

*Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor;
it must be demanded by the oppressed.*

Martin Luther King, 1963

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How Do Museums Relate to Communities, Culture¹ and the Public?

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Does Hong Kong still need museums?

For the city, a new era for museums is approaching...

Since 2015, the “Hong Kong Museum of History” has launched consultations about content updates for its permanent exhibition “The Hong Kong Story,” seeking views from stakeholders, including youth groups, the education sector, and groups for the disabled.

In March 2018, The West Kowloon Cultural District Authority announced the formation of a Board for the newly established “Hong Kong Palace Museum Ltd.” It will be responsible for formulating the vision and mission, and curatorial and operational strategies for the Hong Kong Palace Museum.

In 2019, the “Hong Kong Museum of Art” will be reopening to share local experiences through art.

1 Generally speaking, “culture” refers to a cumulative deposit of collective life experiences. It includes many realms of knowledge such as history, science, art, as well as emotional expressions, social norms of interpersonal relationships, and approaches towards material enjoyment. Cultural studies scholar, Terry Eagleton once pointed out that culture has a dual perspective – as a phenomenon of human development, and as a self-reflective mechanism driving changes towards a better future (2000: 28-31, 130-132). The notion of culture not only means different aspects of knowledge, but also the ideas facilitating social practices and actions. The term is used here to define the purpose of museums – systematically reflecting on the past and articulating present discourses of cultures, so as to motivate social transformation.

Plate 1

“Wall of Freedom” in The International Slavery Museum, Liverpool.

And soon afterwards, the “M+ Museum for Visual Culture” will be opening. It will be examining visual culture of the 20th and 21st centuries from an interdisciplinary perspectives with reflections on the here and now.

In the coming decade, both newly built and long-established museums will endeavor to widen the public’s imagination about art and culture through exhibitions, educational activities, and publications. The people of Hong Kong will likely welcome these new developments of local museums. According to official statistics, the number of visitors to public museums gradually increased from 3.4 million in 2000, to 4.35 million in 2006 and to 6.13 million in 2013. Most museum visitors have responded positively to the experience and services (Audit Commission 2006: 15, Committee on Museums 2007: 14, The Legislative Council 2017: 4).

The development of new strategies and increasing visitor statistics is suggesting a bright future, despite the research reports suggested otherwise – that museum activities and exhibitions have failed to connect with the public, and are unable to display the full potential of art and culture (Commission on Museums 2007, Our Hong Kong Foundation 2016). In fact, the number of visitors is less than a reliable measurement for a museum’s effectiveness. Generally, scholars have criticized the use of statistics for understanding museum programs, which tend to ignore the multiple dimensions of visitor experiences and the underlying value of museum activities. Moreover, an over-emphasis of numbers would tend to distract the institutions from their missions and visions (Selwood 2002, Jowell 2004, Holden 2004).² Based on interviews with museum visitors, more than half of the interviewees were satisfied about their visiting experience, because they could walk freely through spacious venues (Ting and Watts 2014). One interviewee explicitly explained, “It’s a nice place with a lot to see at a low entrance fee. It’s much better than many shopping malls” (Visitor interview, January 9, 2013). For visitors who equate a museum to a shopping mall, the vision and mission of a cultural institution may be of little importance. The experiences of visitors are likely shaped by their immediate perceptions. Furthermore, the mass media mostly associates creativity with personal feelings, and pays little attention to the cultural contexts or artistic language. Culture has been turned into a trendy consumable for young people instead of a topic for critical discussion and reflection. For the people of Hong Kong, museums have always been a minor point of interest. The Facebook page “Visit HK Museums,” features 10

