

**Getting closer, looking deeper, coming back sooner:  
The visitor experience in American art museums**

**Based on the findings of a research trip visiting art museums in  
seven states in America in August-September 2015, supported by  
the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust**

Courtney Johnston  
Director, The Dowse Art Museum and Petone Settlers Museum  
June 2016

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## Acknowledgements

My thanks to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for the funding that supported my research trip to the United States. The insights I collected and people I met have already greatly enriched my thinking about the role of the contemporary museum, and I anticipate drawing on both this knowledge and this network for many years to come.

My thanks also to Hutt City Council for its financial contribution to my trip, and in particular Matt Reid, Manager Community Services, for his encouragement.

Friends I have made in the museum digital world over the past ten years were hugely helpful to me as I researched this trip and built my itinerary: my thanks to Seb Chan, Shelley Bernstein and Michael Edson especially. Everywhere I visited I was met with warmth and keen interest, and I am grateful to all those people who shared their museums and their work with me.

Freelance editor Madeleine Collinge provided invaluable assistance in a review of the draft of this report. I'm also grateful to Virginia Gow for her peer review, as well as those colleagues locally and internationally who commented on early drafts.

Finally, my thanks to my team at Hutt City Museums and especially my leadership team, whose fantastic management over the five weeks I was away meant I could dedicate all my mental energy to looking, listening and learning.

## Preface

*If the museum is to flourish in the 21st century, it cannot afford to be solely a place of retreat from society. It must stimulate, provoke and engage, as well as offering a place for contemplation or consolation. It must be a place in which we can share in a commonwealth of ideas. (Serota, 2015)*

Since the 1970s the stereotype of the museum being a starchily exclusive place for the quiet contemplation of rarities by those with the educational and social advantages to appreciate the experience has been steadily challenged, not least by people working within the sector.

In New Zealand, a wave of new galleries in regional cities (the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 1970; The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, 1971; the Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, 1977) explicitly set out to make the best of New Zealand's cultural production available to local constituents. An account of the opening of the Manawatu Art Gallery began:

*People contributed [to a fundraising drive] because they knew the gallery would not be another city monument to an elitist arts society. Luit Bieringa has deliberately tried to make the gallery as accessible as possible to all the people of the Manawatu, whether their interest be in functional pottery or conceptual art. (Spill, 1977)*

Over the course of the 20th century, museums reoriented from a focus on collecting and categorisation to a focus on public service by way of education. This shift saw the visitor grow in prominence in the museum's view of its own operation. Over the past two decades, the visitor has shifted again, now to the centre of the museum's operation. Museums are increasingly seen as social spaces, and today's greatest innovations in museum operations are inspired by the social and economic changes intricately entwined with the rise of the internet.

The GLAMs (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) sector has avidly adopted the affordances of the internet to find new ways - from social media channels to podcasts to releasing 3D scans of collection items - of connecting the public with their offerings, and to enlarge the voice of individuals within the museum. I count myself fortunate both to have come of professional age in this part of our sector, and to have the opportunity through this research trip to explore some of the world's most vibrantly innovative museums, and better understand how they strive to serve the audiences today, and plan for those of tomorrow.

Nicholas Spill, 'Opening the new Manawatu Art Gallery', *Art New Zealand*, no.7, August/September/October 1977 <http://www.art-newzealand.com/Issues1to40/opening07.htm>

Nicholas Serota, 'The 21st-century Tate is a commonwealth of ideas', *The Art Newspaper*, 5 January 2015 <http://theartnewspaper.com/comment/comment/the-21st-century-tate-is-a-commonwealth-of-ideas>

# Introduction

In November 2012 I became director of Hutt City Museums, a role within Hutt City Council (the local government body that governs the city of Lower Hutt) with responsibility for The Dowse Art Museum (a contemporary art gallery), Petone Settlers Museum (a social history museum) and the Council's community arts portfolio. This is my first museum leadership role: I lead a team of about 25 staff working across two collecting institutions that have a combined annual visitation of approximately 220,000 people.

After completing my Masters in Art History at Victoria University of Wellington in my early 20s, I spent most of the next decade working on digital projects in and for cultural institutions. In particular, while working at the National Library of New Zealand I worked on early social media and open access initiatives, in roles focused on user experience, online community engagement and Agile project management. I also spent two years prior to starting at Hutt City Council as general manager of a Wellington software development agency that specialised in Agile project management and bespoke software for cultural organisations. Over this ten year period I also maintained a strong interest in contemporary art and art museums, as a blogger, reviewer, and radio commentator.

This combined art historical and contemporary web training has left me with a strong interest in how digital technology can be used to amplify museums' activities and improve visitor engagement with the works they see either in the gallery or through the museum's website. Moving from largely digitally-focused roles to running two physical cultural institutions, I've been intrigued by questions of how we can apply the techniques of user experience design developed for the web and for mobile apps to the physical museum experience.

In 2015 I was awarded a Winston Churchill Memorial Scholarship to undertake research in the United States. In late August and early September of that year I visited large art museums in seven American states on a trip designed to increase my first-hand knowledge and experience of innovative uses of digital technology, public programmes, membership programmes and collection displays.

This report includes observations, findings and further information on many aspects of museum operations, from the training of visitor hosting staff to the introduction of mobile apps to the design of collection display areas. All of these activities could be grouped under the loose title 'visitor experience', and in my research I devoted time to simply being a visitor, in addition to research into the various museums' strategies and meeting with key staff.

## **Purpose of this research trip**

We are fortunate in the museum sector - and particularly in the digital area - that museum professionals publish and present widely upon their work. But museums are physical places, and there is no replacement for physically experiencing the museums that are recognised as leaders in their field.

This research trip was undertaken to experience in person some of the most innovative and widely admired digital projects, education programmes and visitor experiences in American museums, and learn from the people who create them. In each case, I was interested in understanding how the museum was responding to its history, its geographic setting and visitor profile, and its mission and vision, and how all these factors coloured decisions about investment in expanded or innovative activities.

I elected to visit museums recognised for their leadership in various areas: Dallas Museum of Art for membership programmes, for example, and the Brooklyn Museum and Cooper Hewitt in New York for their digital projects.

I also made a point of visiting museums where, like The Dowse, encouraging greater repeat visitation from local residents is important both to increasing visitation and to affirming that public investment in cultural institutions is to the city's benefit. While some cities on my itinerary (Washington D.C., New York City, Los Angeles) cater significantly to national and international tourists, others (Brooklyn, Dallas, Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Baltimore) have a stronger focus on permanent residents, and target their programmes accordingly.

## **Objectives**

My proposal for WCMT funding focused on researching four areas of museum operation:

1. Connecting with visitors through digital technology
2. Visible storage displays
3. New models of membership programmes
4. Outreach programmes serving people on the autism spectrum and people with dementia, their families and caregivers

Due to several staff not being available at the time I was visiting, or staff turnover at institutions, I was not able to conduct a great deal of research into the outreach programmes I had identified in my original plan. I met with several educators during my visit, but learned little beyond what I already knew from reading online resources.

However, as I travelled, I found myself focusing a great deal on three aspects of the visitor experience that I had not expected to study closely:

- exhibition spaces specifically designed to introduce new visitors to the museum's collections and exhibitions, such as those recently created at the Brooklyn Museum and in development at the time of my visit at the Baltimore Museum of Art
- the museum store, as a site for preparing for and reflecting on the museum visit
- the role of visitor hosts in American museums compared to their New Zealand equivalents.

As a result I have not included a section on outreach programmes in this report, but have written up my observations on key visitor experience trends in a fourth chapter.

## **Method**

In every museum I visited I observed the full visitor experience (with a special focus on customer service, exhibition display, integration of digital technology, and wayfinding and interpretation). I also discreetly observed other visitors and their experience and where possible talked with the visitor host staff. I photographed my visits extensively - to document for my own later reference, to share immediately through The Dowse's Facebook page, and later share through presentations.

In the focus institutions I extended my observing through meetings with staff members, which often involved a guided tour of specific displays. The people I met with throughout the trip were incredibly generous with their time, and on a number of instances set me up with multiple members of their institutions to interview.

While in Indianapolis I took the opportunity to attend the MuseumNext conference. This international conference, which has been held in the UK, Europe and United States, brings together speakers from a wide variety of museums to share case studies on their work. Presentations at the conference were focused on the issues of diversity and inclusion: about how museums' workforces, audiences and partnerships could better reflect the demographics of their constituencies.

## Outcomes

Immediately after returning from America I attended the Museums and the Asia conference in Melbourne and the National Digital Forum in Wellington. Both these conferences are focused on sharing best practice in digital activities in museums; the National Digital Forum has a wider remit, with museums, libraries, galleries, archives and digital humanities being members of the organisation. At both events I gave presentations on my WCMT trip and my early findings: these were valuable opportunities to reflect on what I had seen and learned with a wide group of colleagues, and discuss my observations with people who had also visited these museums.

I have given a number of talks and interviews about my trip: a list is provided in this report. As I have drafted this report I have posted the four main chapters online to gain feedback and comments to improve it. The finished report aims to both reflect on what I saw, heard and learned, and provide the reader with a starting point for their own further research into areas that interest them. I anticipate I will continue to explore the themes raised here online at [www.best-of-3.blogspot.com](http://www.best-of-3.blogspot.com)

These drafts and presentations were an opportunity not only to share the benefits this intensive travel and study period with a wider audience, but also to refine my own conclusions and better understand how they can be applied to my work at The Dowse and Petone Settlers Museum.

My key realisation from this trip is summarised by this photograph of pansies from the women's bathrooms at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

The BMA is a large museum, full of treasures. What distinguished it from other high quality encyclopaedic art museums I visited was the sense of personality and place I derived on my visit. I observed a new 'orientation' gallery being developed during my visit (more later in the report on this), a focus on collection items in the store's merchandise, a large cardboard cake covered in birthday wishes made as part of a recent public programme and left in an unused hallway, and a gallery devoted to portraits of racehorses (appropriate for a state with a reputation for horse-breeding).

Each of these decisions gave me a sense of a museum that was made by people, for people - as opposed to the rather robotic, faceless generic displays I felt I began to encounter by the end of my trip. So when I walked into the bathroom and found these cute little posies, my impression of the BMA was completed. I was so impressed that I immediately texted my



Business and Operations Manager back home and asked if we could have fresh flowers in our bathrooms.

As it eventuated, when I asked the staff at the museum about their fresh flowers policy, they looked confused - until someone twigged that there was a wedding at the museum that evening and the flowers were part of the decorations. What I learned from this experience was that brand is something that communicates itself through the smallest and sometimes the most unintentional details.

