



Museums for the future: policies and practices in Ireland

A public discussion document
arising from the Royal Irish Academy
Future Museums workshop,
Tuesday, 12 November 2019



Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
Royal Irish Academy

Introduction and context

This paper sets out the main themes emerging from the Royal Irish Academy's Future Museums workshop of 12 November 2019. It is intended as an invitation to you to put forward your views about how museums could be supported to fulfil their potential to secure and conserve Ireland's heritage; reflect the rich heritage of Ireland's diverse communities; improve people's lives; build communities by fostering good relations and respect for different cultures; strengthen society; and protect the environment.

The Academy's Culture and Heritage Working Group¹ convened the Future Museums workshop to bring together key persons from Irish museums to identify the issues they wish to discuss and debate. This paper is an attempt to provide a flavour of the discussion from the day, and to progress the debate by inviting your response to the questions posed.

Context

Project Ireland 2040, the development of a renewed national heritage strategy to 2030, and initiatives such as Creative Ireland have encouraged conversation and debate about the role and contribution of Ireland's national cultural and educational institutions to wellbeing and society. Museums are a key element of this national cultural and educational framework.

Ireland's museums have transformed ways they engage with people and their own view of what their role and contribution to Ireland and its citizens ought to be. Participation and attendance numbers are up, capital budgets have been secured through Project 2040 to help with the refurbishment of vital parts of the national museum infrastructure, collections continue to be added to, and regional and local museums bring a renewed energy and vibrancy to telling the story of their communities within the larger national context.

But creative tensions are evident in the discussion of what it means to be a twenty-first century museum. Is collecting, curating and preserving enough to secure the future? Is it enough for museum collections and programmes to be developed by professional museum practitioners and scholars? Should museums be understood as creative platforms rather than collections of objects? How realistic are these ideas given that some national and local museums struggle to conserve, let alone curate, the objects they hold? Is co-programming with diverse communities really possible within the framework of annual, rather than longer term, budgets? How should the role and contribution of the professional amateur be understood and drawn upon? What role can or should museums be expected to play in helping society understand and reflect on difficult episodes from our national history?

¹ The museums workshop is an initiative of Michael F. Ryan, MRIA and George Sevastopulo, MRIA and members of the Academy's Culture and Heritage working group. The full membership of this group includes Academy members Mary Canning (Chair), Angela Bourke, Diane Negra, Lorraine Byrne-Bodley, Luke Drury and Gabriel Cooney, supported by RIA staff Craig Skerritt and Sinéad Riordan.

Themes emerging from workshop

1 How can museums serve the needs of their communities?

Museums are highly individual by virtue of their collections but typically share many similar attributes and characteristics in terms of their function and remit. This holds true and yet is challenged by emerging understandings and ways of thinking about museums as creative platforms or forums for community engagement or for reconciliation and learning. These varying views were both supported and contested through the course of the discussion, evidence of the varying interpretations and weights given by individual museums to them. Some emphasised the museums' role as curators and preservers of national heritage, others echoed this but added equal weight to their role in enabling co-curation and programming with local communities to reflect their stories and encourage discussion and connect with national heritage objects in a community setting. Still others sought a greater role by museums as creative platforms, bringing together diverse communities to explore new ways of understanding heritage and mediating socially important but often-times tragic and difficult stories from Ireland's past. The need for local museums and local stories and experiences to be mediated at a local level was repeatedly expressed, as were the difficulties associated with enabling such local ownership of their heritage, whether by virtue of the absence of a local museum or limited ability to borrow relevant objects from the national museum collections. (It was noted, for example, that there are twenty-eight local authorities, of which twelve currently support a local authority museum.)

Consultation questions

- What might a new design model for museum participation look like?
- How can museums improve their visibility and engagement with local communities?
- Must museums choose between acting as co-curating, creative platforms for their communities or fulfilling their role to preserve and curate national heritage?
- How can museums better demonstrate and explain their value to the general public? To policy-makers? To elected representatives?

2 'It's about the collection stupid' (Or is it?)

Curated collections of value are at the heart of every museum, large and small. It was noted, for example, that a museum can only be considered for entry to the Museums Standards programme if it is a collecting institution with a collection of value.

There is a keen interest amongst regional and local museums in drawing upon and borrowing from the national museum collections to illustrate objects and collections of local interest. The current funding and work of the National Museum of Ireland to support such collection mobility was acknowledged, but equally so was the fact that it was able to support a very small number of the requests it receives for mobility funding due to its limited resources, particularly of staff. Enhanced mobility funding for inter-museum loans was seen as a key deliverable.

The ownership and preservation of the many significant collections and archives held by religious orders was repeatedly identified as an emerging area of concern. The Heritage Council noted its intention to develop a policy on cultural heritage to include object, museum and archival collections, and other expressions of intangible heritage. The policy will be developed in consultation with the museum, archives and heritage sectors.

Museums were strongly aware of the much greater diversity in Irish society and the need to ingest and reflect the heritage of diverse communities, but they were equally aware of the challenges of raising their visibility and relevance amongst these communities.