2 In searching for a reasonable measurement of the value of museums, Carol Scott, the former president of Museums Australia, examined various aspects of “values” in detail. These included: 1) organizational values embodied by how museums, through exhibitions and activities, promote a better understanding of arts and culture and engage audiences into critical discussions and debates; 2) practical values of activities that are shaped by how museum programs and activities foster the intellectual capacity of individuals, connect people, and build social capital to generate revenues in cultural tourism; and 3) intrinsic values in arts and culture that highlight experiences, inspirations, and reflections that visitors would obtain through museum works, which in turn, bridge individuals to local culture and be further involved in cultural practices (2006).

local museums, but only 50,000 followers, and the Hong Kong Museum of History has only around 1,000. The chief curator of the Hong Kong Museum of Art once spoke in an interview about future developments and trends for the Museum and said that some members of the public had never heard of the Museum, demonstrating the distance between the cultural institution and the public (Ng Sai-ling 2016).

More discussions on museums would seem to promote a better understanding of what cultural institutions mean to society, and encourage meaningful interactions between communities and the profession, while considering what type of museums are needed in the city. In the following discussion, two museum projects are introduced to consider how museums produce knowledge and engage the community with culture, for the purpose of improving the quality of living. The case studies do not propose what museums should do and how they should do it. Instead, the aim is to open up new possibilities for how the institutions can respond to contemporary social needs. Museums are argued to be cultural mechanisms “transplanted” from Europe, the close imitation of which neither helps their establishment in Hong Kong nor builds bridges to local communities.

How do museums share knowledge?

Museums have always been regarded as temples for knowledge, enlightening the public through collection, research, and exhibition. By adopting specific academic frameworks (such as anthropology, archaeology, or art history, etc.), museums work to categorize objects according to the year of manufacture, areas of distribution, and physical characteristics. A comprehensive categorization of the knowledge system helps in clarifying how human civilizations have evolved (Pearce 1992: 99-101). “The British Museum,” established in 1753, embodies the ambitious attempt to construct knowledge through its collections and to reshape peoples’ understanding of the world (Wilson 2002: 56-57). Around 1756, Gowin Knight, the first curator of the Museum clearly stated that discovering new knowledge was a key driving force for societal improvements.

As the principal view and intention in founding the British Museum was to encourage [sic] and facilitate the Studies and Researches of learned Men from whose labor and application under such advantages as greater progress in the several branches of useful knowledge may be expected and thereby the good of the public and the honor of the nation very much promoted... (Quoted from Cash 2002: 29).

Inheriting the Enlightenment principle of universal order and reasoning, the British Museum presents an encyclopedic view of human civilizations by turning multi-faceted phenomena of culture into systematic representations of peoples’ experiences. Through classification and ordering (in an attempt to represent the same division of the world), the Museum recontextualized objects from their original

social network and examined their functions and cultural significance according to different academic frameworks. New knowledge was thereby constructed. Informed by the Museum exhibits, visitors learnt about typological sequences of objects in reflecting on the grand narrative of cultural development and one's position in the world. What remained interesting was the fact that the British Museum, the self-proclaimed "World Museum," only started to devote resources to collecting British and European artifacts after 1851. Historian Craig Clunas argued that The British Museum could never be restricted to British things, for to do so would set a limit to the reach of British power, as well as to the gaze of the all-comprehending and autonomous subject (1998: 43). Knowledge is power. The collecting policy clearly states that knowledge holds the authority, not only for articulating the progress of human civilizations, but also for evaluating what was deemed significant in the human world. At the peak of the British colonial power during the 18th and 19th centuries, acquiring knowledge of different cultures was not just an academic pursuit, but also helped to devise practical governing proposals for different ethnicities and communities. Visiting museums therefore offered opportunities for having a glimpse of world civilizations, offering a satisfaction in terms of intellectual fulfillment and contributing to the national pride for the Empire.