This notion - one that I have seen referred to as 'institutional body language', or the things your museum says to visitors when you don't even realise you're making a statement - is the idea I have taken with me from my WCMT research trip. You might not have the most money or the most staff, but if you apply the same level of thought to all your operations as you do to curating and collection development, you could be the most memorable museum your visitors ever encounter.

## Overview of focus institutions

At the following institutions I arranged meetings with staff and made extended visits

### *American Swedish Institute, Minneapolis*

In 1929 newspaper entrepreneur Swan Turnblad, donated his family mansion along with an office building and another family residence to the American Institute for Swedish Art, Literature and Science, for the encouragement of connections between Sweden and America. Today the ASI manages the historic Turnblad Mansion and the adjoining contemporary Nelson Cultural Center as a gathering place for people to share experiences around themes of culture, migration, the environment and the arts, informed by enduring links to Sweden. Entry is charged (\$10 for adults).

Areas of interest: digital technology, outreach programmes

### *Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore*

Founded in 1914 and located close to the John Hopkins University Homewood campus, the BMA today has a collection of 95,000 artworks spanning from the early Byzantine period to the current day. Since October 2006 the BMA has provided free general entrance, funded through grants from Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

Areas of interest: digital technology

### *Brooklyn Museum, New York*

One of America's oldest arts institutions, the Brooklyn Museum traces its founding to 1823 and the establishment of the Brooklyn Apprentices' Library, followed in 1841 by the Brooklyn Institute, itself renamed the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences in 1890, the forebear of the current-day museum. An encyclopedic art museum, Brooklyn Museum holds a world-renowned Egyptian collection and is also houses the Elizabeth A Sackler Center for Feminist Art. The Brooklyn Museum is acknowledged as a leader in the digital outreach field. Entry to the museum is by suggested admission (\$16 for adults). Free entry on the first Saturday of every month is funded by Target.

Areas of interest: digital technology, open storage, outreach programmes

### *Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York*

Founded in 1897 by the Hewitt sisters, the Cooper Hewitt became part of the Smithsonian Institute in 1967 and is the only American museum devoted to historical and contemporary design. Housed in the landmark Andrew Carnegie Mansion on Fifth Avenue in New York, the Cooper Hewitt reopened in 2014 after a major renovation and complete technology overhaul. Entry to the museum is charged (\$16 online, \$18 on site for an adult).

Areas of interest: digital technology

### *Dallas Museum of Art (DMA), Dallas*

With a history stretching back to 1903, the DMA is Texas's largest art museum. In 1984 the current museum building was opened, occupying a block in the Downtown area, as the anchor tenant in an urban regeneration project. The museum collects international art and artefacts from ancient cultures to current practice. Free basic entrance to the museum was introduced in 2013 under the DMA Friends programme, with charges for temporary exhibitions, public programmes, etc.

Areas of interest: digital technology, open storage, outreach programmes, membership programmes

### *Mia (Minneapolis Institute of Art), Minneapolis*

The Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts was founded in 1883: in 2015 Mia celebrated the centenary of its original museum building. Mia collects across seven areas (Arts of Africa & the Americas; Contemporary Art; Decorative Arts, Textiles & Sculpture; Asian Art; Paintings;

Photography and New Media; and Prints and Drawings). Admission to general programmes and events is free.

Areas of interest: digital technology, membership programmes

*Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul*

Minnesota Historical Society manages 26 historical sites and museums in Minnesota. The Minnesota History Center in Saint Paul houses the MHS collections, archives and library and is a highly interactive museum dedicated to Minnesota's history and communities. Entry is charged (\$12 for adults).

Areas of interest: digital technology

*Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), Washington D.C.*

Housed in a National Historic Landmark building near the National Mall in Washington, the SAAM was the United States' first collection of American art, holding many genres, from painting, sculpture and photography to folk art, contemporary craft and new media work. Entrance to the museum is free.

Area of interest: open storage

*Walker Art Center, Minneapolis*

The Walker originated in a private collection made publicly accessible in his own home in 1879 by Thomas Barlow Walker. In 1918 Walker offered his collection and land for a museum to the City of Minneapolis, but after five years on inaction Walker withdrew his offer and determined to build his own museum, which opened in 1927. In addition to a reputation for cutting-edge contemporary art the Walker is adjacent to the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, one of the largest in the country. Entry is charged (\$14 for adults). Free entry on Thursday evenings and on the first Saturday of every month is funded by Target.

Areas of interest: digital technology

**Other institutions visited to observe the visitor experience:**

Crow Collection of Asian Art, Dallas, Texas

Nasher Sculpture Museum, Dallas, Texas

Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

American Museum of Visionary Art, Baltimore

MOMA (Museum of Modern Art), NYC

The Frick Collection, NYC

The Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC

Museum of Art and Design (MAD), NYC

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NYC

Dealer galleries in Chelsea district, NYC (including David Zwirner, Gagosian Gallery, Gladstone Gallery, Matthew Marks Gallery, Pace Gallery, Hauser & Wirth)

Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis

Children's Museum, Indianapolis

LACMA (Los Angeles Contemporary Art Museum), Los Angeles

The Broad, Los Angeles

# 1. Digital innovation

## 1.1 Introduction

In 2016 the Museums and the Web conference - the major annual international event for museum professionals, academics, consultants and vendors working in the digital facet of museum operations - celebrated its 20th anniversary. While mainstream media coverage of digital innovation in museums often still has a breathless or incredulous tone ('It's not your grandfather's museum' or 'Museums are turning into theme parks!'), for practitioners this is now a well-established field with a distinct whakapapa of milestone projects and leading thinkers.

Every interaction with a museum I had on my trip was mediated in some way by digital technology, whether that was reserving my online entrance ticket for The Broad, downloading the National Gallery of Art's app in advance of my visit, using Mia's exploratory touchscreen interface in their galleries, or simply searching online to figure out transport options prior to my visit.

One of the frequently expressed concerns regarding the introduction of digital technology into gallery displays is that touchscreens or interactives will distract the visitor from the unique selling point of museums: the actual object. Current thinking in digital teams is around how technology can be used to enhance social experiences at museums, rather than isolate the user. The phrase 'heads-up experiences' has emerged to describe the use of technology to promote close looking and social visiting, as opposed to 'heads-down', implying a visit spent looking at screens and not objects.

Another theme in conversations about the layering of digital experiences into the museum is discussion of the 'visitor journey', divided at a high level into pre-visit (researching the museum, its collections and exhibitions, identifying programmes and items of interest) on site (experiencing the museum, from ticketing all the way through to the gift shop) and post-visit (follow-up research or visiting a web-enabled record of your visit).

Launched in 2011, the O, the digital visitor guide to Hobart contemporary art museum MONA has become an exemplar of heads-up technology and innovative post-visit experience that promotes unusually high levels of follow-up engagement by visitors. As part of the ticketing process, every visitor is given an iPod Touch on entry to the museum, which is loaded with the O software (an iOS app developed by Art Processors). The O takes the place of interpretation at the museum (which, famously, does not have labels for the artworks on display). As the visitor moves around the museum they can see images and details for works 'near them' on the O and choose which to access more information around. Following MONA's pointedly irreverent tone, visitors are offered choices of 'Art Wank' (curatorial descriptions), 'Ideas' (talking points, quotes, provocative statements), 'Media' (short interviews with artists) and 'Gonzo' (the voice of the museum's founder, collector David Walsh).

Using the O, visitors can 'Love' or 'Hate' artworks on display, and see how other visitors ranked the same objects. In addition, by entering their email address the visitor can retrieve the details of their visit after leaving the museum by logging into MONA's website, at which time they can see a visualisation of the paths they took through the museum and retrieve the information about artworks. It is notable that MONA has not put its collection online for general web visitors: only by logging in, following a physical visit, can a person explore the collection and the information and interviews aggregated in the O. As Seb Chan has noted, this is the prerogative of a museum that is privately owned and operated, but does not fit with the public mandate of most art museums (Chan, 2011). On the other hand, this does

make the post-visit experience an exclusive one, which is of a piece with MONA's branding of itself as an art pilgrimage experience. MONA and the O have influenced the thinking of many digital practitioners in museums around the world, including some of those I visited on this trip.

In this report, I focus on two flagship projects: the Brooklyn Museum's 'Ask app', an in-gallery app that enables real-time conversations between visitors and staff, and the Cooper Hewitt's 'Pen' (the signature development of their recent three-year overhaul of the museum's building, visitor experience and technology platform). Both museums are in New York, both projects were funded through the philanthropic programme Bloomberg Connects, and both were led by practitioners who have strong track records of digital innovation. Both projects arise from a desire to enhance the 'eyes up' visit, as opposed to the 'eyes down' (i.e. to increase the time visitors spend looking at and thinking about the works on displays, rather than increase the time spent looking at screens or reading labels). At the same time, the Pen and the Ask app also emerge from very specific museum missions and philosophies around visitor experience.

In this section I also discuss how digital innovation has become part of museums' institutional brands, alongside their buildings, collections and exhibition programmes. I reflect on this in the context of my visit to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, which drew a great deal of attention for their digital products and internet-inflected public programming three-five years ago, but which have not sustained these efforts.

## **1.2 Ask app - Brooklyn Museum**

### *Background and objectives*

The goal of the Ask app and associated work programme is to 'create a dynamic and responsive museum that fosters dialogue and sparks conversation between staff and all Museum visitors' (Bernstein 2014). From their visitor research, the museum knows that the majority of its visitors live near the museum, and visit repeatedly. The app is part of the museum's wider goal to serve this community well.

The Ask app is designed to encourage visitors to ask questions about what they're looking at. Available on both iOS and Android platforms, people download the app, which presents only generic information about visiting the museum until they are on the museum premises.

On entering the museum the app 'wakes up'. Visitors can then submit questions using an interface that is familiar for people who text or use chat or messaging services, including uploading images. Specially trained staff receive and answer the questions within minutes: enquiries and answers are added to a database which complements existing documentation of the collections, and shared regularly with curators, to build a staff-wide understanding of what is piquing visitors' curiosity, or what they may not be receiving from existing signage and interpretation.

The team working on the Ask app have three goals:

- Fostering a personal connection with visitors and creating opportunities to talk about art
- Encouraging visitors to look more closely at art, and explore more art as a result
- Use data gained through the app to inform decisions about how art is displayed, thus using visitor data to drive institutional change.

The development of the Ask app has been integral to a larger project reviewing the visitor experience of the Brooklyn Museum, including a redesign of their entry lobby and visitor reception to improve visitor flow and quickly orient visitors to the museum.

