

Public memories and private tastes: The shifting definitions of museums and their visitors in the UK

Gayle McPherson *

Cultural Business Group, Glasgow Caledonian University, Cowcaddens Road, Glasgow, Scotland G4 0BA, UK

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Abstract

There is no doubt that museums now operate in a distinctly different market to those of the past. Rottenberg [Rottenberg, B. (2002). Museums, information and the public sphere. *Museum International*, 54(4), 21–28] identifies the two major trends in museums in the latter years of the 20th century as being ‘the prevalence of a new market-orientated ideology that stressed the importance of revenue generation’ and ‘the introduction of new technologies that transfixed not only the museum profession, but also the world’. The main impact, which these and other changes have had is the revision of the museum into a setting for recreational experiences [Foley, M. and McPherson, G. (2000). Museums as leisure. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16(2), 161–174; Stephen, A. (2001). The contemporary museum and leisure: Recreation as a museum function. *Museum Management and Curatorship* 19(3), 297–308], rather than an educative one. This paper attempts to address some of these shifts in ideology and purpose.

The main concern that museums face as they become more ‘recreation-focused’ is that they will lose what has long been believed to be their ‘integrity’, and thus stray from their original missions to preserve and educate, with critics suggesting that they may simply become arenas for pleasure rather than education.

This paper concludes that in future, it seems inevitable that museums will become ‘hybrid places, combining recreation and learning, allowing visitors diversions from the intense stimuli of strolling through galleries and viewing multitudinous objects’ [Kotler, N. (2004). New ways of experiencing culture: the role of museums and marketing implications. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 19(4), 417–425], with entertainment and education working together to fulfil the museum’s mission. Museums need not be afraid of using entertainment, but should embrace it as a tool for learning, potentially attracting a wider and more diversified public.

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* Tel.: +44 141 331 8480.

E-mail address: g.mcpherson@gcal.ac.uk

1. Introduction

Since its inception as an institution, ‘the museum’ has persistently witnessed significant changes in its academic and intellectual frameworks. However, the direction and the speed of change in its administrative environment over the last two decades have been unprecedented, if not unexpected. In response to changes in public policy perspectives towards state funding, and also to trading and economic pressures within leisure economies, service delivery has been deeply affected (Vergo, 1989). Museums are no longer simply exhibition spaces that represent the knowledge and truth of the histories that they represent; rather they have become sites where people (whether viewed as visitors, consumers or stakeholders) participate, interpret and buy, rather than just visit and become educated (Edson & Dean, 1994).

These changes became more marked in Britain than elsewhere and, when taken alongside changes in government policy at the start of the 1980s, they have become associated with an emerging commercial ethic that has penetrated the plural economies of museums ever since.

The election victory of the Conservative government in the UK in 1979 came at the end of a decade characterised by growing economic difficulties, the high points of which were the oil crisis of 1973 and the government’s bid to the International Monetary Fund for help in 1975. On taking power, Mrs Thatcher quickly led changes in politics, from Labour’s Keynesian policies to Monetarist economic policies, which introduced financial pressure on public sector organisations to become more accountable. Gamble (1989) argues that, as a result of these shifts in ideology, terms such as Citizen’s Charter and rights of citizenship were common phrases in the 1980s. Although, Mrs Thatcher sought to achieve citizenship rights through the market place, some services ended up more centralised than was intended (Savage et al., 1994). The role of the state remained firmly rooted as provider, although certain services such as leisure, education and health were to be restructured. What did not happen, as the ‘neo-liberalists’ had wanted, was the complete dismantling of the welfare state (Atkinson & Moon, 1994). The role of the state as provider, although still firmly in place in health and education, had given way to the state as enabler and facilitator, policies welcomed by some (Ridley, 1988). The argument of the New Right against public services, asserting that the services provided to help the disadvantaged were not used by only them (Gamble, 1989; Le Grand, 1982; Stoker, 1988), is one that is often repeated.

