



# the happy museum

re-imagining museums for a changing world

## A tale of how it could turn out all right



# The Happy Museum: A tale of how it could turn out all right

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## Acknowledgements

We redefined the purpose of the Museum of East Anglian Life as a social enterprise because we felt its strength lay not just in its collections or historic buildings but the social networks built between visitors, volunteers and people who work there. We were inspired by the New Economic Foundation's (nef) *Five Ways to Well-Being* to describe the museum as a space for people to be active, learn new things, look at the world differently, make friends and give something back. We asked the nef to write this paper because they would be best placed to provoke museums to think differently about how they might use cultural heritage to influence people to lead meaningful and happy lives.

Aside from the authors a number of people have kindly contributed to this paper either through attending workshops or through phone interviews. They are Steph Davies from Laughology, Tom Andrews from People United, Ruth Potts and Jane Franklin from nef. Ben Cowell from the National Trust also provided some very helpful advice.

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**Tony Butler**, Director Museum of East Anglian Life, February 2011



# A tale of how it could turn out all right

**The aim of this short paper is to begin a conversation about how the UK museum sector can respond to the challenges presented by the need for creating a more sustainable future. Our proposition is that museums are well placed to play an active part, but that grasping the opportunity will require reimagining some key aspects of their role, both in terms of the kinds of experience they provide to their visitors and the way they relate to their collections, to their communities and to the pressing issues of the day.**

The UK, like many nations in the developed world, is in the midst of a triple crunch: the combination of financial crisis and recession, accelerating climate change and highly volatile energy prices that are underpinned by the approaching peak in global oil production. These are not abstract, distant concerns but issues with real consequences for all of us, both now and in the future. Many people in the UK are consuming well beyond the economic and environmental means of the planet. Given that we need 40 per cent of another planet to sustain

current global rates of consumption this evidently cannot continue indefinitely.

At the same time, recent research in psychology has shed new light on the factors that lead people to feel their lives are fulfilling, meaningful and worthwhile. One important finding to emerge from this research is that material goods play considerably less of a role in determining well-being than our spending patterns might suggest. It suggests that the pressure to 'keep up' in consumption terms has actually been actively detrimental to real well-being for many people, and possibly even a factor in increased risk of mental illness.<sup>1</sup>

Combine the perilous state of our economic and environmental affairs with this latest scientific understanding of well-being and you have an intriguing possibility: namely, that there may be a 'double dividend' whereby we can both live better lives and consume less. But realising this possibility in practice will not be straightforward. It will require a concerted effort to deal with

climate change and the economic crisis in ways that are both socially just and beneficial to people's quality of life.

A high well-being and low carbon, sustainable future seems certain

to involve considerable changes in our values, behaviour and understanding of the world. Barring technical innovations on a scale that would be

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*"In a low consumption future how will we work and how will we spend our leisure time?... What changes will it demand of our political, business and educational institutions?"*

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1. See, e.g. Jenkins R, Bhugra D, Bebbington P, Brugha T, Farrell M, Coid J, Fryers T, Weich S, Singleton N and Meltzer H (2008), 'Debt, income and mental disorder in the general population', *Psychological Medicine* 38, pp. 1485-1494



the museum sector is its sheer diversity. Museums are quite a network: there are around 2,500 in the UK, ranging from small community-focused volunteer-run organisations to large complex international tourist attractions with hundreds of staff and multi-million pound budgets.

## The potential of museums

Museums are popular. Figures from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport suggest that some 47 per cent of adults living in England made at least one museum visit

truly unprecedented and barely plausible,<sup>2</sup> we can be sure that such a future will involve a good deal less material consumption, in particular by the richest in society. But it may also require fundamental change in the understandings, values, rules and meanings we attribute to life in the UK.<sup>3</sup> In a low consumption future how will we work and how will we spend our leisure time? How will we derive meaning in our lives? What changes will it demand of our political, business and educational institutions? And how are we to learn (or re-learn) the practical skills that we need to live sustainably?