During the 20th and 21st centuries, more and more colonies were striving for their independence around the world. The British Museum has been repeatedly accused of keeping a collection that embodied the cruelty and injustice of imperial invasions. For instance, from 1801 to 1805, Thomas Bruce, the ambassador of the British Consulate in Greece and the 7th Earl of Elgin, cunningly acquired inscriptions and sculptures in Parthenon after dubiously claiming that prior approval had been granted by the Ottoman Empire (Jenkins 2008: 209-210). In 1897, when the Benin Empire (today, the southern part of Nigeria) was occupied by Britain due to trade conflicts, more than 3,000 pieces of bronzeware were robbed from the palace and turned over to the British Museum (Jenkins 2008: 138-142). In recent decades, the Museum has been struggling to deal with the stolen artifacts from its colonial past and has reluctantly responded to the growing demand for repatriation.

Looking at the colonial history, scholars have criticized museums for constructing seemingly objective narratives of knowledge to promote a sense of cultural superiority and for imposing a static judgment over other cultures (Simpson 2001, Duthie 2011). Since the 1990s, new museology has expanded the professional scope from preserving and researching museum collections to, more importantly, engaging communities and encouraging multiple narratives about collections in response to the changing contemporary society (Stam 1993, Witcomb 2003). In 2006, the International Council of Museums advocated:

Museum usage of collections from contemporary communities requires respect for human dignity and the traditions and cultures that use such material. Such collections should be used to promote human well-being, social development, tolerance, and respect by advocating multisocial, multicultural and multilingual expression (2006: 6.7).

For centuries, objects have been made to satisfy the needs, desires, and tastes of people. Objects have highlighted craftsmanship, living experiences, and historical contexts of their host cultures. Based on multiple narratives about their collections, museums serve communities by reflecting on how the past informs our present, and how individuals connect with the wider world. While a collection may be isolated from daily life experiences, museums have a duty to explore its contemporary relevance, to foster dialogs between objects and their visitors, while reflecting on our condition of being. Following this line of thinking, the British Museum, housing a collection of more than eight million objects from across the world, is bound to answer the following questions: Whose stories of civilization do the objects tell? How does the knowledge relate to our contemporary world? What inspiration can visitors draw from them?

In 2004, Neil MacGregor, then Director of the British Museum, expressed his view on the Museum's purpose in a newspaper article. He considered the black-or-white judgment and oversimplified notion of identity imposed on communities as a cause of the conflicts, oppressions and injustices of the world. In response to the chaotic global order, he suggested to shift away from the clashes and come to the common grounds among civilizations; that is, how communities exchange goods and ideas, how they learn from others, and how they come to peaceful terms together. The British Museum offers to its audiences a way of looking at objects and comparing them across different regions, social structures, and cultural networks in the context of global cultures. Breaking away from daily routines and conventions, visitors are invited to examine what happens around the world and embrace the diversity in human experiences (MacGregor 2004). MacGregor's argument clearly states that knowledge articulated in museums is neither esoteric information nor universal truth. It is a complex, multi-vocal narrative that revolves around time, people, and places. Museums, like other public institutions, should pursue academic excellence to define humanities and facilitate discussions on the future of civilizations. In 2010, the "A History of the World in 100 Objects" project developed by MacGregor helped to elaborate on how the British Museum produced knowledge and shared it with the wider public.³

Working with more than 100 curatorial colleagues and 400 scholars in various academic fields, MacGregor developed a list of 100 objects in reviewing the two-million-year evolution of human civilizations. The objects were arranged chronologically based on themes like "authority and philosophy," "rituals and religions" and "trade and invasion" in considering how humans have defined who they are and developed civilizations. Each object told a story. Some revealed how people had struggled to survive and co-exist, enjoyed living and searched for the meaning of life, while others

³ This project was originally a collaboration between the British Museum and the British Broadcasting Company. With its popularity, MacGregor gathered the content into a book. The museum also launched a corresponding educational website (<http://www.teachinghistory100.org/>) and developed an exhibition tour around Japan, United Arab Emirates, Australia, and China, etc. Since the project has evolved from a radio program to books and exhibitions, the list of objects varies accordingly to different deliverables. The discussion here is based on the content of the radio program.