One expression of this change in focus was the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering for the delivery of certain public services, in an attempt to make these more accountable and financially efficient and effective (Cope & Atkinson, 1994, p. 26). The Local Government Act (1988) required local authorities to put out to tender the management of some services over the value of £100,000 per annum; a requirement that was extended to sport and recreation management in 1992. Although, museums and art galleries were not subjected to this process, what is evident is that the government was committed ideologically and politically to the view that privatisation, or forms of privatisation of public services, were the answer to economic reform. Indeed, this was to become known as the new managerialism of the public sector, reflecting as it does a range of commercial values. Atkinson and Cope (1994, p. 45) comment that “this approach is based on the assumption that competition is the best guarantee of quality and value for money.” Yet, performance measurement often measured only quantity, e.g. visitor numbers or visits, rather than the ideological purpose of the service and whom it served. This policy direction later changed from competitive tendering to Best Value Reviews in local government, a process of ensuring the best service available should be shown to be offered

for the value of the money available. There is no mandatory requirement in the UK for local authorities or central government to provide a museum or a museum service. However, until recently, under section 14 of the Local Government and Planning (Scotland) Act (1982), a statutory duty was imposed to ensure that “there is adequate provision for the inhabitants of recreational, sporting, cultural and social activities” (Department of the Environment, 1982). Although, there was no specific mention of museums and galleries, local authorities had the freedom to interpret this Act to suit both their service delivery requirements and the needs of their communities (DOE, 1982). Furthermore, in 1991, a report by the Working Party on Local Authorities and Museums (Museums and Galleries Commission, 1991) stressed that local authorities should adopt the role of a trustee and any decisions taken about museums in their care are to be executed under their auspices. In Scotland, all local authority museums have provided free access at the point of entry as part of the cultural provision for their communities.

The subsequent election of a Labour government after 18 years of Conservative rule led to a marked change in social policy and, consequently, the importance of culture as a tool for achieving wider social inclusion became more recognised (Hayes & Slater, 2002). Alongside the social changes and functions of culture outlined above, this has meant that museums have had to both change their outlook and identify ways to make themselves more accessible to a wider range of people, or perhaps customers, as well as competing with other leisure activities. As Kotler and Kotler (2000) noted, museums can no longer be content to reach a small, narrow and self-selected audience as they emerge from the shadows of privilege and move into the arena of public life and mass culture (Stephen, 2001). There is no doubt that museums now operate in a distinctly different environment than in the past. It is with this in mind that this paper will now discuss some of these shifts in ideology and purpose.

2. Social function as ideology: the politics of inclusion

Since the Museums Act of 1845, and until relatively recently, the social function of museums in the UK went largely unquestioned, especially in terms of their roles, performance and agreed position. Even in the 1980s, a period of both economic reform and calls for greater public accountability, museum management was left largely in the hands of Boards of Trustees (Fopp, 1997). A key factor in this overall arrangement was the power attributed to curators, since the classificatory systems of labelling and interpretation placed power very much with them (Heinich & Pollak, 1996). As a result, any change in the functioning of museums was itself conditional on a reconsideration of the role of the curator as part of the museum process, rather than the end in itself (Alloway, 1996).

However, if the museum as a public institution was to continue to exist in the 1990s (Barrie, 1994; Hooper-Greenhill, 1990), what had previously been considered the social purpose of the museum, and the roles deriving from such an understanding, needed to be re-evaluated to cope with important shifts in public policy, particularly in the wake of the election of a New Labour government in 1997. In fact, museums joined the long line of public institutions and street-level bureaucracies required to justify themselves in terms of efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery (Davies, 1994; Middleton, 1994). The focus of New Labour on the use of culture as a tool for addressing social problems has been a key issue, as audience development for the purpose of social inclusion has become ‘the mantra of arts and museum practitioners in the later half of the 1990s and has remained a priority for many organisations as they have moved into the 21st century’ (Hayes & Slater, 2002). As Stephen (2001, p. 297) comments, “the museum

serves...as an institution which contributes to civic enlargement.” Consequently, many museums have adopted political and social policies that bring additional funding and benefits, including policies aimed at achieving tangible social objectives, such as reducing social exclusion, combating crime levels and improving health targets related to smoking and dietary habits, to name but a few (Hayes & Slater, 2002). This has led some (e.g. Bennett, 1995) to argue that, although the museum may continue to represent an aristocratic hegemony, it has progressively transformed its purpose to that of educator and towards a more populist function of encouraging access for all.