Robert Janes, in his book *Museums in a Troubled World*, suggests that 'the salient question for museums is whether they can transcend their commitment to the stewardship of collections and embrace broader societal issues?'<sup>4</sup> In researching the paper, we interviewed a number of professionals from inside, and outside, the museum sector and held a half-day workshop to explore current practices and ideas for future directions. Throughout the paper, for convenience we refer to 'museums' as if they were a single, discrete entity. However, one of the more striking features about

in 2009, up from 42 per cent in 2005.<sup>5</sup> Museums in the UK receive around 100 million visitors ever year.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, an interesting (if unsurprising) consequence of the recession seems to have been an increase in demand for free leisure services, with museums a significant beneficiary.<sup>7</sup>

But museums are more than just a cheap day out. Within the panoply of places and organisations vying for our attention, museums display a number of other strengths – or, at least, *potentialities* – that could count in their favour as key contributors to a happier, more sustainable society.

Firstly, notwithstanding the ubiquitous gift shop strategically positioned by the exit, museums have little to 'sell' to their visitors but understanding and enjoyment.<sup>8</sup> In a world that seems increasingly saturated by advertising, a trip to a museum is an all-too-rare opportunity to find sanctuary from commercial messages. This is no trivial matter, for not only is materialism strongly implicated in our present environmental difficulties, it is increasingly recognised by psychologists as a serious source of dissatisfaction, unhappiness and mental ill-health.<sup>9</sup> Marilyn Scott, Director of The Lightbox in Woking,

2. For a lucid and detailed discussion of this issues, see Jackson T (2009) *Prosperity Without Growth* (London: Earthscan)

3. Evans D and Jackson T (2007) 'Towards a sociology of sustainable lifestyles: RESOLVE working paper 03-07' (University of Surrey)

4. Janes R (2009) *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?* (Abingdon: Routledge)

5. <http://www.culture.gov.uk/publications/7386.aspx>

6. <http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=165106>

7. IDEA (2010) Cutbacks and communications <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=9656723> [21 June 2010]

8. Wood C (2007) *Museums of the Mind: Mental Health, Emotional Well-being and Museums* (Bude: Culture Unlimited)

9. For a review of this literature, see Kasser T (2002), *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press)

drawing on the experience of working with mental health service users in the gallery, has described the museum as 'a place for healing'. In this respect, museums provide a model for the kind of leisure experience which might characterise a higher-well-being future.

Secondly, through their physical collections of objects and the careful work they do in piecing together the context and narratives that give them meaning, museums play a role in communities as keepers of collective memory. Museums are able to make real – in a way that history books never quite can – different ways of living: be it alternative ways of organising cultural and economic life, of producing goods and delivering services, of working and playing. For instance, local museums have the ability to link us in a very direct and visceral way with our own social histories, and in so doing offer new perspectives on the way that we live now. Perhaps even more potently, museums can provide a direct confrontation with other ideas, values and cultures.

It is striking, too, that museums as institutions are highly valued by communities and command widespread public trust; all too rare a commodity. In principle, this trust puts museums in a strong position to raise difficult and challenging issues in a way that is perceived as honest and authoritative.

## Slow and steady – the risks of business as usual

These characteristics, together with the fact that the sector has both the audience numbers and the geographical reach that make it virtually unparalleled, are obvious strengths when we begin to think about the wider role museums could play in moving toward a 'happier' future. However, there are also weaknesses. For a start, the trust and esteem in which museums are held is, in part, a reflection of their perceived neutrality; museums are seen as independent authorities, untainted

by ideology, politics and self interest. And fear of jeopardising this reputation can lead to hesitancy and unwillingness to take risks.

This has practical consequences. For instance, many museums have rather one-dimensional

strategies, whereby exhibits are developed by curators with little in the way of external consultation (beyond, perhaps, consumer-focused research) and then 'marketed' at targeted groups. But

museums could do so much more here, because of their unique position as trusted and valued organisations. They are well placed to facilitate connections and interactions between groups who might otherwise have little to do with one another, and we know that this erodes fear, prejudice and the sense of community, all of which is important to happiness. Over-emphasis on the collection as the starting point, and an unduly limited sense of social purpose, can lead to museums missing opportunities.