traced the routes for technology and cultural exchanges and revealed how people explored the natural environment and made contact with other communities. For instance, the Olduvai handaxe suggested that *Homo sapiens* – regardless of race or ethnicity – had their origin on the African continent (MacGregor 2010a). In 263 B.C., Ashoka, the Indian Emperor who had political control over the Indian subcontinent, erected columns through the land that were not for magnifying imperial glory, but for advocating tolerance and respect for different religions (MacGregor 2010b). Saint Hedwig wine glass, excavated from Syria, explained how the medieval church encouraged women's participation in charity work, and its circulation trajectory also helped to pinpoint the trade routes paved by the Crusaders (MacGregor 2010c). With objects from diverse origins and times, the Museum not only examines their cultural contexts and historical significances, but traces their social biographies and trajectories throughout history. This research approach outlines the multi-layered phenomenon where civilizations at times interact and compete, at times interact and blend with one another.

In exploring the diversity of human experiences – the royals and peasants alike – around the world, this project includes masterpieces of the arts and mass-produced industrial products. A solar-powered lamp and charger manufactured in Shenzhen is the 100th object on the list. MacGregor pointed out that 1.6 billion households were currently without electricity supply. The low-priced lamp has allowed many to convert sunlight into electric energy for powering home appliances like ovens, electric water pumps, lights, television and computers, to meet their basic needs. Convenient and environmentally-friendly, this technical product has entirely changed peoples' ways of life. Solar energy supplies electricity for the whole community, which in practice, means providing children with extra time to study at night, facilitating women's communications with the outside world through the Internet, and further establishing business networks (MacGregor 2010d). From Inca gold llama to Australian bark shield, and from Hebrew astrolabe to HSBC credit card, this project is concluded with a solar-power facility to demonstrate how humans have successfully overcome difficulties and challenges. Audiences are motivated to look for hope in a world plagued by incessant conflicts and injustice.

By examining the biographies of objects across time and place, the Museum invites audiences to look at the materials, functions, production skills, and technology to discuss how different civilizations have assigned values and meanings to objects. The knowledge is constructed in an attempt to see our life experiences from a macro-history perspective, and to understand the joy, fear, desires, and perseverance we have in common with everything else that make us human. Audiences can reflect on how we live as humans, and carry on writing the story of humanity. In other words, knowledge is neither plain description of historical facts, nor information free from disputes; but rather, it is a concise interpretation of arguments and ideas that change across time and space. Museums, all in all, have their purpose in facilitating a public understanding of the past and present, and provoking diverse ideas from their provision of knowledge. It is their fluidity that encourages public to critically engage into the discussions. Museums, as public platforms, encourage critical engagement in discussions to help reflect on what we hold on to and how we move forward.

Considering this project in the context of new museological thinking, “A History of the World in 100 Objects” is a reflection of the British Museum’s research into its collection and how it benefits the contemporary society. It aims at creating knowledge that goes beyond the boundaries around ethnicity, nations, and life experiences, engaging the audience into a discussion of our shared destiny. By evaluating the choices made by past civilizations, this project demonstrates how museum projects can connect the past with the present and articulate the cultural discourses to embrace in the future. Knowledge-based projects are by no means dull or irrelevant to the contemporary world. Museums, as institutions of art, history, or science, should not limit their programs to a single art historical, archaeological or anthropological academic framework. As knowledge production centers, the institutions should offer multiple perspectives and interdisciplinary viewpoints to address contemporary issues. The key lies in whether or not the Museum thoroughly understands the value and meaning of its collection.

In considering the local development of culture, how do museums in Hong Kong reflect on their cultural position, and comprehend the “east meets west” narrative? Is it only a superficial cliché or a critical discourse that bridges the static boundaries between different cultural identities? There has been the times when people from around the world, be they Chinese, Scots, Portuguese, Parsis, Jews, or Nepalese, set foot in the city (Ting. S. 2014). The question to be answered is how museums portray their stories and how the diverse voices speak to the public.