This increased ‘community focus’ has led to many museums encouraging visitation by target groups within their communities, and to offering temporary exhibitions to suit the apparent needs of these communities (Davies, 1994). For example, the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow mounted the ‘Nu’ exhibition, offering portraits and video arts that celebrate the ‘goth’, as a response to the large number of these people congregating outside the gallery or using it as a social space. At the same time as museums have become more accessible, many museum managers and curators of museums which occupy grand, imposing buildings, and generate popular perceptions of inaccessibility and elitism, are seeking ways to make their facilities appear more congenial, comfortable and, even, mundane (Kotler & Kotler, 2000). Indeed, museums now tend to be much more open and organic in their layouts. At the same time, museums are increasingly utilising new media and interactive elements to expand visitors’ sense of immediacy and participation (Kotler & Kotler, 2000), and as a way of making themselves more attractive to visitors.

However, although this offers positive achievements to politicians in accordance with electoral manifestos, it is unclear whether it gives museums a significantly altered social purpose. Although, efforts have been made to include the wider community and make museums more accessible, some research suggests that, even as visitor numbers have increased, the social profile of the typical population of museum and gallery visitors has remained relatively stable, and continues to favour the ‘traditional’ middle-class visitor (Martin, 2002). Indeed, as Bailey, Falconer, Foley, McPherson, and Graham (1997a,b) point out, museums, even those with free entry, do not necessarily equate with accessibility. Many museums still produce exhibitions that present objects in glass cases (representing images of control), and their interpretive regimes instruct visitors not to touch, thus placing rules upon experiences and reflecting. As Crimp (1985) argues—the image of a prison.

I am arguing, therefore, that despite the political deployment of a discourse of inclusion, the fundamentals of museum culture have not changed over time. Kavanagh (1989) argues that the presence (or, indeed, the absence) of specific objects in a museum can be seen as physical indicators of ideological forces and social positions, an argument which has the benefit of shifting the debate from one about objects, and who sees them, to what these objects represent in terms of a social purpose aimed at particular groups, and the political forces behind their representation (Weil, 1990). Seen from this point of view, the museum, perhaps paradoxically, is caught in a dilemma of power relations, one side of which represents freedom through education, the other tending towards control—the dual role of cultural hegemony imposed by the museum itself. However, the ‘modern’ political rhetoric of social inclusion has not been the only, or indeed the most powerful, force at work. Since the 1990s, the social purpose of museums has also been revised within a framework of consumption (Lash & Urry, 1994), introducing a further, post-modern complication to be reconciled within the existing dilemma of education and control.

3. Revisiting the visitor: from spectator to cultural shopper

Since the 1990s, alongside their traditional roles, museums have been expected to adopt multi-media approaches to interpretation in order to enhance visitor experiences, and also to increase income from private sources (Vergo, 1989)—all this during a period of ‘real’ cuts in public sector funding (Fopp, 1997; Hayes & Slater, 2002). As Stephen (2001) argues, the political rhetoric of inclusion and its accompanying need to attract the ‘masses’ was, at least partly, conditioned by the need to generate income. This shift in ideological focus has led to the visitor being redefined as primarily a ‘customer’ (Lewis, 1989), with the museum now cast in the role of ‘provider’. This change in terminology represents a significant shift in thinking about museums, since the underlying values inherent in such terms place a new emphasis on the status of the visitor, or user (and, of course, the non-user), and imply a change in approaches to managing museums.

Although, it is widely accepted that museums continue to have an educational role, there is now less agreement over their social, political and, above all, economic purposes (Bailey et al., 1997a,b; Bailey, Falconer, Foley, McPherson, & Graham, 1998; Boylan, 1992; Hewison, 1991). Indeed, the recent emphasis on their economic dimension has led to their overall function becoming the subject of considerable debate (Bennett, 1995; Edson & Dean, 1994; Hopper-Greenhill, 1993; Zolberg, 1994). Alexander (1997, pp. 13–14) exemplifies one line of argument when he asserts that “museums are not simply cultural businesses. To judge the value of museums’ value solely by their contribution to local economic development is unrealistic and inappropriate, and will lead to distorted judgements by all involved.”

As part of this change of focus, tasks that were once in the realm of the curator have now become the remit of the recently introduced figure of museum manager; already in existence in the US since the mid 1970s, but only adopted with fervour in the UK during the 1980s, (Alexander, 1997). Simultaneously, concepts such as Best Value, performance management and commercialisation have entered the vocabulary of museum management (Lewis, 1994). The evaluative emphasis has shifted towards monitoring visitor numbers, introducing performance indicators and increasing both efficiency (e.g. by reducing the number of museum assistants and opening hours) and effectiveness (McPherson, Foley, & Durie, 1998). This has introduced a focus on trading and on generating increased income through ancillary services, such as catering and retail trading, which were put forward to curators as a way of halting job cuts in one local authority museum service (Glasgow City Council, Museum minutes, 1996). As Kotler and Kotler (2000, 278) comment, museums in the late 20th century “have evolved another community function, as economic development engines in the form of attractions and tourist destinations which can contribute to a community’s growth in jobs and income.”