*Interview with Shelley Bernstein, Vice Director of Digital Engagement & Technology*

On my visit to Brooklyn Museum I met with Shelley Bernstein – who spearheaded the development of the Ask App as well as many of the museum’s other digital developments over the past decade – before and after embarking on my trip around the galleries using the App. As information about the development of the App (from audience research to technical platforms) has been well documented by the museum online, our conversation focused on audience uptake and behaviour, on staff training, and on how information about audience needs and interests was being collected through the enquiries received through the App, and fed back to other areas of the staff, and into the development of collection records and future interpretation.

After my visit I sent Shelley an email detailing my experiences with the App, and we discussed this further online as my trip continued.

*My experience of the Ask App*

Unlike the Cooper Hewitt, where every visitor is given one of the pens as part of their museum entry, and the Dallas Museum of Art Friends programme (see Chapter 3), where roving ground floor visitor staff promote the programme to people as they enter the museum, the Ask app is not built into the entry or ticketing process at Brooklyn Museum. Visitors must either already be aware of the app (through word of mouth or the website) or notice small signage placed around the museum. Staff are aware of this limitation, and see it significantly influencing the current low uptake (about 2% of visitors were using the app at the time of my visit).

Using the Ask app did not come naturally to me. To start using the app, you have to think of a question to send, one that is not already answered by your pre-existing knowledge, or by the very good interpretation already provided in the galleries.

My first question was a slightly frustrating experience. I had a very specific query about a particular Gerrit Rietveld chair that was part of a design display. I wanted to know who would have access to buy it. What I was trying to understand was ‘Was this chair sold on the general market or did you have to know the designer to get one?’. The answer the Ask team sent me though, in a series of small chunks over the space of about three minutes, gave me context about the chair, the fact that the general public wasn’t interested in avant-garde design, and only in the fourth message told me that actually no, only the artist’s acquaintances acquired the chairs.

However, I was intrigued by how quickly the app grew on me. I found that I was generating more questions in response to the answers I was receiving, and this questioning behaviour persisted as I moved from gallery to gallery. I also felt like I struck up a rapport with the Ask responder, who expressed their own enjoyment of artworks I was sending through, and mentioned works by the same artist in other museums. At one point I found myself sending through observations rather than questions: I almost felt like I was visiting with a friend and having discussions in the galleries, rather than having a solitary experience.

On some occasions the time lag between my question and a response meant that the answer came through after I was finished with the part of the museum I had asked the question in. This was particularly the case when I asked a question about whether a sculpture in a lobby space was allowed to be touched: the reply arrived ten minutes after I

had moved on from the lobby, and therefore well after the use case was closed. As there is very little seating in the museum's galleries, it was difficult to find a place to pause my visit and wait for an answer.

As you move through the museum, you encounter works on display have been appended with Ask app-branded questions. These are designed to prompt curiosity about the app amongst those who have not downloaded it, and remind those people who have installed the app to use it. I found these branded prompts to be a weak point in the overall experience. The signage is large and more flamboyantly designed than the regular object labels used throughout the museum, but unfortunately the level and tone of the questions used feels babyish in comparison to the traditional object labels they were juxtaposed with. The analogy I would draw is to the interpretation technique of placing information panels targeted adults and children in the same exhibition: the traditional labels felt like the adult version, whereas the Ask labels felt like the kiddie prompt - in strong opposition to the target market of repeat visitors who are becoming more and more engaged with the museum's offerings.

Another distinctive feature of the Ask app is that when you leave the museum, the content of your conversation disappears from the app, which is effectively wiped clean and rendered inactive until your next visit. This is a feature that divides opinion amongst practitioners I have spoken to. On my visit I did not notice that this happened, and when it was brought to my attention, it felt natural to me: like any conversation had in a museum, you couldn't take it with you. Others who I talked about the app with wanted to be able to refer back to their conversations, or share them with other people, and were frustrated that (a) they could not do so and (b) they weren't aware of this until it was too late. While I was unconcerned with losing my conversation, I do think that having it disappear without warning violates an unwritten rule of internet good faith, that the content you create on a site should remain available to you unless you are explicitly told otherwise.

From an initially stiff beginning, by the end of my visit I found that my engagement with the museum had been deepened by the experience of using the Ask app. It was not so much that I learned new information I may not have been able to search out for myself, had I been sufficiently curious: it was because the inquiring part of my brain was lit up by using the app, and I found myself generating an unusual number of questions.

### **1.3 The Pen - Cooper Hewitt Design Museum**

#### *Background and objectives*

The Cooper Hewitt reopened in late 2014 after a major renovation of its heritage building, and a rebranding exercise. Alongside the physical redevelopment, the museum rebuilt its technology and digital offers to support its new take on its role as a design museum, rapidly digitising their collection, integrating new ticketing and customer relationship management software, building a new digital interface for their collection, and launching new digital experiences for on-site visitors, specifically a series of interactive tables, the Immersion Room, and the 'Pen'.

After initially investigating using a version of MONA's O platform, the Cooper Hewitt decided to create their own experience. Working with a number of hardware, software and design companies, the Cooper Hewitt created a range of experiences, from the Immersion Room (where visitors digitally explore the museum's large wallpaper collection then design their own wallpapers, which are digitally projected into the room they are standing in) to a Process Lab (a hands-on exploratory space) to interactive tables that allow for collection browsing and simple design exercises.

Uniting all these experiences is the Pen, a piece of custom-made hardware shaped like a stylus that allows the visitor to interact with the different digital experiences of the museum, and 'collect' information about the items that are on display. All the visitor's interactions are available to them after their visit via a personalised URL; the museum is concurrently collecting and analysing data from the Pen to better understand visitor behaviour (e.g. length of stay, under-visited galleries, items that are frequently or infrequently 'collected').

The museum's key concepts for integrating media and technology into the visitor experience were:

- Give visitors explicit permission to play
- Make interactive experiences social and multi-player and allow people to learn by watching
- Ensure a 'look up' experience
- Be ubiquitous, a 'default' operating mode for the institution
- Work in conjunction with the web and offer a "persistence of visit" (Cope and Chan, 2015)

#### *Interview with Micah Walter, Director of Digital & Emerging Media*

Before I toured the Cooper Hewitt, I met with Micah Walter. Seb Chan had recently left this role, but I met with him when I attended Museums and the Web Australasia immediately after my trip and had the opportunity to compare notes.

As with the Ask App, the development of the Pen has been extensively documented online. In our conversation Micah and I focused on take up rates, visitor behaviour, and plans for future developments. Micah accompanied me as I bought my entry ticket and was given my Pen for my visit, and talked me through the signage and support they were deploying to explain to new visitors why and how to use the Pen.

#### *My experience of the Pen and other interactive elements in the museum*

Unlike the DMA Friends (discussed later in this report), where the programme is promoted but not a requirement for free entry, and the Ask app, which depends on visitors self-initiating a download, the Pen is given to every visitor at the Cooper Hewitt as part of the ticketing project. Every visitor receives a well-honed patter that takes the staff member about 40 seconds to deliver, explaining how they can use the pen during and after their visit. You can see in this piece of visitor experience design the observations Chan made in 2011 about the digital experience of MONA in Hobart:

*I was very impressed by the 'technology concierge' skills of the ticketing staff – they run you through the basics of the App and the hardware as they sell you your ticket and set you off on your way. Sitting beside the cash register is a graphic clearly explaining each of the main interface screens of the O as well. I've never seen this level of 'scaffolding' happen in other museums and the deftness with which visitors are set off on their way quickly is a testament to their staff training (and acceptance amongst these staff of the value of the O itself) (Chan, 2011).*

The front of house staff member explains to each visitor the two ways each Pen can be used: to "collect" information about objects on display by pressing one end of the Pen to icons on information labels (this information is stored in the Pen, and in your post-visit URL); and to "download" this information by docking the Pen to an interactive table, where the objects you have collected on your visit can be explored through their catalogue records, and serve as a springboard to exploration of more collections items through the interactive.

I loved the Pen as an object. It is like an oversized, enjoyably rubbery crayon in the hand, with sufficient weight to feel useful, not flimsy. The act of pressing the pen to labels brought an pleasant tactile and physical element to my visit which is usually lacking in galleries. I also enjoyed using a device that was unique to the building I was in, rather than borrowing an iPod or using my own phone. It brought a level of specialness to the experience, and subtly emphasised the museum's entire ethos: the history of human innovation and adaption as expressed through design.

The Pen became pesky when I was trying juggle using it, however, using my phone to take photos, and using my notebook and pen to make notes about my visit - especially as the museum is small, and has little seating or break-out space.

As I moved through the *Making Design* exhibitions on the second floor, the fundamental underlying changes to the way the museum approaches objects became clear to me. *Making Design* is a rotating collection exhibition, using groupings of collection items to explore five key elements of design: line, form, texture, pattern, and color. Some of these are straightforward (such as a grouping of blue objects) but others were more complex. I was particularly struck by a pairing in one case of an early 20th century bracelet and an early 21st century piece of medical technology used in shoulder reconstruction surgery. The two objects seem very unrelated, but when I read the label, deeper connections emerged. The labels include the tags assigned into the collection database to each item. In the case of the implant, the first two words as aesthetic descriptors: 'lace-like', 'snowflake'. Suddenly, a piece of medical technology was being presented simultaneously for its use value, and for its aesthetic qualities. This was eloquently but subtly suggested by the display, by the interpretation, and by the Cooper Hewitt's emphasis on actively making sense of objects as part of your visit.

During my visit I came to perceive the Pen as the most recent point on a design continuum that stretched from the beautiful historic home the museum is housed in, out through its collections, and right up into the contemporary visitor experience. This insight crystallised for me in the first floor collection galleries. I was standing in the mansion's original library, hand carved from teak in the 19th century: through the door of the gallery I could see an Issey Miyake dress from around the turn of the century on display. Between me and the dress were two young women, using the Pen on one of the interactive tables. In that moment I experienced design across the centuries: design history in action.

The topmost floor of the Cooper Hewitt was given over to a touring exhibition showcasing the work of Heatherwick Studios. The integration of the Pen into an exhibition sourced from outside the museum, not made up of objects existing in its collection database, is still an issue being worked through by the Cooper Hewitt. The show was displayed as a series of modules or pods devoted to individual projects: the integration of the Pen is limited to panels attached to the walls around the galleries where you could 'collect' the various displays. This breaks the user experience pattern set by the rest of the museum, and given that the panels are modest to the point of invisibility, in these spaces I didn't see anyone else except me - dutiful expert visitor - using their Pen.