Consultation questions

- How should the relevance and value of a museum's collections be gauged? How do we decide what are important collections?
- Is the current mobility programme for national collections sufficiently resourced? If not, what scale of resources is needed?
- How can the preservation and curation of the collections and archives of religious orders / new communities / volunteer-held collections best be addressed?
- Do museum collections offer a positive means of facilitating conversations around our past, current and future cultural and national identity?

3 Staffing, funding and governance of a twenty-first century museum

Strong discussion emerged around the appropriate mix of specialist and generalist skills needed to meet the ever-wider needs and roles of a modern museum. There was general agreement that museums must have a strong and influential curator-led centre, but there was some tension evident in the balance between curator-led and audience-led programming, curation and design. Those in favour of greater co-creation with, for example, local communities, recognised that this needs to be facilitated by staff who are skilled in supporting engagement by non-typical museum audiences with collections and programming. The vast contribution of the professional amateur in building public awareness and understanding of aspects of Irish heritage cannot be underestimated, whether this contribution takes the form of the discovery of ancient artefacts or unpicking and telling the story of difficult episodes, such as that of the Magdalen Laundries. But what standing or role should museums give to the professional amateur?

In many ways, however, this debate between specialists and generalists is a misleading one, as for some national museums the principal challenge faced is that of ensuring sufficient staffing numbers to perform the core responsibilities work programme of collecting, recording, preserving and securing their collections. It was noted, for example, that the staffing recommendations of the Academy's *Present status and future needs—a report on the Natural History Museum (2004)* remain unmet, and that low staff numbers inevitably slow the museum's ability to do all that it wishes.

Ambitious targets and creative extensions to the role of a museum require a strong governance and policy framework. It is critical that the boards charged with the governance of national cultural organisations have the necessary skill-set and knowledge, but this raises the questions of what is the appropriate skill-set and knowledge required to strategically advance and support modern day museums? And once we have established what this desired set of skills and knowledge is, how do we ensure that board members meet these criteria?

Financial self-sufficiency as a goal of museums was agreed to be a possibility for some, but not for others. Ireland's developing traditions of familial philanthropy and/or large-scale corporate philanthropy were recognised and encouraged, but at present this type of funding plays a very minor role in supporting national cultural institutions in comparison to international counterparts. The capital budget allocations under Project 2040 have brought comfort and reassurance to the beneficiaries within the museum sector but will be unable to resolve, for example, any of the staffing-cost challenges or the resourcing of collections mobility. The growing presence of Fáilte Ireland as a supporter of national and regional museums was warmly welcomed, but it is clear that this meeting of tourism and heritage carries its own challenges, including the need to build a shared understanding of metrics of quality and value.

The Museums Standards and Accreditation scheme run under the auspices of the Heritage Council was acknowledged as playing a major role in supporting the professionalism of Ireland's museums offerings.

Consultation questions

- What skills and knowledge are currently mandated as desirable for national cultural institutions' board members?
- Does the current appointment system to boards of national cultural institutions prioritise the appointment of persons with such skills and knowledge?
- What is the appropriate balance between state capital and core budget for museums?
- Should all professional museums be brought together under a Museum Council? What would the role of such a council be? How should it relate to voluntary museums and national cultural institutions?

4 Demonstrating success

Can a museum's value and societal contribution be captured in a number? If yes, is the number of visitors the best metric for showing this contribution and value? What happens when the visitor number becomes 'King'? These issues were particularly hotly debated. While the visitor number offers a clearly definable metric that can be understood as a measure of the popularity of a cultural attraction, it tells us little or nothing about the quality of the visitor experience or the learning or wider value that the visitor gains. The latter metrics—while deemed every bit as important by the museum sector as visitor numbers—are less well developed. Museums and their supporters have a job of work to do to develop a set of understandable and collectable metrics to illustrate the quality and value of their experience; for example, counting the number of entries to all major exhibition areas to check on the penetration of visitors to all public areas. What role could feedback surveys play in capturing the experiences of museum visitors, whether those visiting an exhibition, participating in an education event, or community programme?

Consultation questions

- What numbers—in addition to the visitor number—could be used to define and demonstrate the quality, value and contribution of museums to Ireland's social, cultural and economic wellbeing?
- Does the value of a modern museum rest in its objectivity and contribution to social life? How can it harness and demonstrate these values?

5 Big sister, little sister or a family of equals?

Ireland benefits from an incredibly rich and diverse network of cultural institutions. This includes the national museums and galleries; local authority museums, both those well established and emerging; and a significant number of volunteer-led museums whose collections capture and reflect a particular niche interest or community (for example, liturgical collections held within religious orders). There is inevitably a degree of vigorous debate within any such grouping, but this is counteracted by a deep and genuine respect for the work of colleagues—whether professional or the professional amateur—striving to protect, preserve and present collections of significant national interest. The debate clearly recognised the need for a responsive museum policy at a national level to address the support and resource needs of different sizes and types of museums and collections of value; for example, the National Transport Museum in Howth, a volunteer-led collection, fears it may be forced to close its doors or disperse its collections in the absence of support for its collections.

Consultation questions

- What policies and supports are needed to deliver stronger partnerships between national, regional and local museums?
- What additional supports could be offered to help small scale and/or volunteer-led museums engage with national policy and funding frameworks?

Conclusion

Please read the paper, think about what it says, discuss it with colleagues and send us your views, to: policy@ria.ie.

4 December 2019