Such changes can be traced, at least in part, to a UK governmental report (Cabinet Office Enterprise Unit, 1985) entitled, *Pleasure, Leisure and Jobs: the Business of Tourism*. This report firmly located government’s ownership of cultural products and services, *inter alia*, as an expression of its interests in tourism and leisure. Whilst the consideration of museums as tourist attractions had not been unknown prior to this, the expression of a role in the tourist industry represented a major change in thinking about cultural services as predominantly economic, as opposed to, social entities. Since, this report and the realisation of the impact of Thatcher policies of accountability and performativity in the 1980s, museums in the public sector have had to find ways of reconciling their roles as arbiters of knowledge and taste, as repositories of the officially sanctioned collective memories of communities, and as sites of scholarly endeavour with the need to demonstrate commitment to, and performance within, a national or

local tourism strategy (Ferguson, 1996; Spalding, 1993). This has occurred at a time when bodies responsible for tourism marketing have appropriated the ‘day trip’ as a touristic experience, with much focus on promoting city breaks by expressing the cultural merits of the cities in question. Inevitably, indoor museums contribute substantially to the supply of visit opportunities during either day trips or overnight stays. For example, in Scotland, they account for 44% of recorded visitor attractions (Scottish Museums Council, 2005), and have become perceived as a significant part of local touristic infrastructures. Of course, there is no reason to suppose that tourism is not educative per se in the eyes of visitors, but governmental pressure has been to accentuate the ‘pleasure’ and economic development potential of museums in heritage and tourism (Hewison, 1987; Lury, 1996), potentially at the expense of other functions.

Perceptions of museums as part of the infrastructure of the tourism industry are reinforced by arts tourism and cultural policies on the part of tourism agencies, with strategic remits (Foley, 1996; Hughes, 2000). Moreover, marketing strategies, especially the use of relationship marketing, are fundamental to this paradigm, particularly “the acquisition and retention of customers and the recognition that during the lifetime of the relationship, the need and wants of individuals will change” (Hayes & Slater, 2002). These concerns have become central to the operating environment of many museums (Kotler, 2004; Lewis, 1993; McLean, 1995; McPherson, 1997; Scottish Museums Council, 2005). Museums now take into account different visitor expectations and cater for interpretation and participation by different methods, including the development of both retail and catering outlets which attempt to replicate the offerings of other ‘sightseeing’ experiences, and which are wholly aimed at ‘customers’. Paradoxically, however, as the number of visits increases, more resources are needed to maintain museums (Pemberton, 1986). Yet, this does not seem to have been anticipated by government and, since there has been no increase in grants to public museums, alternative income sources, often via even more intensive trading, have become a necessary expedient to ensure survival. Cossons warned in the late 1980s that:

“In pushing museums towards a self-help policy they are being asked, in effect, to raise funds in the corporate sector, charge admission, derive profits from their shops, and so on, in order to fund the depreciation on their increasingly expensive capital assets. The collections are inalienable, held in public trust for today and tomorrow. So they have no cash value. Money cannot and should not be borrowed against them” (Cossons, 1989, p. 193).

Yet, in the 1990s, this was apparently what public museums had been asked to do. Belk (1995) argued they were at risk of destroying the very products, concepts and images that had made them unique and historically valuable, by pursuing the economic viability embodied within the market-led alternative of hedonistic, touristic leisure.

Although, museums have long been encouraged to make themselves more attractive to visitors, their importance as a key cultural resource in terms of tourism has only just been recognised. The fact that investment may be needed in order to make the most of the potential contribution that they can make to the tourism economy has also only just been recognised (in Scotland at least), with the Scottish Museums Council (2005) stressing the need for investment in skills and marketing.