I was also disappointed by the design interactives on the ground floor touch-tables. On the tables you can design certain objects (lamps, chairs, etc.) by selecting the form and materials and then sketching lines. I chose a lamp and concrete and with two intersecting lines made an elegant form. Compared to the intelligence and empathy with which the work of designers is displayed throughout the museum, I felt this particular interactive undersold the true complexity of the design process.

The very last place I visited was the hands-on design exploration studio on the ground floor of the museum, tucked through a doorway after the tables that I used above. On walking into

the room I realised my haptic needs had already been met on my visit. I didn't want to twist cellophane and hessian around wire armatures to make lightshades because I'd already done things like that. I assume however that the room is extremely well-suited to group use and education visits: the exhibition galleries themselves would quickly feel crowded if visitors were sharing the space with school groups.

I also have to admit to being one of those people who never visited their URL after their visit (in the first five months after the Pen was introduced, the take-up rate was about 34%). I flirted with the idea of doing it for the sake of completeness, but I decided to stay true to my natural inclinations (and those of 66% of visitors). While the post-visit URL is the museum's formal, designed attempt to remain linked with the visitor after they leave the physical building, my online relationship with the Cooper Hewitt probably reflects my professional concerns and consists of what I think of as the 'micro-touches': the multiple ways I "hear" from the museum in my everyday online life, by following the museum's digital development blog and Twitter account, and following several staff and ex-staff on social media. Physically visiting the museum has given greater depth to my ongoing digital interaction.

As a museum of design, the Cooper Hewitt's use of technology in its exhibitions and building possesses an extra layer of meaning: devices and interactives that are part of the museum experience are also part of the material world that the museum seeks to collect, document and share with the public. The museum's presentation of the Pen is not simply as an accessory to the physical visit: it is presented and discussed as a piece of design, consistent with all the other examples of design in the museum, set apart from all other examples in that you actually get to use it.

#### **1.4 Innovation and sustainability**

Traditionally, a museum's brand has been built on buildings, collections, 'rockstar' staff, and exhibition programmes.

Today, digital is definitely the newest way of branding an institution. This can be seen in increasing amounts of media coverage for digital strategies and philanthropic support for digital initiatives. And unlike buildings, exhibitions programmes, and collections, a new digital brand can be forged relatively rapidly.

I felt that each of the museums whose technology efforts I focused on made a strong brand statement through the values and objectives that drove their projects. The DMA's digital brand expresses a commitment to inclusion - widening their audience beyond the country club that previously felt at home in the museum. Cooper Hewitt's brand says that design is an integral part of being human, and each of us has a designer inside us. The Brooklyn Museum's brand says that people are intelligent and curious about art and warrant personal responses to their curiosity. All these brand statements are being communicated out through messages to members, funders, stakeholders, residents, and the general public.

However, I have come to feel there is a distinct danger of your digital brand being, or becoming, disassociated from your physical experience.

My clearest experience of this was visiting the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. In 2012 the Walker's then-Senior New Media Developer Nate Solas was invited to keynote at New Zealand's annual National Digital Forum conference on the museum's recently redeveloped website, which was being held up as an international exemplar at the time. The Walker's website redevelopment was carried out with a philosophy of unusual generosity and external focus, and with the aim of supporting the local art community as well as positioning the museum internationally. This was exemplified by the homepage of the website becoming a

newshub for external art stories, connecting their audience in with the global and local arts world. This reinforced the brand of the Walker as a node in the international art media environment. I found their way of thinking inspirational, and have tried to follow it in the way we behave online at The Dowse.

Alongside the web redevelopment ran the Open Field programme, where a large undeveloped grass area in front of the museum, intended for a building extension that hadn't been realised, was turned into a community-focused performance and activity space, hosting everything from yoga classes to internet cat video festivals.

The conjunction of the newsy, outward-looking website and the innovative, welcoming Open Field programme (which attracted significant internet attention) created a strong brand awareness for the Walker with me. I felt very connected to the museum, despite never having visited. This left me with very high expectations when I finally visited the museum.

The Walker has famously innovative architecture and a blue-chip art collection. The wayfinding and graphic design throughout the museum was slick and sharp. But as a visitor to the physical museum, I experienced none of the generosity and freshness I felt online. And the biggest surprise was that Open Field programme had been stopped, most of the staff involved had moved on, and the physical space was literally being dug up, to be turned into a sculpture garden. Many of the staff who led both the Open Field programming and the digital development have moved on to other museums, or to the private sector.

One of the greatest attractions of the web is the speed of change and the emphasis on experimentation. Museums are known for 'being in it for the long haul' and thus having a sometimes glacial pace of change, a persona that can be in conflict with the joyous embrace of change in web development. My visit to the Walker left me thinking about how we need to consider about how we make enduring digital change, where the values of our work can be sustained, even if the forms it takes are constantly evolving.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

The digital projects at Brooklyn Museum and the Cooper Hewitt, though very different in their outcomes, are the same in their intent: encouraging visitors to actively make sense of what they are looking at, by asking questions and organising objects.

What unites the Ask app and the Pen is a focus on the on-site, eyes-up experience. Moving past the bogeyman of digital technology being a distraction from the museum object, the focus is now on giving the visitor reason to look more closely, for longer.

My overall assessment is that the focus of digital technology in American museums at the current time is 'on-site' over 'online': this can also be detected at new and recently renovated museums like The Broad in Los Angeles and SFMOMA in San Francisco, where audio tours and location-aware eyes-up digital experiences have been heavily promoted as part of the opening media push. After a decade or more of projects seeking online engagement and community-building (not necessarily linked to physical visitation), American art museums who are leading digital innovation have their attention fixed on extending (through pre-, during and post-visit services) and enriching (encouraging longer looking and greater curiosity) the experience of the physical visitor.

In terms of post-visit experience, I have yet to follow any of the prompts given to me, be that the Cooper Hewitt's URL or the regular promotional emails from the DMA. Instead, I continue to follow the museums through micro-touches: Twitter and Instagram accounts, blog posts, conference presentations. My personal situation is so niche - a museum professional located in a country physically distant from the large centres of museum

discourse and thus heavily internet-aware of international museum activity - that I do not view this as useful data. My extrapolation though is a reinforced awareness of the need for museums to be consistent in all the messaging they put out into the public realm - from apps to bus shelter posters, magazine ads to Facebook posts.

While in Washington I met with Michael Edson, then Director of Web and New Media Strategy at the Smithsonian Institution (he has since moved on to a new role). Michael and I talked extensively about the shifts I was researching in digital innovation – the change in focus from online projects with a potential global audience to on-site projects focused on physical visitors. While there is steady innovation in this space, and it is exciting to see such an emphasis on enhancing the visitor's experience and their ability to connect to the works on display, there also seems to have been a reduction in sector-wide, collaborative endeavours seen in the previous decade. It may be that as a sector we have figured out collaborative platforms, APIs, metadata sharing and so on, but I also wonder if the increasingly walled garden nature of the contemporary internet (the design especially of social media sites to keep you within the application, rather than roaming the open web) and the bedding-in of digital practice as business as usual rather than experimental work is seeing art museums displaying a less collaborative, more internally-focused approach to digital development than in the past decade. In due time, and with the benefit of hindsight, we may also see that external funding (such as that provided by Bloomberg) has affected the objectives and design of digital projects, encouraging institutions to focus on their own visitors, and not think of arts audiences as being made up of people who patronise (physically and online) multiple museums, potentially in multiple cities and countries.

## 1.6 Further information

### Ask App

For more information on the Brooklyn Museum's Ask App project see their online documentation at BKM TECH <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/> and especially entries tagged "BloombergConnects"

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Daniel McDermon, 'Who's in Charge at the Brooklyn Museum? It Could Be You', *New York Times*, 29 April 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/30/arts/design/at-the-brooklyn-museum-with-a-chatty-curator-in-your-pocket.html>

## Cooper Hewitt Pen

For an overview of the Cooper Hewitt's in-gallery digital experiences see their The New Cooper Hewitt Experience page <http://www.cooperhewitt.org/new-experience/>

For more information on the Cooper Hewitt's Pen and digital transformation see their online documentation on the Cooper Hewitt Labs site <http://labs.cooperhewitt.org/> and especially entries tagged "CH3.0" <http://labs.cooperhewitt.org/category/ch-3-0/>

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Lynda Kelly, 'Visitors, apps, post-visit experiences and a re-think of digital engagement, part 2', #musdigi, 8 October 2015 <https://musdigi.wordpress.com/2015/10/08/visitors-apps-post-visit-experiences-and-a-re-think-of-digital-engagement-part-2/>

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Website <http://www.walkerart.org/>

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Seb Chan, 'The museum website as newspaper', Fresh+New(er), 3 December 2011 <http://www.freshandnew.org/2011/12/museum-website-newspaper-interview-walker-art-center/>

Open Field programme <http://www.walkerart.org/openfield/>

## 2. Visible storage

### 2.1 Introduction

Open collections, or visible storage, is a general term used to describe public displays within museums where the emphasis is placed upon access and serendipitous discovery rather than a curated, white-wall experience. Visible storage is a way of giving museum visitors a feeling of being 'behind the scenes' in the normally off-limits art collection store, and addresses the oft-heard complaint of museums only displaying a tiny fraction of their permanent holdings at any given time.

Visible storage displays were introduced in the mid 1970s, as museums moved towards a more educational and audience-focused mission. In these spaces, objects are usually displayed in fairly functional cases and shelving, closely grouped. Objects may be minimally labelled, or described through numbering, and handbooks or database access is provided to assist the visitor to learn more: lengthy descriptive labels are rare. Objects do not tend to be moved or exchanged often, although items may be withdrawn for exhibition or loan. Small temporary display spaces may be built into the larger space, offering the opportunity to create 'focus' exhibitions on certain groups of objects with more interpretation.

Sculpture, ceramics, glass, design objects, furniture and paintings are well suited to this form of long term display. Light-sensitive materials such as textiles, photography and watercolours are rarely displayed in this manner, as the conservation risk is too high.

In American museums, visible storage ranges from small galleries, almost like nooks, to large purpose-built spaces that may include space for researchers to work. It is worth noting that while these study centres are presented as 'uncurated' spaces (suggesting that the objects on display have not been selected with the same level of curatorial decision-making as objects in a normal gallery exhibition, and that the display has not been designed with the same level of aesthetic attention) there is a strong shared visual language and interpretation approach to visible storage. A virtue is made of providing only minimal labelling or interpretation, meant to encourage browsing and a visual, rather than textual, engagement with the objects. Objects are grouped by medium, size, type, or place of origin rather than chronologically, thematically, or by artist, as a visitor would expect in a normal exhibition. Display cases and racks are functional (glass and metal cases, or large heavy drawers) or old-fashioned (small, wooden): white plinths of the sort used in collection or temporary galleries are rarely employed.