How do museums catalyze social change?

Endeavoring to share knowledge with different communities, museums expand their scope of work from object-centered to people-oriented. James Clifford, the renowned anthropologist, holds that museums are obliged to be “a contact zone,” where everyone can come to communicate, negotiate, and contest his or her ideas (1997: 192-193). Clifford’s proposal received considerable feedback, and consequently, “community participation” became a fashionable jargon in the field. In Hong Kong, to many organizers or sponsors, activities or events that draw tremendous interest and have a high participation rate would be considered as “successful.” Rarely do local professionals consider who the participants are, how a given activity embodies any values or meanings of art and culture, how the values and meanings might resonate with the participants, or how people might interpret their experiences. Do they have an opportunity to discuss the meaning these activities have touched upon with the organizers and fellow participants? Undeniably, museums need participants, and museum collections can only be meaningful if people learn about the objects and create new meanings to accommodate timely needs. If cultural institutions only focused on fun and spectacles, we might have second thoughts about whether museums are needed.

Importantly, the notion of a “contact zone” is by no means synonymous with “community participation” and “social harmony.” Participating in museum workshops, having fun with artists,

or visiting exhibitions of a foreign culture can be engaging, but it does not necessarily fulfill the museum's social responsibility. As Clifford poignantly pointed out, boundaries between peoples are created because of contesting views on politics, religions, ethnicities, and perhaps sexual-orientation. The museum's social responsibility is to eradicate bias and stereotypes, so as to enable meanings to be negotiated and differences to be heard. Museologists Robert Janes and Gerald Conaty stated:

Just as today's societies are incredibly diverse and complex, museums are no longer the monolithic institutions of the past. Instead, many are focusing their efforts more narrowly, telling particular stories with larger meanings. Often, these stories reflect issues and people that have been marginalized by mainstream society – First Nations, immigrants, and chronic illness. This approach can also lead to an activism that embraces community issues and inspirations, in an effort to provide value and meaning (2005: 3).

Promoting participatory practices, the new museology aims to transform the institution into a community powerhouse where exhibitions and educational activities can encourage people to discuss contemporary issues in terms of the collection and motivate change. Community interactions might tend to be disagreeable rather than entertaining, but the competing dialogs encourage one-way transmissions to be more reciprocal and favor privilege exchanges over extraction. In the context of the new museology, community engagement envisions the institutions to be a space of negotiation and communication, enabling the marginalized to express themselves and conventional ideas and practices to be challenged. By embracing diverse perspectives and personal experiences, museums can find new insights into the causes of prejudice and dissension and critically discuss the deconstruction of the dominant narratives (Sandell 2007: 174-181, Abram 2002). "The International Slavery Museum" in Liverpool provides an excellent example of how a museum, through interpreting the centuries-old history of slavery, facilitates a discussion on contemporary social issues.

In 2007, David Fleming, the Director of the the National Museums Liverpool, stated in his inauguration speech at the International Slavery Museum:

Make no mistake, this is a museum with a mission. We wish to help counter the disease of racism, and at the heart of the museum is a rage which will not be quieted while racists walk the streets of our cities, and while many people in Africa, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, continue to subsist in a state of chronic poverty (Fleming 2007).

Liverpool was once a hub for the slave trade. During the 18th century, more than 5,000 ships of slaves sailed off Alberta Pier, ushering 1.5 million Africans into lives of forced labor and abuse in Europe. For more than 200 years, the prosperity of Liverpool was built upon slavery and torture (Longmore 2007). The British government formally abolished the slave trade in 1807, though the prejudice towards the

African continent and its people continues to prevail, illustrating how the tragic past has never ceased to plague the present. To many Africans, the endless pain, fear, and cruelty brought about by the system of slavery and colonial rule remained as the most vivid memory for their parents and grandparents. Moreover, discrimination, the discourse of “White supremacy,” and hate crimes have become part of everyday experiences (Small 1991). The history of the transatlantic slave trade is in no way a distant nightmare, but it remains as a scar twitching in the heart of many. Fleming’s speech was a clear statement that the museum’s mission is to understand racism from a historical perspective and address related issues including discrimination, exploitation, and social injustice. The history was not written for a specific community, but as a larger topic shared by Liverpoolians, British, and everyone who is concerned about social justice.