4. Retailing, sociability and the ‘museum experience’

Commercial activities in museums are not, in themselves, a recent phenomenon. The first museum restaurant opened in 1857 (Weeks, 1997), and the retailing, that had been an essential

part of the experience of the Great Exhibition of 1851, including price tags on goods for sale and encouragement to browse, was later replicated in many museums. Lancaster (1995, p. 19) argues that such retailing ventures mirrored the essentially middle-class values and lifestyles of the typical exhibition/museum visitor, and comments that their “cultural message was skilfully propagated by displays at exhibitions, a vast array of printed advertising and material and, perhaps most importantly, by its mail order catalogue.” The National Gallery in London formed its publications department in 1915 to produce guides and catalogues. In the 1990s, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the value of the museum shop catalogue is considerable, as Berry (1993, p. 20), the Business Development Manager argues: “it is essential that the catalogue reflects the museum or gallery it represents and offers ideas not available in every High Street store.”

In attempting to become accessible to wider audiences, museums have, as Bennett (1995, p. 105) notes, gone as far as to ‘model museum shops on the sales outlets of tourist sites’ but, he contends, while this may broaden their customer base it will not, in itself, alter the composition of visitors, since the image of the museum as a middle-class preserve remains essentially unchanged. The presence of such retail outlets transforms the museum from a space ‘constructed for uni-directional gazing’ (Falk, 1997, p. 182), where the visitor is defined as spectator. In its dual role as museum and shop (in some cases selling the work of artists), the museum now facilitates a form of ‘gazing’ as pre-purchase contemplation, the eventual purchase in the museum shop afterwards being the realisation of that gaze. Falk goes as far as to liken such behaviour to that of the ‘hunter who gazes then eats later’. Whether or not this is the case, the consumer experience offered by retail outlets at museums can be seen to operate as an extension to the traditional educational mission of the museum, rather than just as a source of income (Berry 1993, p. 20), with most museums selling educational products related to their exhibitions, as well as educational books.

Kotler (2004) points out that an observable trend in museums is the increase in attention to sociable, recreational and participatory experiences, redirecting the traditional and singular focus on collections and exhibitions. While audience research shows that, for the majority of visitors, social and recreational experiences have become more important than educational or intellectual ones (Kotler & Kotler, 2000), today’s museums are in a situation where they must reconcile entertainment and education if they are to ensure that people continue to visit the rather, than see them as one-off leisure experiences. This is echoed by Theobald (2000, pp. 5–6), who states that, “the museum’s dilemma in a nutshell is not *money or education*, but *money and education*—how to achieve the proper balance whereby the educational goals maintain their ascendancy and the profits grow.” Curators are engaging with the marketing strategies of business managers to showcase innovative blockbuster exhibitions and to attract leisure consumers and audiences who may not often (or previously) visit museums, but the problem still exists after the spectacle has gone—how to engage the visitor with the museum at other times (Hayes & Slater, 2002).

5. Curators and managers: the impact of change on the museum professional

The role of curator in museums is one that, until recently, would have been easily defined in terms of specialisms relating to objects within the museum and the interpretation of those objects. That job involved research, scholarly activity, seeking new knowledge and displaying and mounting exhibits (Alloway, 1996; Edson & Dean, 1994). In recent years, this job has become much more diverse and commercially orientated (Alloway, 1996), with the challenge being to safeguard the traditional museum mission, while reaching out to a wider audience

and offering a ‘richer’ museum-going experience for visitors (Kotler & Kotler, 2000). Evidence shows that the concept of ‘visitor’ is now of increasing importance to the museum, and that the curator has to engage with an ‘audience’, although it is clear that this has been a shift out of necessity, rather than a voluntary recognition of the need for change (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

The main change which the curatorial profession has seen in recent times, however, is the introduction of museum managers in the 1980s, practitioners who are not necessarily from an arts background, but who often have a business background. This phenomenon is also happening elsewhere in the leisure industry (Bacon, 1990). This has been in response to the need for museums to be more business-like and accountable to their visitors/users/customers as they compete in the expanding leisure marketplace and is also due to the requirements of government schemes such as Best Value. Museums, thus, have had to respond to the social and economic pressure of outside agencies (O’Neill, 1991), which have had both an interest in, and influence over, museums (e.g. government, sponsors, artists, benefactors, stakeholders, citizens). Difficult questions are now being raised in relation to the role of curators, about whom is in control of the museum and, as Ferguson (1996, p. 177) puts it, ‘its agenda’. While a strong case can be made for business managers coming into museums, there are fears that this may lead to what has traditionally been seen as the museum’s ‘integrity’ being compromised, with one commentator suggesting that it would be impossible for managers from outside the sector to understand the curatorial needs of the museum and arguing, as a result, that “it is the museum professionals who must learn to become managers” (Fopp, 1997, p. 6). However, the contrast between the two positions may prove to be dangerously polarised in the context of a growing, popular, non-public sector. Equally, a continuum needs to be sought in the structure of funding which constructs packages of resources from various agencies, whether public or private, and recognises the possibilities for commercial developments in retailing services when connected to the lucrative market segments that are museum and gallery visitors (Brown, 1995).