The overarching narrative is that visible storage encourages unmediated access where visitors are free to make their own observations and engage in slow, close looking: this is, of course, as conscious a curatorial and design choice as any other arrangement of objects into a gallery display. In this section of this report I present observations from visits to the open storage areas at the Brooklyn Museum and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which launched their visible storage areas in the early 2000s. Neither of these displays, while impressive, has been actively maintained and they feel somewhat tired today. To provide further context I note other recent international developments in this area, including the recently opened Broad Museum in Los Angeles, designed to make looking into the collection store part of the visitor's experience of moving around the building.

### 2.2 Henry Luce Foundation support

Between 1985 and 2001 the Henry Luce Foundation, through its American Art Program, gave significant amounts of funding to four museums to increase public access to their

collections by creating visible storage spaces. On my trip I visited two of the four: Brooklyn Museum and the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

#### *Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*

In 1985 the Met received the first Luce Foundation grant to create a visible storage centre. The 16,000 square foot facility, named the Henry R. Luce Center for the Study of American Art, opened in 1988 and displays a significant portion of their American fine art and decorative art collection (over 10,000 objects). Items are grouped by medium (painting, sculpture, furniture and woodwork, glass, ceramics, silver and metalwork) and within those categories by date. Light-sensitive works such as textiles and watercolours are not on view but can be seen by appointment.

#### *New York Historical Society*

The NYHS was the second recipient of a Luce Foundation grant for visible storage. In this instance, rather than fitting out a display space, the grant was used to create views into actual storage spaces, giving visual access to approximately 40,000 objects. This facility, the Henry Luce III Center for the Study of American Culture, opened in 2000. The Center is currently closed for an extensive renovation.

#### *Brooklyn Museum*

The Brooklyn Museum received a \$10 million grant in 2001 towards a reinstallation of their permanent collection galleries displaying their American art collection, and a visible storage centre. The Luce Center for American Art is a 5,000 square foot space displaying approximately 2000 objects, from Tiffany glass to contemporary furniture, and with nearly 600 paintings on rolling racks. Space is set aside for small feature exhibitions and representative selections of Native American and Spanish colonial objects are included. Database access points are built into the space.

#### *Smithsonian American Art Museum*

SAAM received a \$10 million grant to create the Luce Foundation Center in 2001; \$7 million towards the development of the Center and \$3 million towards an endowment to support ongoing staffing and programmes. A library within the museum's 19th century building - previously the National Patents Office - was renovated to create the Center. Approximately 3,3000 objects are spread over three levels: large sculptures on the bottom floor, and then paintings and objects in cases cases and pneumatic drawers on two mezzanine levels. Objects on display vary from portrait miniatures to Roman glass vessels to folk art paintings. The drawers make it possible to display some light sensitive materials, as they are climate controlled and only lit when opened.

The Luce Conservation Center is adjacent to the space, allowing behind-the-scenes view of conservation procedures. Study tables and some database access points are built into the space.

## **2.3 Visits**

#### *Smithsonian American Art Museum*

I first visited the Luce Foundation at SAAM in mid 2013. At the time I found the experience engaging: the eclectic mixing of objects, the lack of overt supervision which created a more intimate sense as a visitor, like browsing in someone's house while they were in another room. There was no-one to discourage photography on either visit, and the setting - wooden

balustrades, large chandeliers, small staircases between floors - lends to the old-fashioned, romantic atmosphere - almost like a very good antique store.

The experience however does not appear to be being refreshed with any regularity. I did not notice any changes having taken place in the two years between my visits, and in fact a set of the pneumatic drawers that had were not functioning in 2013 were still out of order in 2015. No new visitor features or interpretation were provided.

The database stations are becoming outmoded and the research space is basic. The Center was unstaffed on the weekend that I visited. While the bones are in place for a rich experience, my second visit to the space made me question whether static open storage exhibition designs will have ongoing appeal for repeat visitors; this was a surprise to me, because my own tendencies as a visitor incline me towards galleries like this.

### *Brooklyn Museum*

The Brooklyn Museum's Luce Center for American Art is entered off the permanent galleries displaying the American Art collection: redesigned in early 2016, these galleries at the time of my visit displayed American art, design and craft along with Native American and Spanish colonial-era art in eight thematic displays that were highly designed, richly coloured, and mixed objects from different genres in each display.

The Luce Center had a strikingly different aesthetic from the rest of the museum. The back of the space - behind a glass wall - is devoted to painting racks, of which only the first row is visible. The rest of the space is full of tall, multi-level glass and steel cases, giving a warehouse-like atmosphere. Lighting is kept dim, and many cases have a flashlight attached to them to allow for better inspection. The objects vary greatly in size, from jewellery in drawers to large statues in their own cases. Database access is provided through screens affixed to the sides of cases with a metal chair provided. The overall effect was more dramatic and contemporary than SAAM, but the space also felt dim, cool, and not conducive to lingering, compared, for example, to recent work done at the museum to make the foyer a more hospitable space that visitors would enjoy lingering in.

I met with Matthew Yokobosky, the museum's Chief Designer, who had originally worked on the construction of the space. (The two curators who worked on the project have left the museum.) He described how industrial materials were chosen to be cost-effective, but also to contrast to the curated galleries. The brief sought to communicate the sense of the wealth and diversity of the collections, and this is achieved. The lighting is in need of renewal, but this is not a priority, and hence the centre is darker than intended – teamed with the spartan furnishings, the overall effect is a space rich for exploration, but not comfortable to spend time in.

While at the Brooklyn Museum I also visited Double Take: African Innovations, a temporary display of objects from the museum's African Art collection. This is the second shorter term exhibition of this collection, undertaken during a longer term renovation of the museum's first floor galleries.

The main gallery displays nearly 40 collection items arranged in 15 pairs or small groups, each exploring subjects, themes and artistic techniques that recur throughout African history: the emphasis is on continuity and innovation. Each display encourages viewers to draw connections between the artworks they are looking at. In an adjacent gallery, a further 150 items are displayed in what the curator describes as an 'unstructured sampling': the display method is more closely packed and presented with less interpretation than the first gallery, but is still displayed in more of a 'gallery' aesthetic than the Luce Center. Visitors are

encouraged to make their own new pairings of these objects through an interactive display, and share them on social media using a hashtag.

I found this mixed display - a modernist hang, where artworks are given a great deal of space and interpretation, alongside a denser, compacted display of multiple items on a similar theme - to be the most successful of the visible storage approaches I saw on my visit. Despite coming to this gallery at the end of my seven-hour visit to the museum, I was still pulled in to both the artworks and the pairing-making activity. The contrast between overtly curated display and ostensibly random sampling gives the impression of both an experience that has been created for you as the viewer, and an experience that is handed over to you to serendipitously explore, and to respond to in a concrete way.

## 2.4 Recent developments in visible storage

Visible storage and digitised collections have evolved alongside each other as responses to the constraint of physical space, and museums' inability to ever properly display more than a small percentage of their holdings in curated exhibitions. While the area of digital developments is extremely well documented, there is little research or evaluation generally available on the history, trends, and visitor experience of visible storage.

The general trend for new and planned visible storage spaces is to take a more dramatic or overtly designed approach to the design of displays, contra to the earlier emphasis on evoking or replicating the functional design of actual storage spaces.

For example, the York Art Gallery has recently opened its Centre of Ceramic Art. The museum holds Britain's most significant collection of British studio pottery, and its building was recently redeveloped to create this centre. A large number of collection items are presented in a variety of ways: the 17-metre long Wall of Pots contains over 1000 objects from the Roman era to the present day, currently organised by colour; two domestically-scaled rooms have been created to display the collection of Anthony B. Shaw, mingling objects with bookshelves; and for the opening of the exhibition ceramicist Clare Twomey was commissioned to create *Manifest: 10,000 Hours*, a towering installation of 10,000 identical white slip-cast vessels that acts as the anchor of the new centre.

In another example, the New York Historical Society (a previous recipient of a Luce Foundation grant for visible storage) is currently renovating its fourth floor galleries. Opening in January 2017, the renovated floor will include a gallery designed by architect Eva Jiříčná dedicated to the Tiffany lamp collection; the newly established Center for the Study of Women's History, which will present exhibitions and public programmes along with an 'immersive multimedia film', and a 're-imagined display of collection highlights' in the Henry Luce III Center for the Study of American Culture.

An alternative approach is evinced at the newly opened Broad Museum in Los Angeles. The architectural conceit of this building, designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, is of 'the vault and the veil'. The building, wrapped in a striking articulated fibreglass-enriched concrete mesh, is constructed around a large central well which forms the collection storage space. Windows are let into the public access staircase and the first floor, allowing visitors to peek into the working storage space. While convincing as a design notion, the actual visitor experience is of small apertures in out of the way locations, which do not provide large or comfortable views. The windows, let into corners on the staircase, are surprisingly easily missed and uncomfortable to linger at, as there is nowhere to lean or sit, or to avoid becoming an obstruction to other visitors' progress.

An interactive display at the Cooper Hewitt offers another alternative for mass-access to a collection, through digitisation rather than display of objects. In the immersion room, visitors

can access the museum's extensive collection of wall coverings. Using an interactive table, visitors can browse through wallpapers and project them onto the walls of the small gallery. Visitors can also use the collection items for inspiration for their own designs, which they can create on the table and project. The Immersion Room is not only popular with visitors, but a strong attractor for social media engagement, through the sharing of photos taken in the gallery. Much like the Brooklyn Museum's African art display, the room enables exploration of a large collection, visitors' own creation and then subsequent sharing; its very positive reception (as documented through high social sharing on sites such as Instagram and the focus on the room in early reviews of the refurbished museum) suggests these could be key features in future developments of such spaces.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Visible storage spaces tend to be heavily invested in upfront and then not updated for a considerable period of time: any area of a museum that is left unloved for too long inevitably begins to convey some sense of that neglect to visitors, like a room in a house that is never aired out.

My experiences on this research trip suggest that the behind the scenes aesthetic is beginning to pall, and that mixed-density displays, combining the familiar aesthetics of both gallery exhibition and collection storage, with a higher level of interpretation and greater opportunity for visitor interaction, are becoming more appealing.

Visible storage is also an area of museum practice that is ripe for more research into visitors' interest, expectations, and actual experience. This is especially so in a digital age where access to a museum's holdings through technology (be that an interactive screen, table, or personal device) is becoming the default setting, at the same time that museums employ more and more design techniques to create immersive and spectacular displays in order to remain compelling in an increasingly visual and design-driven world.

