

## **Keeping historic house museums relevant - some afterthoughts.**

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In the Tower of London's royal armours room, that holds armours, weapons and dummies of horses and knights from the British monarchy, one of its explicative texts says that, in the old times, more important than truth or historical accuracy, were the stories told by the exhibitions. So, the objects were exhibited in order to create a narrative as fascinating to the public as useful in transmitting the idea of royal power, needed for reinforce the monarchic government's legitimacy between its subjects. The same Tower of London, a mark from British historical heritage, has passed by some architectonic interventions in the 19th century to be remodeled in a more "medieval" style, so the Victorian public fondness for the gothic style could be pleased. These were the ways that the tower's managers used, in past centuries, to keep that heritage site relevant. And the intentions that based those actions left clear an aspect stressed since the very first moments of Relevance 2017 conference <sup>1</sup>: that the museums and the education in museums are not neutral, but political.

They are political because the decisions of what must be exhibited or not, forgotten or remembered, emphasized or relativised, is taken on basis of factors like the social class backgrounds and ideologies from curators and staffs, the political and economical conjunctures in a given historic period, or the own vision of itself that groups from society desire to perpetuate to others, for example. By registering and preserving the evidences from history, museums have the power of shaping the perceptions from present and also from the future. This power creates a potential of conflict inside the institution that, in turn, is inserted into the broader tensions and divisions of the societies around them.

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<sup>1</sup> The conference *Relevance 2017: Are we trying hard enough? Making museums and historic houses relevant to audiences in the twenty- first century* was part of the annual calendar of events from the sectorial committees of ICOM and was organized by DEMHIST and CECA. Held on Tower of London and Hampton Court Palace, also in London, the conference goals were to discuss the ways by which historic house museums could keep themselves relevant in the contemporary society, establishing connections with diversified publics, redefining their roles in formal and informal education and keeping narratives fresh and challenging in times of fast technological changes and reconfiguration of national and group identities.

Other point, related to the last one and also much stressed by the conference was that of the relationship between museums and their public as a key element for the existence and preservation of historic heritage. A building or object only become a "place of memory" when exists a will of memory by one or more persons or groups of persons. This idea is illustrated by the affirmation, given by Karen Whitting, then Head of Creative Programmes from Royal Armouries in 2013 <sup>2</sup>, that if the tower would continue to be functioning by one thousand years more, that would be because people wanted to, so it could continue to be visited and preserve and share its heritage. In this relationship of recognition and identification, in which the public is a crucial element, lies one of the ways to the permanent relevance of historic house museums.

The historic house museums have specific characteristics that streamline certain ways for their relevant action. Generally, they are houses, prisons, palaces, military barracks, farms, etc whose original inhabitants and workers doesn't live there anymore. All that was left were the furniture, household items, documents, personal belongings or, in the absence of these things, writings in the wall, empty spaces that one day were occupied by people or even places that don't exist anymore. They are places that suffer the risk of become static, frozen in their historical periods, unless some kind of "life" permeate their rooms. It's the same life of work, culture, war, religion, sexuality, technology, etc that flourishes outside the original time period and walls from the house and that, at same time, act over it and create questions which the museum can't get away from, if it wants to stay relevant.

Based on this, we can understand as a key factor to relevance of museums and historic houses the way how those institutions act in order to "engage" the public. The word "engage" here suggests that this relationship consists in something more than just attract visitors to the museum but, further, to make them involved with the narratives and experiences provided by historical heritage, in a way so that this could cause an impact in their lives. In this sense, it has been proved efficient the movement of narrative reconfiguration, from a "top/up" axis to a "bottom/down" one, where the focus is on individual experiences and themes that make people feel personally connected

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<sup>2</sup> As seen on the documentary "Secrets of Britain: Secrets of the Tower of London". PBS, EUA, 2013. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4911948/>

with the objects or the heritage site<sup>3</sup>. Museums and objects become relevant because they are understood and felt by people in a level more personal and relatable.

Thus, many experiences in museums and historic houses showed that, more than caring about the accuracy of subtitles, for example, the visitors wished to feel welcome by the heritage site. Exhibitions and activities that arouse imagination and emotion proved to be more effective than knowledge alone in the relationship between the public and the institution. However, is the own tangible knowledge, built and diffused by museums, that allows mediation with the intangible feelings of visitors. Museums have responsibility with history and, even if one wants to let the public's imagination bloom, this can't go on without be grounded on historic knowledge, which research and production are elementary finalistic activities of heritage institutions.