Frans Verbass argues that museums need to adopt a corporate culture, rather than the personal cultures of the curators in charge. He states, “there is a need for the organisation to change, for the temple of culture to change to a market-orientated organisation, while maintaining the original tasks of the museum” (Verbass, 1992, pp. 173–174). He adds that “corporate culture is usually composed of many aspects and the implementation of a change requires a multi-disciplinary approach.” In recent years, museums have embraced the idea of corporate culture (partly due to encouragement from government), with many contemporary museums offering, not only galleries, but also “curatorial and staff areas, auditoria, lobbies, restaurants, and the now indispensable souvenir shop and bookstore” (Rybczynski, 1993, in Stephen, 2001, p. 365). In addition, Stephen (2001) points out that many museums also have spaces for unrelated social occasions such as banquets, galas and other public performances. According to Lewis (1994, pp. 6–9), such spaces and facilities can have a four-fold positive impact on museums in the form of “significantly contributing to funding; enhancing visitor enjoyment; enabling visitors to retain a tangible memento (purchase) of the museum visit, and aiding the educational mission of museums by sale of informative goods/products.” Although facilities in the USA tend to lead the way in terms of museum retailing and the use of entertainment facilities, it appears certain that British museums are starting to recognise the benefits of this approach.

It is interesting to note that in the UK, where London museums still lead in their recognition of the importance of retailing, organisations such as the Victoria and Albert Museum have invested significantly in retail development. Aspects such as design have received significant allocations of funds (Fitch & Knobel, 1990), and the success of the mail order collection has boosted retail sales further (Berry, 1993). Similarly, innovative product line development has

been reported, whereby the Victoria and Albert, in association with a manufacturer, developed a licensed product range, such as gift cards. In this way, the product receives a licence from the custodian of the ‘world’s finest collection of decorative arts’—an association with tangible, commercial value both in the UK and overseas. Similar arrangements exist between the Tate Gallery and the Magic Travel Group, who offer ‘art themed holidays’, whereby 4% of the cost goes to the Tate Gallery. Although such licensing remains in its infancy in the UK, the potential for expansion is considerable. Currently, developments such as this are uncommon outside London but, as [Kotler \(2004\)](#) points out, the successful museum of the future will not be an entertainment centre, but it will certainly have entertainment elements.

These changes, with their concomitant reconfiguration of the visitor from public spectator to private consumer (at times even ordering the goods from home) have, inevitably, brought about significant changes in the internal power structure of the museum. Indeed, the power now wielded by the consumer is apparent, even in determining the museum product itself ([Brown, 1995](#)). [Kotler and Kotler \(2000\)](#) point out that visitors to large museums typically spend an hour or so in the museum, splitting their time between the galleries, the restaurant and the gift shop.

This move, from a predominantly educative leisure and recreation role towards pleasure management based upon contract culture, measurement, retailing, consumption and the adoption of commercial values and structures was, and still is, at the centre of the dilemma for the museum professional in the late 20th and early 21st centuries ([Hooper-Greenhill, 1994](#); [Lewis, 1989](#)). Indeed, as critic John McDonald (quoted in [Stephen, 2001](#), p. 306) aptly put it, “the modern museum director is less of a scholar and more of an entrepreneur.” Changes in the nature and function of museums have required changes in the ways in which they are managed, with these changes requiring appropriate responses which reconcile ‘professionalism’ ([Coalter, 1990](#); [Houlihan, 1988](#); [Laffin & Young, 1990](#)) with ‘commercial/managerialist’ ideologies ([Bacon, 1990](#); [Cossons, 1989](#); [Davies, 1994](#); [Fopp, 1997](#)). Such changes have given rise to further debate over the nature of the users of these services (are they consumers, citizens, visitors, users, or some, or all of these, in combination?) and, in particular, over the place of retail services within museums ([Coalter, 1990](#); [Lewis, 1989](#); [McPherson, 1997](#)).

