Museums and Migration: a Question of Identity

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Introduction

• Greater expectation that museums will play a role within policy

• Confusion between rhetoric and reality

• Issue needs to be disentangled
  – Consumption of museums
The social role of museums

• Museums having a social role

  – 19\textsuperscript{th} century museums

  – New Museology

  – Instrumental policy
The social role of museums

• UNESCO expert meeting on migration museums – 2006

• New migration museums aim to:
  – Acknowledge the contributions made by migrants
  – Include and integrate
  – Build an awareness in host populations
  – Give migrant communities a voice
The social role of museums

• UNESCO expert meeting on migration museums

  – Contribute to a new plural identity at individual and country level
  – The role of the communities in migration museums?
  – To impact and induce a change in perception, behaviour and attitude toward the foreigner, the stranger?
  – How to contribute to the development of a memory and a patrimony of immigration?
  – Build self-esteem and interaction
The social role of museums

- Much museum literature supports this approach but a consensus has not been reached.

- Political situation
  - Cited Nationale de l’Histoire de l’Immigration

- How can we understand impact – what is possible?
The social role of museums

• Assumes museums and galleries are capable of this
  – Acting on two levels
    • The individual/groups
    • Wider society – discourse

  – Need to identify a mechanism through which museums act

  – Implications for practice
Consumption of museums

- Consumption – manipulation of signs for identity practices
  - Identity politics – meaning
  - All do this – clothes/cars/houses – normal aspect of everyday life
  - Role of museums in this process
Previous research

• Project looked at exhibitions and community development projects
  – Glasgow and Newcastle upon Tyne
  – Experiences were being used in various ways
Previous research

– People attempting to control their social environment

– Identity constructed in terms of the needs of the present

– The contribution of museums originates in their ability facilitate identity construction/individually/collectively
Previous research

• People felt more positive about themselves
  – Not all could engage with this process

• Socio-psychological impact
  – Sense of belonging
  – Empowerment
Migration and estrangement

  - Failure of memory to fully make sense of the place that is inhabited
  - Have estrangement is common
  - Dislocation of migration allows communities to be formed
  - Remake a relationship with what appears unfamiliar
Migration and estrangement

– Role of making community important

– Shared experience of not being at home

– Creation of a supportive space?

– Issues of identity
Contribution of museums

• Individuals and groups
  – Series of activities/exhibitions
  – Driven by migrants themselves
  – Enabling the development of supportive communities
    • Access to capital (cultural, human, social and economic)
    • Development of a collective memory/new identities
  – Expensive/small scale
  – Museums can become associated with authority and so might be avoided
Contribution of museums

• Impact on wider society
  – “New plural identity at individual and country level”
  – More difficult to see how this might work
  – Normally only a maximum of 40% of a population might visit
  – Drives or reflects wider discourses within society?
Contribution of museums

• Because consumers drive this process themselves responses might be quite personal and hard to predict

• Does not really matter if the respondent reads displays in an “oppositional” or “negotiated” way
Citizenship – the role of museums

• Marshall (1950) rights based approach
  – Social
    • Exhibitions/development projects/social capital
  – Political
    • Empowerment/involvement more likely to be involved
  – Economic
    • Projects provide confidence/knowledge and skills
  – Cultural
    • Exhibitions/cultural activities
Conclusion

- Museums have a part to play in improving the experience of migrants

- Give migrants the resources to respond in identity terms to their situation

- Challenge is in engagement – socio-psychological elements