Near the Hampton Court Palace greenhouse, where is placed the biggest and oldest vine in the world, planted in 1768, there is a sign with a quotation typical of the traditional "top/up" vision about museums public and its preferences. There we can read words from Lionel Earle, Permanent Secretary of the Office of Works, who in 1930 said that "such is the mentality of the ordinary British public... [that] the joy riders at Hampton Court will always be more attracted by the vine than by any Mantegna pictures" <sup>4</sup>. It's interesting that he uses the term "joy riders" almost in a depreciative tone, as if stating that the ordinary people who visited Hampton Court would prefer rather a joyful fruition of the place, motivated by fun, curiosity and pleasure than a presumably more intellectualized, serious and "cultural" appreciation of a work of art. It is a traditional elitist point of view that still can be found in museums and cultural institutions alike.

Earle's "joy riders" are the "sightseers" from today. Of course, many of them may visit a museum because it "has to be seen", according with tour guides or Trip Advisor; because the gardens or the rooms of a palace could provide some nice photos for Instagram; or, in the case of national history museums, to learn about the country's history, as a "civic duty". This can all be true, but Earle misses the point when assumes that visitors experiences in a museum couldn't address joy and curiosity together with

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<sup>3</sup> This idea was presented by Franklin Vagnone, author of "An anarchist guide to historic house", in the conference opening. He used as an example experiences as the project "Humans of New York", started in a Facebook page, which registers individual experiences of common people, with the city of New York, USA as temporal and geographic background.

<sup>4</sup> The "Mantegna pictures" are the ones at the gallery in Hampton Court where are exhibited the nine paintings from italian artist Andrea Mantegna that form the panel "The triumph of Caesar", executed between 1484 and 1492.

reflection, social awareness and learning. This is corroborated by a recent report which points that 37% of the cultural audiences in USA didn't think that visiting a museum is a cultural experience <sup>5</sup>. And that happens because they are thinking or, rather, living culture in a different way. So, "culture needs to be defined in new ways and from the ground up rather than the top down. To respondents, culture involved fostering empathy, expanding your perspective, building community, and educating the public" <sup>6</sup>.

According with many cases presented at Relevance 2017, the transition from "joy riders" to "engaged joy riders" happens, as resumed by one of presenters, when museums "give the keys" to visitors, allowing them to engage and participate, instead of simply present them "locked doors" to contemplate <sup>7</sup>. In other words, instead of just show objects and contents ready and done, museums are creating forms of making people confident enough to enter inside them and embrace the history, stories and experiences that can be developed there. And then these people will be involved with the heritage site as a part of their lives, and not as some old house apart of it, both in time and space. They will be more prone to come back and new people would be more encouraged to go there for a first time.

In fact, these issue are not exactly new in the historical heritage field of studies. However, the challenges of present make some aspects even more obvious, while bring up others usually underestimated. We are living in times of conservative reaction, in global scale. Fear of other, reinforced by violence and prejudice, is added to the individual isolation, although the sensation of full-time interaction provided by technology and social networks. When the concept of "post-truth" is powerful enough to be elected the "word of the year 2016" by the dictionary's department of Oxford University <sup>8</sup>, it means that museums, as entities committed with historical responsibility, need to be aware to not fall for appearances and cheap emotional appeals.

Concluding this roll of ideas in the same place where it started, at the Tower of London, we can remember the old legend about the tower's ravens: if they flew away

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<sup>5</sup>"37% of Art Museum Visitors Don't View Them as Culture—and Other Takeaways from the 2017 Culture Track Report". <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-37-art-museum-visitors-view-culture-takeaways-2017-culture-track-report>.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>7</sup> Idea presented by Lisa Leblanc, of Canadian History Hall from Quebec, Canada, on the presentation "Being Relevant to Canadians".

<sup>8</sup> According to Oxford, "post-truth" is a adjective defined as " relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

from there, the tower and the reign would fall. By good measure, a group of ravens is always kept and cared there, just to maintain a *quorum*, at least. But, thinking about heritage sites, the historic houses and palaces like the Tower of London will never fall of relevance, with or without ravens, as long they assume their political nature and are able to keep their narratives and practices fresh and aware of the things happening today in the lives of people. These same people who, engaged to become part of the public, will sustain the relevance of the heritage sites for a "thousand years" more.