The role of the museum manager has been further complicated by the requirement of institutional funders to balance the needs of the local community with those of tourists, and the questions being raised over who should be the primary focus in any decision making ([Falconer & Bailey et al., 1993](#); [Hill & Bramley, 1986](#)). If museums are to be regarded as key resources for a touristic leisure infrastructure, and are expected to offer themselves in a manner consistent with such an approach, then this represents a substantial redistribution of income away from local, community-driven needs towards commercially-driven, external tourism demands. On the one hand, tourists bring much needed revenue but, on the other, in order to secure local authority funding, museums must be seen to be attempting to incorporate the local community in their programmes. However, as [Hayes and Slater \(2002\)](#) point out, both of these tactics risk excluding ‘traditional’ users of museums, who tend to be those who are loyal users in the long-term and become members; sometimes making substantial donations. It should also be remembered that, notwithstanding social inclusion policies and tourism developments, these people continue to make the majority of visits to all UK museums ([Martin, 2002](#)).

6. Social function as practice: widening access through fun

[Rottenberg \(2002, p. 21\)](#) identifies the two major trends in museums during the latter years of the 20th century as being “the prevalence of a new market-orientated ideology that stressed

the importance of revenue generation” and “the introduction of new technologies that transfixed not only the museum profession, but also the world.” The main impact which these, and the other changes mentioned above, have had is that of turning the museum into a setting for recreational experiences (Foley & McPherson, 2000; Stephen, 2001), rather than just educative ones. This has also served to make museums more accessible for the visitor, with many of today’s exhibits encouraging interaction and participation, rather than simply displaying ‘untouchable’ objects in glass cases. Museums have not just attempted to improve their exhibits, but have also engaged services previously regarded as ancillary, such as retailing, and turned them into a core part of the ‘recreation experience’, as they are in commercial visitor attractions. As such, these services are no longer ancillary, but have become central to the museum service and wield considerable power in the decision making process. As has been seen, retail and other services are not new to the service mix, as they have always played a part in the function of museums. In recent years, however, the importance of their roles has increased and their prevalence has accelerated. For example, the Natural History Museum in London now contains three shops, each themed differently. One of these is aimed directly at children, selling replica toys of the exhibits and extending interactive displays of the museum, thereby continuing the educational message, but in a so-called ‘fun’ way.

Of course, it is not only museum professionals who face the need for compromise, since the concomitant compromises demanded of retailers in a museum context are just as restrictive as those facing curators, albeit perceived from different ideological standpoints (e.g. O’Neill, 1991). But, while well-presented and well-resourced exhibitions are, it is argued, vital for any museum to reach its goals (Ferguson, 1996), it seems that the challenge for today’s museum manager is to maintain the museum’s integrity as “a distinctive, collective, conserving, research, exhibiting and educational institution and at the same time, making their museum more popular and competitive” (Kotler & Kotler, 2000, p. 271), with questions being raised over the ability of ‘entertainment-focused’ museums to maintain their scholarship, authenticity of collections and staff professionalism. Indeed, Zolberg (1994, p. 63) suggests that some museum professionals believe that any democratisation of culture is at the expense of an elite experience. She suggests that there is “some fear that the museum may become, instead of a serious institution, a place of popular entertainment with no standards of quality to govern the selection of artworks.”

It is a sobering thought that some museum professionals may still believe that there is only one elite culture to be experienced and, further, that that experience is delivered solely from the museum’s objects. Indeed, many of today’s entertainment-oriented museums, such as Disney’s Epcot, are primarily based on experience and popular ideas of what is fun, rather than on specific objects. Such an approach does not, in itself, make them less educative (indeed, it could be argued that they may be more so because they attract a more diverse audience than ‘traditional museums’), but less obviously so, at least from a ‘traditional’, or ‘elite’, point of view. Realising the full potential of museums in today’s conditions may, in fact, require greater attention to the development and management of the total service offered, and assimilating approaches which have been operationalised elsewhere in the leisure sector. The service, it would seem, needs to encompass not only the acquisition, preservation and interpretation of objects suited to a globalising world, but also the development of previously peripheral services such as retailing, either within the museum or, at least, closely associated with it (especially in terms of both values and image). This would add to the overall image of museums’ core activities and meet the expectations of tourists who have, inevitably, assimilated leisure experiences elsewhere (Harrison, 1993; Weil, 1990) and bring these expectations to their visit.