When visitors first enter the International Slavery Museum, their eyes immediately fall onto the “Wall of Freedom” (Plate 1) that documents how civil rights leaders, activists, researchers, and young people define freedom and slavery. The permanent exhibition turns to introduce the rich cultural traditions shared by various African communities before the arrival of European slavers, to challenge the stereotypical representation of Black culture. The second part of the exhibition, reviewing the development of the slave trade and capitalistic economy, looks into the slaves’ stories and reflects on the cruelty and suppression of racism. It then focuses on the abolition of slavery and notions promoted by the subsequent civil rights movements, encouraging visitors to define the concepts of “equality,” “justice,” and “freedom”. In an attempt to spark social change, a “campaign zone” is set up to present contemporary issues and discuss with the audiences any possible actions to realize social justice. In 2011, the Museum collaborated with the Environmental Justice Foundation in its “White Gold: The True Cost of Cotton” exhibition, exposing the devastating impact that the global cotton production industry cast on the ecosystems of Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries while exploiting the rights of local laborers. A T-shirt design competition, as a component of the exhibition, invited people to bring the message into their daily lives. A panel of fashion designers judged one Liverpool participant to have the winning slogan: “Thousands of Childhoods Lost...and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.” The design was brought to market through the online shop of the Foundation and successfully aroused the public’s attention about such issues as industrial production and child labor (Johnson 2012). In the exhibition, educational activities and extended projects have helped the Museum become a forum that encourages the public to learn about and discuss contemporary issues. It also creates opportunities for people to assume an active role in initiating changes and fighting for social justice. The knowledge created by the Museum extends from the experience of a particular community to universal topics like social inequalities. With all these efforts, the Museum aims to foster mutual respect and trust among different communities, and gather more support for consolidating the changes.

To effectively promote social change, the Museum’s strategy is not to exert a greater effort on its own, but to empower the public to take actions by themselves. In 2016, the Museum launched the “Sankofa Project”⁴ to work with participants on preserving their own histories. The community

workshops offer basic knowledge and skills on museum studies to equip the participants to write their stories about themselves, their families, and communities. The project also advised participants on how to preserve their personal collections (Ramagavigan 2017). The argument was that historical knowledge can be ordinary or trivial, but crucial in the fight against obliviousness. For instance, Betty Vandy, a food store owner, vividly told about how she began her career and collected memories of her African family and communities through her collection of 300 cook books that she had kept for more than fifty years (2017c). Emotionally charged, her personal stories are interwoven with her memories of the streets and the history of her community that touches on her mixed heritage. The knowledge constructed through these workshops demonstrates the textures of life experiences and how individuals make critical decisions in the face of adversity. Some of the decisions reshaped the peoples' lives, and brought new possibilities to the neighborhood. By collecting local stories, the participants could see how they were connected to the wider community, and how new ideas and actions could be nurtured for a better future. Not by coincidence, the feedback from the Sankofa Project and the discussion of cultural identities and activism has helped to drive social change (2017d; 2017e).

Nonetheless, the Museum is not implied to ignore academic research. Jointly, the Museum and the University of Liverpool have set up the Centre for the Study of International Slavery and developed research projects in collaboration with other universities in the U.S. and Europe. By working with research institutions and community members, the Museum is dedicated to exploring academic research and community memories in conjunction with developing multiple narratives of the city. More importantly, the Museum does not claim sole ownership of historical knowledge. Instead, it emphasizes the sharing of skills and knowledge by encouraging the communities to write their own stories. The power of knowledge also comes in the form of caring for the path each life takes, and how different voices are recorded and heard.