## 2.6 Further information

Henry Luce Foundation American Art Program

<http://www.hluce.org/americanart.aspx>

Metropolitan Museum of Art

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## 3. Membership programmes and data gathering

### 3.1. Introduction

Museum membership programmes have two main objectives: to generate an unrestricted source of revenue for the museum, and to create a core group of supporters who will attend exhibitions and events, spread the word about the museum's activities, and hopefully further contribute to the museum through donations and bequests. Membership levels are generally tiered: at the lowest levels, membership is generally seen as a direct exchange for benefits (free or discounted exhibition entry, parking, merchandise, etc.) and the cost of acquiring and servicing members usually takes up a significant portion of the revenue generated. At higher levels, the revenue often outweighs the benefits received, and membership is seen as a form of philanthropy.

Museums are increasingly concerned about how to attract new members, and are not seeing younger visitors transition into becoming members in the way their predecessors did. Research has been conducted into millennials attitudes towards museum membership, and shows changing priorities; while free admission is still the highest priority, younger generations are less interested in exclusive access or perks, and are increasingly interested in showing their support for social causes (Dilenschneider 2012, 2015).

Like many museum directors, I am interested in new approaches to museum membership programmes. Without doubt, the most discussed project in this area in the past three years has been the Dallas Museum of Art's Friends programme. The programme is designed to encourage repeat visitation from locals and deeper engagement during each visit: underlying it is a plan to collect data on visitor behaviour and then analyse that for insights about their visitor demographics and ideas to feed back into the museum's programming.

On this trip I both wanted to meet with staff at the museum to learn about how the programme had been implemented and evaluated, and to have the experience of signing up as a member and visiting the museum as a Friend myself.

### 3.2 Museum memberships in the internet age

My own observation is that over the past ten years, with museums' rapid adoption of social media platforms, the concepts of loyalty, friendship and access have changed. Museums now regularly share online the kinds of stories and insights that were once the purview of a museum member. People follow museums online that may be nowhere near their geographical location, enjoying a sense of connection and support that may never translate into a physical visit. To give a leading example: in 2016, the Met announced that 61% of followers on Instagram, 53% on Twitter, and 69% on Facebook were international (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016).

The Brooklyn Museum's 1st Fans programme was an early experiment in museum membership in the online world. The programme, which ran from 2009 to 2012, was designed to appeal to two groups who did not buy traditional museum memberships: regular attendees of their Target First Saturdays (free admission days) and online fans of the museum. Often described as a 'social media membership', the programme offered access to private channels on Flickr, Twitter and Facebook, where exclusive content was shared, and physical meet-up events at the museum, for \$20 a year. The creators, Will Cary (Memberships Manager 2008-2010) and Shelley Bernstein (Vice Director of Digital Engagement & Technology until 2016), saw the programme as a way of offering a form of membership that was not about buying cheaper access to the museum, but about forming a

deeper relationship with the museum and greater two-way interaction. This thinking was very much in the air in 2008 (when the programme was conceived), when museums were moving rapidly into the area of online community management (following the lead of early champions such as photo-sharing site Flickr) and the use of social media too, for the first time, offer large-scale personalised two-way communication between the museum and its audiences. The programme, while loved by its participants, stalled in its growth and moreover did not transition members from this 'beginner' level to higher tiers of membership, a development path that is key to generating the revenue that is, after all, part of the reason for having membership programmes. The programme was shut down in mid 2012 (Bernstein, 2012).

The Dallas Museum of Art's Friends membership programme could be seen as an evolution of this thinking on what membership looks like in an online world. Where Brooklyn Museum took its model from community management, the web zeitgeist of its time, the DMA's is informed by our contemporary focus on data collection and data mining.

In late 2012, the DMA announced they were about to reinstate free general admission to the museum. This in itself was not innovative: approximately one third of American art museums have free admission (although this is most common in organisations located in universities). In the same announcement though the museum announced a new, free level of museum membership, the 'Friends', that would allow participants to collect points that could later be converted into their choice of rewards. At the time of the announcement director Maxwell L. Anderson stated that "Nobody has ever done this. ... We're going to build a model for museum engagement that we believe every other museum like us will want to have" (Granberry 2012).

Anderson has long argued that museum admissions bring only a tiny fraction of museum's earned revenue (2%-5%) while presenting a significant financial and social barrier to attendance, especially to non-traditional audiences. (It is worth noting that the DMA received a US\$9 million donation to fund free admission, the development of the Friends platform, and collection digitisation.) As director of the Indianapolis Museum of Art (his role previous to the DMA) Anderson had reinstated free admission with the ambition of removing barriers to access; the Friends programme at the DMA was the next iteration of his aspiration to expand and diversify museum attendance.

While this was not the message of early announcements, the Friends programme quickly became framed by the museum and by commentators as an exchange of data for access. Within a year, arts commentator Tyler Green described it as a successful "data-for-free-admission deal" (Green 2014). In this way, DMA Friends trades upon our growing comfort with (or resignation to) sharing a little bit of information about ourselves in return for access or convenience: handing over our email address for a discount, using Facebook to create an account on another platform, accepting cookies on a website. Deliberately or unwittingly, we are accessing the bounty of the internet seemingly for free, but really at the cost of the sharing of information about our age, gender, location, interests, shopping history, and more.

### **3.3 DMA Friends programme - objectives, implementation, and philosophy**

The Friends programme has three main aims:

- to promote the museum to non-visitors
- to increase engagement and repeat visitation
- to use the data gathered from tracking members of the programme to inform museum operations.

When the DMA made its double announcement, Anderson was quoted as saying "When somebody from South Dallas walks up to the front desk, and the person behind the counter says, 'Welcome to the DMA - are you members?' What are they hearing? It's like walking into a country club. It freaks you out. It's exclusionary. I want everybody to feel they belong here, so I want everybody to be a member" (cited in Granberry 2012).

Like all museums, the DMA is seeking to become more relevant to its community, and to attract an audience that more accurately reflects the population that surrounds it than the statistically-typical white, older, more educated, usually female museum visitor. Since the 1970s the museum world has been seeking to break down barriers to access - physical, financial and perceptual - through education, outreach, programming and partnerships. However, the perception of the museum as a place that is 'not for people like me' amongst non-white, lower income people is still strong. The announcement of free admission and the Friends was an opportunity for the museum to reach out to non-visitors with a striking new offer, and to engage every visitor in a new way (invite them to become a member rather than require them to pay for entry) as they entered the museum.

In a 2014 presentation, the DMA stated "The DMA staff's top priority is to increase the number of Friends who come back to the Museum tracked by the program" (Stein and Wyman 2014). Offering free admission enables people to make more frequent, shorter and ad hoc visits, rather than seeing visiting as an investment. While museums such as the Met, the Guggenheim and MOMA are tourist icons and draw a high proportion of visitors from domestic and international tourism, museums in most American (and other) cities are serving an audience largely living within driving distance. This is not to dismiss the important role museums play in promoting the reputation of a city and attracting visitors nationally and internationally, but at the same time, encouraging an increase in repeat visitation from local is an important goal for museums that want to be valued and valuable civic assets.

A negative outcome of free general admission is that museum staff lose an opportunity to personally engage with every visitor who comes into the building. When every visitor is required to purchase a ticket or present a membership card, the museum has a chance to cross-promote another activity or message. Without this, museum receptions become more like retail experiences - you may ask a visitor host for assistance or advice, or you may avoid them entirely. Mixing free membership with an interactive programme assists with the DMA's goal of increased repeat visitation and engagement. In a 2013 paper, Rob Stein (then Deputy Director and head of technology at the DMA) and museum consultant Bruce Wyman noted the urgent need for museums to "embrace cultures of participation" and respond to contemporary society's desire to be co-creators of the experiences we encounter, rather than passive consumers. (Stein and Wyman, 2013) They noted that despite significant effort from curators, interpreters and designers to construct defined and engaging exhibition layouts, self-directed visitors often "graze" their ways through museums, not necessarily consuming texts and objects in the order museum staff thought they that would be experienced and understood. At the same time, Stein and Wyman noted that people's learning is better and their experience more satisfying when they feel they have actively participated in the museum's offering.

The visitor-facing aspect of the Friends programme therefore seeks to create multiple pathways for people to engage with and enjoy the museum. Once a visitor is signed up for the programme (handing over their name, contact details and postcode), they have access to the Friend's 'digital engagement platform'. The platform uses a digital badging system, BadgesOS. The system works in a way familiar to any user of an incentive system: by completing certain activities, the visitor collects points, which can then be redeemed for a reward of their choice. Points are collected by the participant collecting short numerical codes as they visit the museum, either by texting them with their phone, or entering them on kiosks on the ground floor.

These activities take both long-term and one-off forms. A scavenger hunt may be run on a single evening, for example, with visitors solving clues, identifying paintings and gaining points. On the long term side, each gallery entrance in the museum has a code affixed to it denoting the exhibition inside: visitors can gain points by uploading these codes. Other 'challenges' are also available, such as gaining points by signing up a friend as a new Friend on your visit. On this level, the Friends operates within the mode of gamification - the application of elements of game playing (for example, point scoring and unlocking levels) to other areas of activity, including the physical world. Gamification techniques have been adopted by many museums in efforts to make their exhibitions 'stickier' (more interactive and more memorable) and provide opportunities for deeper participation.

These kinds of activities are not innovative in themselves. The true innovation behind the Friends programme is the linking of these activities to large-scale data collection about individual visitors, which the museum can then analyse. As Anderson said in a 2014 interview, "We're trying to incentivize people to represent what they're doing, where they're going, and how they're spending their time" (Tozzi 2014).

In a 2014 paper, Stein and Wyman noted:

*In the first year, nearly 50,000 individuals have joined the program, with a running average of 900 new friends per week, primarily from a local audience. Becoming a DMA Friend requires direct on-site enrollment and connection to Museum staff, making the enrollment statistics an important measure of local adoption. The Museum has awarded over 343,000 badges for participation during the launch year and has given away nearly 12,000 rewards connected to points earned in the program.*

In addition to providing a means for the staff of the Museum to structure and measure its performance for generating engagement, the DMA Friends programme also generates copious amounts of data about the behavior of individuals as they connect with the Museum's collections and programs. Truly one of the few big data problems in the museum-space, the Friends program generates more than 21.8 million discrete fields of data annually (Stein and Wyman, 2014). Tangentially, it would be interesting to compare this to the data now being collected with the Pen at the Cooper Hewitt, which has the ability to gather far more granular information about the visitor's path and points of interest, but collects no demographic data.

This data not only allows the museum to measure what events and exhibitions Friends members attend, when, and how often (on the assumption Friends are diligently gathering points as they visit): the museum can also associate this visitation data with the postcode information collected at sign-up.

