writing The Oral History Society is working towards a new set of copyright and ethics guidelines to cover socially sensitive material which it is hoped will inform practise in museums and archives.
- <sup>4</sup> Interestingly the National Portrait Gallery, London visitor survey conducted by the National Audit Office 1993 (Hargreaves 1997) also found 54% of their visitors were female with 29% over 55 years old.

## References

- Attfield, J. (2000) *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*, London: Berg.
- Byrne, A. (2000) 'Singular Identities: Managing Stigma, Resisting Voices' in *Women's Studies Review: Oral History and Biography*, 7, 13-34.
- Carnegie, E. (1996) 'Trying to Be an Honest Woman', in Kavanagh, G. (ed) *Making Histories in Museums*, 54-65, London: Leicester University Press.
- Carnegie, E., H. Dunlop, Jeffrey, S. and M.O'Neill (1998), *The People's Palace Book of Glasgow*, Edinburgh: Mainstream.
- Clark, H. and E. Carnegie (2003) '*She Was Aye Workin': Memories of Women in the Tenements of Edinburgh and Glasgow*', Oxford: White Cockade.
- Conroy-Baker, T. (2000) 'Oral Research in Ballyconneely', in *Women's Studies Review: Oral History and Biography*, 7, 35-52.
- Crumley, C. (2002) Exploring Venues of Social Memory in Climo, J. J. and M. G. Cattell (eds) *Social Memory and History*, New York : Altamira Press.
- DuBois L. (2000) 'Memories Out of Place: Dissonance and Silence in Historical Accounts of Working Class Argentines', *Oral History*, 28 (1).
- Dyck, I. (2000) 'Putting Ethical Research into Practice: Issues of Consent', *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 3 (1) 61-102.
- Evans, M. (1997) *The Memory of Resistance*, Oxford: Berg.
- Field, S. (2006) 'Beyond "Healing": Trauma, Oral History and Regeneration', *Oral History* 34 (1) 31-42.
- Fisher, S. (2002) 'Objects are Not Enough', *Museums Journal*, 31-35, June.
- Goffman, E. (1968) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Gurian, E. (ed) (1995) *Institutional trauma: Major Change in Museums and Its Effect on Staff*, Washington D.C: American Association of Museums.
- Heywood, F. (2003) 'Bittersweet Memory', *Museums Journal*, October.
- Hodgkin, K. and S. Radstone (2003) *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, London: Routledge.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. (ed.) (1997) *Cultural Diversity: Developing Museum Audiences in Britain*, London: Leicester University Press.
- Ison, M. (2002) 'The Trials of Life', *Museums Journal*, 26-27, March.
- Hargreaves, R. (1997) 'Developing New Audiences', in Hooper-Greenhill, E (ed.) (1997), *Cultural Diversity: Developing Museum Audiences in Britain*, London: Leicester University Press.



Hollway W. and T. Jefferson, 'Biography, Anxiety and the Experience of Locality', in Chamberlayne, P., J. Bornat and T. Wengraf, (eds) (2000) *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science*, London : Routledge.

Kavanagh, G. and G. Frostick, (eds) (1998) *Making City Histories in Museums*, London: University Press.

Kavanagh, G. (2000) *Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum*, London: Leicester University Press.

King, E. (1985) 'The Cream of the Dross: Collecting Glasgow's Present for the Future', *Social History Curator's Group Journal* 13, 4-11.

Lennon, J. and M. Foley, (2000) *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, London: Continuum.

Merriman, N. (1991) *Beyond the Glass Case. The Past, the Heritage and the Public in Britain*, London: Leicester University Press.

Moore, K. (1994) *Museums Management*, London: Leicester University Press.

Newman, A. (2002) 'Feelgood Factor', *Museums Journal*, March.

O'Neill, M. (2002) 'Beauty and the Beast', *Museums Journal*, 21-23, September.

O' Seaghdha, B. (2002) 'Real Estate', *Museums Journal*, 19, March.

Pearce, S. (1995) *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, London: Routledge.

Pearce, S. (1997) 'Making Other People' in E. Hooper-Greenhill (ed.) *Cultural Diversity: Developing Museum Audiences in Britain*, 15-31, London: Leicester University Press.

Portelli, A. (1991) *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, Albany NY: State University of New York Press.

Portelli, A. (2003) 'The Massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine: History, Myth, Ritual and Symbol' in Hodgkin, K and S. Radstone (eds), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, 29-41, London: Routledge.

Radstone, S. and K. Hodgkin (2003) *Regimes of Memory*, London: Routledge.

Arnould, E. J. and L. L. Price, (2000) 'Authenticating Acts and Authoritative Performances', in Ratneshwar, S. D. Mick and C. Huffman (eds) *The Why of Consumption*, 141-163, London: Routledge.

Roper M. (2003) 'Analysing the Analysed: Transference and Counter-Transference in the Oral History Encounter', *Oral History* 31 (2), 20-32,

Samuel, R. (1981) *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London: Routledge.

Samuel, R. (1996) *Theatres of Memory, Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, London: Verso Books.

Sandell, R. (ed.) (2002) *Museums, Society, Inequality*, London: Routledge.

Taubman, A. and E. Carnegie (2003) 'Lest we forget....' *Museums Journal*, 25-30, September.

Thompson, P. (2000) *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, London: Oxford University Press.

Trouillot, M. (1996) *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Boston: Beacon Press.

### Interviews

Extracts from Mary B (1996)

Helen Clark, then Keeper of Social History, Edinburgh City Museums (2003)

**\*Elizabeth Carnegie** lectures in arts and heritage management at the University of Sheffield. She was a curator of history with Glasgow Museums from 1991-98 participating in a number of high profile and award winning projects including setting up the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art (1993) and redisplaying the People's Palace in 1998. She is a committee member of the Oral History Society and research areas include museum audiences and public memory, community interpretation and cultural identity.

#### Address

Management School,  
University of Sheffield,  
9 Mappin Street,  
Sheffield, S1 4DT, UK.

Tel: 01142631942

email. e.carnegie@sheffield.ac.uk