All activities, from the nature of exhibitions to the type of interpretation, can be affected by these new imperatives. Decisions about such areas are no longer located solely with curators and historians but, increasingly, with marketing managers and leisure practitioners, while politicians also exert increasing influences on museum practice (Lewis, 1994; McLean, 1995). Although, many museums still strive to represent the social lives of surrounding communities, or interpret aspects of national heritage, the dividing line between educational, recreational and commercial orientations is becoming increasingly blurred (Urry, 1990). Reconciliation of these objectives is achieved in different ways, depending upon ownership, operational climate, location and the market profile of users. However, it is clear that retailing, in particular, is expected to play a more significant role in the museum experience (e.g. Lennon & McPherson, 1995), whatever future policies are adopted.

7. Conclusion

The social policy of the current New Labour government in the UK advises that museums must attempt to be inclusive of their local communities and encourage participation by groups that would not generally attend. Many museums have embraced these ideas, putting on temporary exhibitions that are pertinent to their local communities, such as the ‘Nu’ exhibition at the Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art mentioned above. However, while the number of visits to museums has increased rapidly, research shows that the type of people visiting museums has not changed (Martin, 2002) and, thus, it is likely that the success of such initiatives will be limited in the long-term. Museums have also come to recognise the potential which tourists offer, especially in terms of providing revenue to the museum and enabling ‘improvements in facilities, services and programs, serving to facilitate and reinforce the museum going experience for a broader audience’ (Kotler & Kotler, 2000, p. 279).

It can be seen, therefore, that change is pervasive, with the boundaries that once separated museums from other recreational and educational organisations becoming blurred and breaking down (Kotler & Kotler, 2000). Not only do museums face increased competition from other visitor attractions and similar recreational experiences, such as Disney’s Epcot Centre (Stephen, 2001), but also the changes in government policy and initiatives, such as Best Value, that have led to museums becoming more accountable and more oriented towards the general public. Museums can no longer market themselves solely to small, niche groups, as competition, accountability and cuts to funding have meant that they have had to broaden their appeal, sometimes in order to simply survive, if nothing else. This has led to many museums repositioning themselves in the marketplace, to becoming more business-like, and to focusing on visitors as ‘consumers’, rather than simply ‘users’ of the service they provide.

These changes in the role and function of museums have led to concomitant changes for curators, as their role has evolved to encompass the new challenges which running a ‘recreation based business’ requires. Increasingly, curators have had to become managers and diversify their roles away from concentrating primarily on scholarly activities and developing the museum’s collection, towards considering ways to develop the museum’s audience and its marketing activities. In many cases, managers from outside the sector have been imported, with the organisations that preside over museums, such as the Scottish Museums Council, only recently endorsing the need for development and training of staff in these areas (2005).

The main concern which museums face as they become more ‘recreation-focused’ is that they will lose what has long been believed their ‘integrity’, and will shift from their original missions to preserve and educate. Such changes tempt critics to suggest that they may become arenas for

pleasure, rather than education. However, there is nothing to suggest that the museum, as a context for recreation, will conflict with its functions of collecting or educating (Stephen, 2001). While perhaps less obvious in its impacts, learning through entertainment is no less effective. As Simpson (1930) recognised some time ago, the general public do not like to think of themselves as ‘being educated’, Stephen (2001, p. 307) expresses this as “using its collected artefacts and physical spaces, the modern museum can function remarkably well as a context for education, reliving leisure experiences and the general betterment of life for people in society.” In the future, it seems inevitable that museums will become “hybrid places, combining recreation and learning, allowing visitors diversions from the intense stimuli of strolling through galleries and viewing multitudinous objects” (Kotler, 2004, p. 423), with entertainment and education working together to fulfil its mission. Museums need not be afraid of using entertainment. Indeed, they should embrace it as a tool for learning and for attracting a wider and more diversified public.

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Dr Gayle McPherson is a Senior Lecturer in cultural policy. Her doctoral thesis utilised Steven Lukes' theories of power to examine the leadership and management of a local authority museum service. Gayle has edited books in leisure studies and published in the area of museum management, leisure policy and festivals and events as tools of public policy.