On my visit, Rob Stein showed me the visualisations he can perform with this data, contrasting the visitor patterns they are collecting with Census data. This allows them to generate insights such as understanding which neighbourhoods they are serving, over-serving and under-serving. An insight like this might see the museum draw back on marketing that is reaching a community of high visitors in order to reach a community of lower visitors, or experiment with new programmes to attract new audiences and then measure their success through the Friends data. By using the Census data as a proxy, the DMA can also extrapolate an estimate of the demographics (age, ethnicity, education and income) of their visitors at a scale inconceivable from traditional face to face, phone or online surveying.

In a podcast interview, Anderson noted that the data available through the Friends project lent itself to a more rigorous evaluation of the audience appeal of the museum's

programming than ever before (Inscho, Cairns and Anderson, 2014). However, the use of the data extends beyond internal review, and into fundraising. In mid 2015 Anderson noted that the data the museum was collecting was far more valuable than the lost revenue from admission charges. Or in a specific example from 2014:

*We have 10,000 corporations headquartered in the Dallas area, we're about to embark on a robust new recruitment drive around corporate membership. For the first time, we're going to be literate about who their potential customers are and whom we're serving. Obviously, we'd never divulge individual data, but now we can say to corporate philanthropy executives, 'This is whom we're reaching, and here's how it's relevant to you' (Green, 2014).*

### **3.4 DMA Friends - my experience**

The DMA's architectural footprint is very large - it spans a full city block, and the ground floor has three entrances located at the south (focused on car parking), west (adjacent to the Nasher Sculpture Center) and north (towards the city centre) frontages of the building.

On the first day that I visited the museum I spent some time observing at the north and west entrances. I was immediately struck by the friendliness of the visitor host staff, and their engagement with visitors, greeting them as they entered, ascertaining if they were already members of the Friends, and moving quickly into a sales pitch that was practised but not robotic if the person was not already signed up.

I was also struck by the visitors' willingness to hear the sales pitch out. This was my first visit to Texas and the state certainly lived up to its reputation for politeness. It was interesting to contrast the speed and precision with which the explanation for the Pen was delivered in New York with the leisurely and conversational manner of the Friends pitch.

This point should not be notable, but one of the visitor hosts I encountered greeting people on the ground floor on my visit used a wheelchair. This is the first time I have seen a front of house staffer with an obvious mobility restriction in a major museum. This gave me a very positive early impression of the DMA and its commitment to supporting staff.

After observing for about thirty minutes I went to sign up myself. The pitch I was given was focused on the transactional benefits I could receive (such as quickly gathering sufficient points to reimburse my parking costs - in a city dominated by cars, this is the most appealing short term reward for visitors and likely the key motivator to participate in code-collecting on an average visit).

The host walked me through the sign-up process on a touch screen. I was asked for my email address, phone number and birthdate. The first stumbling block was when I was asked for my postcode. There is no option to enter another country or international postcode and so the host did what he always did in these situations: used the DMA's own postcode. The museum will need to control for this in their data analysis.

The second stumbling block was the screen which asked me to select an avatar. This is a feature which has not been developed (I expect it is in place for future social/sharing developments) and the host explained to me "That doesn't do anything, they had something planned but it didn't work, I don't know why they don't remove it". When I pressed him gently on this he shrugged it off, saying "I'm just a lowly staff member"; it was clear he felt like he could not influence the presentation of the tool he was promoting. His manner was warm and helpful throughout, and his response was not delivered as a complaint, but more as a 'Well, what can you do about folks?' observation.

The host explained the rewards system and quickly completed a couple of simple challenges for me, meaning that on my visit I could undertake a smaller number of activities myself and still gather enough points to redeem them for a reward that felt meaningful.

At this point I moved into the galleries. There were two main ways to gain points on the day I visited: by collecting codes from the entrances to galleries, and by collecting codes from specific artworks that were part of a Favourites scavenger hunt.

Collecting gallery codes is the simplest activity. As they are located at the entrance to the gallery, you do not actually have to enter the space or engage with the exhibits in order to earn the code. This could affect the accuracy of the data, as the assumption is that when a visitor enters a gallery code they do so in good faith (showing that they have visited that exhibit) rather than simply to rack up points. This is a low point activity however: the system is organised so as to reward more effortful engagements with higher rewards.

As I began moving around the galleries it became clear to me that the Friends engagement platform is not targeted to international visitors like me, who remained on their original data plan. The simplest way to gather codes is by texting them to the Friends platform: however, because I would be charged for each text, I had to instead note the codes down and then return to the kiosks on the ground floor and manually upload them. This interfered noticeably with what should have been a low-friction interaction.

I also found the gallery codes to be remarkably discreet in terms of design and placement, and I often missed them when walking into a gallery, as I was following the sightlines into the displays rather than looking at the doorways as I went through them. I also tended to use the stairs that slip you between floors in the museum rather than the formal entries to the galleries, so tracking of my progress through the galleries would have been very inconclusive.

As part of my visit I also took part in the Faves scavenger hunt. I found that the design of this interaction was quite the opposite of the gallery codes. The DMA is an extremely large building, with four floors and a great number of galleries. Most are painted in muted hues, with equally muted label design. The labels that pick out Fave artworks however are large and bright red - immediately eye-catching when you enter a gallery and visually sweep it. The effect was to draw you to these specific works at the cost of all other works in the same space. The labels carried a code to be entered into the Friends platform to gain points: again, no further interaction or engagement was sought

As I experienced it, the DMA Friends programme requires only modest effort from the visitor, and evoked correspondingly low engagement. As a non-local, one-off visitor it added very little to my experience, and in fact the scavenger-hunt design pattern probably disrupted rather than enriched my experience.

However, as a professional observer, I appreciated this. The programme is emphatically designed to increase repeat visitation by local people, and the activities and rewards are geared towards this. If the design had worked for me - a non-target visitor - I expect the experience for the target audience would be less compelling.

One thing I (perhaps naively) did not expect from the programme was to start receiving weekly emails from the museum with news about coming exhibitions and events, donation appeals and special offers. As a non-committed one-off visitor, these emails tend to be deleted immediately, unopened.

## *Overall visitor experience*

Two observations struck me as I reflected on my visit to the DMA.

The first was that the Friends platform was in keeping with the overall ground floor visitor orientation. The tone of communication and the design of the larger challenges (such as bringing friends with you to the museum) was aligned to the overall communication to visitors. Visiting guidelines at the museum, for example, emphasise "doing things right" rather than "don't do this" and are posted as very large signage on the inside doors of elevators. The building has very good wifi, and the ground floor's main feature (aside from the cafe) is an interactive creativity centre that is strongly appealing to adults as well as children. While the upper three floors are standard museum layout, the ground floor provides a coherent and friendly orientating experience that I think would be appealing to people who are new to, and possibly unsure about, visiting museums, and to family groups.

The second thing was the friendliness and engagement of the visitor hosts. I interviewed eight staff members in my time at the DMA and of these six told me - without prompting - that the most dramatic change in Anderson's time at the museum was the way visitor hosts roles were defined.

Barbie Barber, the head of visitor services, described this as a transformation from security culture to a hospitality culture. Staff who had previously been hired and trained to perform a security role - and explicitly discouraged from interacting with visitors - were now trained to think of themselves as hosts. Job descriptions were rewritten, with the mission put at the top, and training on the mission was instated.

New ongoing training was instituted: visitor hosts now attend training every Friday morning from staff throughout the museum. Visitor host staff can now take on training roles themselves, and a previously missing element of career progression has been built into the role. Visitor host staff have also been given more authority: for example, the complaint form has been removed, and visitor hosts encouraged to resolve problems on the spot themselves or take responsibility for following complaints up.

In a 2014 presentation, Rob Stein and Bruce Wyman emphasised the importance of this transformation:

*Believing that the ultimate success of an engagement platform in museums rests on the positive interactions visitors have with museum staff, the DMA chose to reorient its staff in anticipation of the program. This internal realignment is one of the most critical factors in the program's success to date.*

*To start, an existing force of gallery attendants were relocated from the Security department to the Visitor Services department and retrained to focus on hospitality. A warm and sincere welcome is the first interaction a visitor should have with the Museum. The newly minted Visitor Services Attendants embraced the change warmly and grew to see it as their primary role to ensure that the entire city of Dallas would feel a part of the Museum when they arrived. Additionally, small teams of Visitor Services Attendants were redeployed to act as ambassadors for the DMA Friends program. Their goals were to inform new visitors—asking them to join if interested—and welcome return visitors with a smile. Team members began to challenge themselves to hone their 'pitch' for DMA Friends and used simple graphs and charts to track their progress each day and week. The positive competition proved infectious and resulted in significant gains seen in new DMA Friends recruitment that continues to this day (Stein and Wyman, 2014).*

### 3.5 Future rollouts

In 2013 the DMA, together with partners from the Denver Art Museum, Grace Museum (Abilene, Texas), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Mia), was awarded a National Leadership Grant for US\$450,000 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to pilot a version of the Friends software in each of the partner museums.

On my research trip I visited Mia, where staff were excited about the opportunities afforded by the software, coupled with work on their customer relationship management software and a realignment of their membership programme to introduce a free entry level with benefits (a US\$5-10 gift per month is encouraged; the next level begins at US\$150/year).

At Mia I heard a strong focus on tracking and sharing visitors' consumer behaviour as well as their visit behaviour. This reinforces the data presented by Diana Pan of MOMA at the Museums and the Web Asia 2015 conference on members' shopping behaviour and the museum's action to maximise revenue. Staff at Mia were particularly interested in how visitors who signed up for free membership could be engaged in a more philanthropic mindset and moved on to a paid level of membership or encouraged to donate regularly to museum activities.

### 3.6 Data concerns

Over the duration of my trip, and then at the Museums and the Web Asia and National Digital Forum conferences, I became increasingly discomforted about some of the conversations I had had relating to the collection and use of visitor data. The phrase 'if you're not paying for it, you're the product' has been much bandied about the internet over the past five years, and has become increasingly familiar to those of us who use free services, such as Facebook and Twitter, with the lurking or explicit knowledge that access to our attention is being sold to advertisers.