Museums are more accustomed to telling than to listening. Understandably, they see themselves as the 'impartial expert' whose role is to educate their visitors and, in many cases, they have become adept at presenting information to their visitors in an engaging and accessible way. However, they may be less adept at helping audiences find answers for themselves. They may do this in learning programmes for 'hard to reach' audiences but not carry through this learning to their exhibits for mainstream visitors. This may lead to missed opportunities for promoting dialogue, not only between different groups of visitors but between the visitor and the museum itself. Treating visitors as passive consumers underestimates their capacity. Too often there is a one-way monologue whereas what is needed is dialogue that produces lasting change in both visitor and the museum itself. (Museums may be surprised to find that they have as much to learn from their audience as the audience does from them!). This is important to happiness because, in properly listening to their audiences, museums demonstrate that they

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value what people have to say; and that improves people's sense of self-worth and validates their opinions in a way that shows they matter in the world.

Another weakness comes from the use of narrow and partial criteria for success. Often, museums are judged by funders and policy makers (and judge themselves) against short-term, process-driven targets – numbers of visitors and their demographics, quality of collections care, and so on – rather than what is, arguably, the real *outcome* that they hope to achieve, namely providing experiences for their audiences that are enjoyable, educational and can lead to transformative change.<sup>10</sup> Narrow outcome criteria might lead to beautiful exhibits, strong marketing campaigns and a good 'visitor experience', but they are unlikely to encourage a deep dialogue between the institution and the community. More innovative means of evaluating impact are required to capture these kinds of important but diffuse and non-tangible outcomes.

## Making people happier

Notwithstanding these weaknesses, we believe museums have undoubted potential to play a more significant role in creating a happier, sustainable society. What, in practice, might be some of the approaches required to make this happen?

We have sketched a role for the museum sector in a future in which there is a greater demand for worthwhile experiences whilst imposing low costs in terms of carbon and other resource use. This will mean thinking not only about what people learned, but considering the quality of the experiences as a whole – whether it was enjoyable, rewarding and meaningful.

These kinds of experiences – part of what is often now termed *subjective well-being* – have been

the focus of intense scientific study in recent decades. This followed a recognition that for too long research in psychology and related disciplines has focused on what can go wrong with people to the almost total exclusion of understanding what makes life go well. It is now widely accepted that living a life characterised by happiness, a sense of meaning and purpose and a feeling of connectedness to others is valuable not just for its own sake, but because it benefits society as a whole. As such, promoting psychological well-being is increasingly seen as an important concern both for policy-makers and for all institutions in society, not just those with an explicit role in mental health.<sup>11</sup> With this research evidence in mind, what other aspects of the museum experience (beyond education, with its clear well-being outcomes) might be worked on in order to increase the well-being potential of a museum visit?

Museums' function as social spaces is significant. Research suggests that social interaction is perhaps the single most important factor in distinguishing happy people from those who are merely 'getting by'.<sup>12</sup> With recent trends seeing city space being increasingly transferred to private ownership,<sup>13</sup> museums are an important bulwark against the erosion of the public realm, especially if they are freely accessible. For many people, a museum visit is not a solitary activity but an opportunity to spend time with family or to meet up with friends. In some cases – for instance in the British Museum's atrium – physical meeting spaces occupy a central part of the museum visit. Jude Kelly, artistic director of the Southbank Centre in

London, has described the centre as first and foremost 'a place for encounters'.