To face the crimes against humanity, the International Slavery Museum examines the 200 years of the slave trade and its legacy, and critically discusses notions of racial discrimination, freedom, and justice. The aims of the Museum are to motivate actions against injustice among the diverse communities in Liverpool. That is, the target audience is not the anonymous crowd known as “the public,” nor the African decedents who seek to trace their family histories. To be an institution for the locals, the museum understands that its work must not be orchestrated by the professionals or represents just a limited fraction of the community. In fact, the locals are working partners, and not passive receivers of the Museum's service. To acknowledge this, the Museum designs its exhibitions, educational activities,

4 “Sankofa” comes from Akan, a common language used in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. It literally means “going back to the source” (National Museums Liverpool, 2017a). The name has a connotation of returning to the community where historical events took place and where different narratives were articulated. As the promotional slogan goes, “If you don't tell your own story then someone else will tell it for you, and that will never do you justice; or worse, your history could be hidden all together” (2017b).

and community projects by listening to the locals and trying to accommodate their needs and concerns. The Museum's vision and mission are comparable to the idea of the "contact zone" proposed by Clifford – to create a multi-vocal platform where stories of the underprivileged and underrepresented can be heard. This public platform does not pretend to be neutral or shun away from the controversies, nor act as a snobbish broadcast agent merely quoting from different sources (Barrett 2011: 135-140, James 2009).

When it comes to the development of local institutions, instead of rushing for a thematic museum, the local issues for each museum should be pondered in terms of their values and meaning. How should museum exhibitions tackle the difficult issues that haunt the city and connect with different communities to portray our shared future? To this end, who are the target groups of museums? How do museums facilitate community engagement so that the general public is comfortable about getting involved in cultural discussions?

The future of museums

It could be unrealistic to ask everyone to treasure museums, or for the institutions to become something for everyone. Yet, when the institution is associated with boredom, stagnation, or irrelevance, the cultural discourses that we hold dearly would not likely pass on to the next generation. It might become impossible, or at least difficult to discuss the past, the rights and wrongs, and explore new meanings and values of our history. Why do we need museums then?

In response to this question, Stephen Weil, the prominent American museologist, said:

If our museums are not being operated with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of people's lives, on what [other] basis might we possibly ask for public support? Not certainly, on the grounds that we need museums in order that museum professionals might have an opportunity to develop their skills and advance their careers, or so that those of us who enjoy museum work will have a place in which to do it. Not certainly on the grounds that they provide elegant venues for openings, receptions and other glamorous social events. Nor is it likely that we could successfully argue that museums... deserve to be supported simply as an established tradition, as a kind of ongoing habit, long after any good reasons to do so have ceased to be relevant or have long been forgotten (Weil 1999).

Weil's reflection can be understood as a professional idea sitting at the core of new museology. To put it explicitly, how do museums respond to social change and rework their interpretation of communicating for a wider audience? Museological researchers hold that museums are an intellectual platform serving

to engage communities to share ideas, negotiate differences, and create values and meanings for art and culture (Stam 1993, Witcomb 2003). In magnifying the potentials of cultural activities, museums in Hong Kong should re-examine the relationship between the institutions and local communities. How can cultural institutions connect with a wide range of communities? How can such institutions discuss local issues to address community interests and concerns? How can they improve peoples' life experiences through art and culture? If these questions remain unanswered, the discussion about local museum development would be limited to little more than practical operating models, outcome-based evaluations, and professional guidelines. What is lacking is not how institutional routines should be executed, but how the notion of museums can be contextualized in relation to local cultural needs. Ultimately, we need to consider the purpose of museums and how this cultural mechanism can promote critical public discussions about our cultures.

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