Museums also offer connections to other cultures and other

times, encouraging visitors to make links across generational and cultural boundaries. Through the collections and ideas that they present and the manner in which they present them, museums can

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10. For example the *Vital Communities* programme was an action research programme aimed to demonstrate the impact of the arts on the aspirations, achievements and attitudes of communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough over a five-year period: <http://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/leisure/arts/vitalcommunities.htm>

11. This point was made forcefully in 2008 by a large government-led science review, the *Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Well-being*. See [www.foresight.gov.uk](http://www.foresight.gov.uk)

12. Diener E and Seligman M E P (2002) 'Very happy people', *Psychological Science* 13, pp. 81-84

13. Minton A (2009) *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First Century City* (London: Penguin)

provide common points of connection between people and opportunities for dialogue – enhancing well-being by breaking down prejudices against other groups which may lead to conflict or social damage.

Another significant aspect of the museum experience, from a well-being point of view, is the way that it can encourage visitors to be psychologically 'present', with attention focused completely in the here-and-now and on the aesthetic qualities of things. Experiencing this kind of involvement is not only enjoyable in itself, but is associated with wider psychological benefits. Some museums already pay close attention to the immersive nature of the visitor experience and it may be that there are opportunities to build on this further, perhaps through more creative use of multi-sensory exhibits.

Finally, it is known that reciprocity and 'giving back' to others promotes well-being for people

of all ages. A shift in focus from museums seeing themselves as didactic educators to 'co-creators of well-being' might see the enabling of a more active and engaged role for the visitor. Where museums offer the chance for reciprocal relationships, where visitors are providers as well as receivers of knowledge and learning, they can engage the assets and resources of a community.

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The opportunities that museums make available for volunteering, for example, can directly influence the well-being of individuals by leaving them with a sense of self-worth and status in

the community. Moreover, encouraging greater participation and agency for individuals induces a multiplier effect. Motivated and valued people inspired by the museum are more likely and better equipped to get involved with civic life within their own communities.

Working with audiences could involve multi-authored, open story-telling around collections with museums entering into dialogue with people



about what to preserve or what stories to tell. Tyne and Wear Museum's recent Culture Shock digital stories project simply asked people of the North East for the stories of their lives, inspired by objects from the collections. The link to well-being has been clear and dramatic, as people have rediscovered that their voices matter despite the social impact of industrial decline.

The idea of museums adopting a more collaborative and facilitative approach to their work raises interesting questions about institutional-level relationships within local communities and economies. Some museums – including, for example, the Museum of East Anglian Life in Stowmarket – are naturally inclined to see themselves as playing a role within the local community, in part because their collections are grounded within a local context. But even museums with collections that transcend the local, for instance, many of the large London museums, are still significant and potentially active stakeholders in the community. They probably employ local people, source goods and services locally, and may draw a significant proportion of their visitors from within a reasonably small geographical area.

**Given that a degree of re-localisation is strongly implied by many visions of a high well-being sustainable future, there is ample opportunity here for museums to lead by**

**example.** For instance, the National Trust has already begun to give much more autonomy to local managers in order that they can make better connections between their areas and forge better working relationships with local businesses and groups. For the Trust, understanding of the threat climate change poses for its properties has led to a localised model of development where properties are promoted and developed as a 'local' resource. By involving local people more fully in some of their core functions, museums can develop a new kind of relationship with the communities in which they are situated.

To summarise, the argument is that by encouraging happiness and well-being museums can play a part in helping people live a good life without costing the earth. They can also lead by example, for instance by reducing their environmental impact and by engaging ever more deeply with communities. They can show leadership in the way they work with other organisations, for example by supporting local third-sector organisations or by encouraging business sponsors to be more ethical. This was one of the findings of the Museums Association's work on sustainability and museums,<sup>14</sup> which also asked to what extent museums should explicitly feature sustainable living in their displays and programmes. Given the scale of the challenges we face, the need for open, inclusive dialogue is urgent and we hope that the museum sector as a whole resists the temptation to remain in the role of passive observer, and instead chooses to play an active part in facilitating the conversation.

Embracing these opportunities, we believe, could lead to an invigorating transformation that places museums at the heart of an active public realm with significant benefits for society and museums alike as we transition to a low carbon and we hope high well-being future. To this end what follows is a set of pathways to help museums embrace that opportunity.



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14. [www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability](http://www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability)



## Museums for a high well-being, sustainable society: a manifesto for transition

This is intended as a set of eight principles for museums to hold to while making the transition to a high well-being and low-carbon sustainable future. All UK museums will need to make some kind of transition and adapt, due to the government's announcement of funding cuts for the next four years, and because most of their audiences will have fewer expendable resources. This manifesto aims to make this a positive transition, one that enables both communities, and their museums, to survive and thrive.<sup>15</sup>

### 1. Make people happy

Seek to understand the importance of well-being, embracing healthy minds not just bodies, and healthy societies not just individuals. Embody and enhance the Five Ways to **Well-being**, as set out by the New Economics Foundation, which can be summarised as Connect; Be Active; Take Notice; Keep Learning and Give. For more, see <http://www.neweconomics.org/projects/five-ways-well-being>. Consider, too, how human well-being is entirely dependent on the well-being and abundance of the natural environment.

### 2. Pursue mutual relationships

Find ways to have more mutual relationships with your communities, supporters and visitors. Explore how museum staff and public can work together, with different expertise but equal status, to achieve common outcomes such as making a sustainable locality in which to live and work. Learn from voluntary organisations and social enterprises to try out new models of working with people. Consider the possibility of becoming a mutual organisation, or of running your organisation as a co-operative.



### 3. Value the environment, the past, the present and the future

Value and protect natural and cultural environments and be sensitive to the impact of the museum and its visitors on them. Focus on quality and don't be seduced by growth for its own sake. Contribute responsibly to the social, cultural and economic vitality of the local area and wider world. Acknowledge the legacy contributed by previous generations and pass on a better legacy of collections, information and knowledge to the next generation. Manage collections well, so that they will be an asset that is valued by future generations, not a burden.

### 4. Measure what matters

Counting visitors tells us nothing about the quality of their experience or the contribution to their well-being. Listen to the debate about measuring happiness: watch the Office of National Statistics and their research into a happiness index; hear what think tanks and academics have to say about the subject; ask your audience how your work affects them emotionally; don't wait for someone else to design the perfect metrics – talk to people, understand what makes them feel happier, measure that. And what about the other environmental impacts of your work? Happiness will be short-lived if museums achieve it for this generation at the environmental expense of the next. You need to know about both so you know if you are going the right way.

15. See also the Museums Association's sustainability principles: [www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability](http://www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability)

## 5. Lead on innovation towards transition

Ride the inevitable changes by positively embracing the need for innovation. Show that museums don't have to be only storehouses of the past but can also be hubs of innovation. Test ways that assets like your collections, staff and communities can be imaginatively applied to current problems. For example, could you work with corporate sponsors to develop products and services that are high well-being, low-carbon?

## 6. Think global and be networked

'Think global, act local' should be a guide for museums in transition. Whilst most museums might best support well-being in a specific locality, all could increase the extent to which they make international links, use digital tools to reach wider audiences and open their visitors' eyes to global histories and contemporary issues. Use your networks to deliver this, but use them in reverse too: collect best practice, other models, partners, new ideas, comments, critiques and feedback in pursuit of perfection.

## 7. Support learning for resilience

Museums enable individuals and communities to learn together. Museum learning is already all the things much orthodox learning is not: curiosity-driven; non-judgmental; non-compulsory; engaging; informal; and fun. The people needed in the future will be resilient, creative, resourceful and empathetic systems-thinkers, exactly the kind of capacities museum learning can support. Museums could lead in developing our understanding of why and how education needs to change to bring about these capacities.

## 8. Find your niche

Sustainable museums will be diverse. Build on all your assets (collections, buildings, knowledge, skills, communities, and audiences) to identify your distinct role. Learn from other museums, and other organisations that bring social benefit, but don't clone them. Be clear about your long-term purpose and be sure it is what society wants and needs.

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**phf** Paul Hamlyn  
Foundation

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