I am not suggesting that museums are taking a malicious or exploitative approach to data collection, or storing and using this data in anything but an honourable and secure manner. However, I am strongly swayed in my thinking about my sector's use of data by thinkers such as Cory Doctorow and Maciej Ceglowski, who have likened our current approaches to data collection and retention to the nuclear waste industry:

*We should treat personal electronic data with the same care and respect as weapons-grade plutonium - it is dangerous, long-lasting and once it has leaked there's no getting it back (Doctorow, 2008).*

*Information about people retains its power as long as those people are alive, and sometimes as long as their children are alive. No one knows what will become of sites like Twitter in five years or ten. But [as with nuclear waste] the data those sites own will retain the power to hurt for decades (Ceglowski).*

Recent research by the Pew Research Center in the United States showed the adults are increasingly willing to trade personal information for benefits, depending on the deal they are being offered and the risk they perceive, but are frequently unhappy about what happens to that data after it is collected by a company (Pew, 2016). This research did not show any consistent demographic (age, education, income) variation in opinions on data sharing. Meanwhile in New Zealand, the most recent Privacy Commission survey on New Zealanders' attitudes towards privacy and data sharing showed that the most cautious

groups are younger people (18-29 year-olds) and those with a university education (Privacy Commissioner, 2016).

It is not difficult, in a time of falling public funding and increased competition for the philanthropic dollar, to imagine a future scenario where selling the data we collect on our visitors to third parties becomes an appealing - or necessary - scenario. I believe it behoves us, as institutions trusted for centuries now to collect, manage and preserve our society's material culture and expressions of creativity and knowledge, to apply the same forethought and ethics to the data we collect from and use on behalf of the public, and ensure we are always acting in the best interests of the people we exist to serve.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

What impresses me about the DMA Friends programme is the rigour and ambition of the thinking behind it. The programme is designed to address many of the central questions facing museums today: How do we reach out to non-visitors? How do we create engaging experiences? How do we know who is visiting us, and what they're doing? How do we provide information to current and future funders on our performance? It does this in a manner that is scalable, and that draws on many parts of the museum, from education to visitor hosts.

New Zealand is fortunate in that our publicly funded museums operate largely on the basis of free entry, meaning this barrier to access has been far less significant in our history. There is much we can learn however from American museums' approach to membership programmes, especially as they seek to move on from a transactional to an engagement model.

In the time since I returned to New Zealand, both Maxwell Anderson and Rob Stein have resigned from the DMA. The pair came to the museum together from the Indianapolis Museum of Art (IMA) where they evolved much of the thinking that went into the DMA's programmes, including free admission and data collection. Since Anderson moved on from the IMA, the decision has been to reinstate charged entry, on the basis that the draw-down on the museum's endowment was too great to sustain the loss in admissions revenue.

It has become clear to me that innovation in the digital realm is strongly driven by individual personalities and aspirations. The digital world moves swiftly - especially compared to the 'museum world', which is a steady and slow-paced beast. With driving figures such as Max Anderson and Rob Stein moving on, I will be watching with interest to see whether the changes in culture and operations they introduced become embedded in the DMA's DNA, or if the institution morphs again under a new leadership team.

### **3.7 Further information**

Online membership and social media patterns

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## DMA Friends

For more information on the Dallas Museum of Art's Friends programme see the Friends section of their website <https://www.dma.org/friends>

See also

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On free entrance, repeat visitation and membership programmes

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## 4. Visitor experience

### 4.1 Introduction

I was fortunate on this research trip to spend time at some of the best encyclopaedic art museums in the world. The quality and scope of American art collections is startling, and this applies not only in the major tourist destinations (New York, Washington, Los Angeles) but also to many cities whose arts institutions are not internationally known brand names. In all the centres I visited, the scale and quality of the encyclopaedic museums was at times overwhelming: I spent an entire day, for example, working my way through the Indianapolis Museum of Art, and still felt like I was rushing through numerous galleries.

The flip side of this largesse is that many of the museums were somewhat repetitive. Galleries are devoted to ancient cultures, to American art history, to major moments in European art history. Art from Asian and indigenous cultures is largely presented as artefact: precious objects from the past, somewhat deadened in the museum context. Decorative art is weighted towards silversmithing and furniture. Intermixing of collections in long-term displays is still relatively rare. 'Blue chip' artists take up a lot of wall space, and after a few cities I found myself ticking off each museum's Ellsworth Kelly room, its Richard Serra sculpture, its Alexander Calder mobile.

I came to appreciate smaller, more tightly focused museums (I acknowledge that my itinerary consciously focused on larger art museums and, had I sought out experimental, contemporary or niche organisations instead, my experience would have been very different) and distinctive displays that spoke to the location I was in. In Baltimore, it was a small room at the BMA with a display of seven elaborate 19th century crazy quilts - an intimate, tactile experience unlike any other I had on my trip. At Mia in Minneapolis it was a room that brought together artworks from across continents and decades, united by a link to textiles, from a Robert Rauschenberg assemblage to a Yinka Shonibare sculpture to a beaded suitcase depicting a courtship scene by a Lakota artist, tentatively identified as Ida Claymore.

This section of my report details memorable examples of visitor experience design encountered as I travelled around museums. At the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis I was struck by how closely the museum tracks with the needs and interests of its urban community. The retail experiences at Baltimore's American Visionary Art Museum and Minneapolis's Mia impressed me with how, in very different ways, the selection of merchandise and presentation of stock communicate the museums' brand messages. At Brooklyn Museum I was excited by their recently refurbished entrance gallery, which seeks to give visitors an introduction to the whole museum in one space; at the BMA in Baltimore I saw a similar (smaller) gallery under construction, and heard about their plans to open up an adjoining room to create a venue for community discussion.

As I travelled around the States, I read articles almost daily about the newly opened Broad Museum in Los Angeles. The Broad is a privately funded museum that eschews many of the trappings of the conventional art museum, including charged entry, reception desks, venue hire spaces and restaurants. Much was made of their Apple store-inspired approach to visitor hosting. In this section of the report I also reflect on my observations of American museums' training and deployment of visitor hosting and security staff, and how different the context is in New Zealand museums.

## 4.2 American Visionary Art Museum and Mia: Inspiring retail experiences

On my trip around the States I made a point of spending time in as many museum stores as possible. I observed not only stock and display methods, but how the staff interacted with customers.

I took a lot away from how stores like that at the BMA communicate the iconic nature of certain collection objects or areas through their merchandising: a single quilt or painting might be presented as magnets, pencils, notepads, embroidery kits, cards and more. I realised as I visited these stores that not only do they impress upon visitors the importance of certain works: they also give the visitor a subtle preview/reminder of the museum's displays. By exploring the exhibition and collection-related merchandise, you have an opportunity to recall the things you have seen in the museum, and reflect upon (through making decisions on potential purchases) what you were really attracted to.

The stores also offer an opportunity for visitors to connect with a museum employee. In general, American museum gallery attendants are not encouraged to engage with visitors (see below for more discussion of this observation). In contrast to the often silent (and bored) attendants in the galleries, and ticketing staff who were focused on processing visitors, store staff were chatty and inquisitive, commenting on accents, asking where you were from, asking about your visit, what you'd liked, helping you find something in the store you'd be interested in.

On my trip, two stores really stood out for the way they embodied the museum's brand statements and served as a visitor experience unto themselves: the Sideshow Shop at the American Visionary Art Museum (AVAM), and the store at Mia in Minneapolis.

Independently owned, the Sideshow Shop effortlessly embodies the AVAM focus on "an innate personal vision that revels foremost in the creative act itself" (AVAM website). The museum overall demonstrates the same respect towards artists and professional standards of any other museum, but all aspects of its design and presentation speak of visual abundance, pleasure in the act of creating, spontaneity and individuality.

When you purchase an entrance ticket at AVAM you automatically receive a \$5 discount chit for the store, which whets your appetite. The store itself is divided into two halves. The first room consists of a overflowing and extremely stimulating array of giftware, tchotchkes, jewellery, curiosity pieces and crafts, mingled with AVAM publications and merchandise. The second half of the store is equally densely stocked, but more restrained, and offers an astounding array of books on outsider, visionary and folk artists, from monographs to exhibition catalogues. The quality of the selection underlines the seriousness with which the museum approaches promoting visionary artists.

I am not a person easily seduced by gewgaws and baubles, but even I found the joyfulness of the Sideshow Store infectious, and spent more there than I did in any other museum. It has become the first thing I tell people about in terms of the museum - not because it undercut the actual art, but because it complemented the art visit so well.

The store at Mia sits at the other end of the taste spectrum. Part of a recently-renovated entrance way, the store spills out into the foyer space and sits opposite a large wall with pictograms that orient the visitor to the museum's numerous floors. The stock underlines the museum's brand as sophisticated, urbane and high quality. Brand-alignment is obvious and strategic.

As stated on the museum's website, the store has very clear messaging and purpose:

*Explore*

*The Store at Mia offers a curated assortment of unique products from around the globe that celebrate the quality of the collection, while connecting life and art through the hands of the artist to support the Minneapolis Institute of Art. All proceeds benefit Mia.*

*Connect.*

*Enjoy an engaging experience where the art comes to life through artisan-crafted products in a range of styles and materials. Learn the stories behind the products while being inspired by the stunning displays.*

That second paragraph in particular could easily be adapted to express the goals of any contemporary art installation.

I was particularly struck by Mia's product line relating to its 100th anniversary activities. Some products were standard: a line of text-based t-shirts commissioned from American artists, a celebratory book. Others were far less predictable, like a collaboration with Minneapolis business Handsome Cycles to custom-paint a cycle range in designs inspired by iconic works from the collection.

The store also makes prominent use of collaborations and pop-ups. An exhibition about chef Ferran Adria and his restaurant El Bulli was complemented by a partnership with Etsy to showcase artisanal linens, tableware, kitchen tools and food products, along with an extensive cookbook pop-up, all promoted under the 100th anniversary banner.

The experience at both these museum stores was more than just retail. It was an opportunity to learn more about what the museum valued, what they aimed to provide for visitors, and how they perceived themselves.

#### **4.3 American Swedish Institute, Minneapolis: A philosophy of hospitality**

At the American Swedish Institute (ASI) I spent a day with the director of exhibitions, collections and programmes Scott Pollock, learning about how the organisation fits both into its geographic and cultural communities.

The ASI, comprising the historic Turnblad Mansion and the contemporary Nelson Cultural Center, acts as a gathering place for people to share experiences around themes of culture, migration, the environment and the arts, informed by enduring links to Sweden. Communities of Swedish and Nordic origin remain a core focus; for example, the ASI runs language programmes, offers traditional art workshops, and shows the work of Scandinavian artists.

At the same time the museum services a specific urban locale, an area largely populated by young professionals who have not yet started families and older professionals whose children have left home, and an immediate precinct populated with pre-school providers and elder-care and health-care facilities. Therefore the museum has a focus on programming with intergenerational appeal: their audience for their late night programmes, for example, tends to attract older adults in the first two hours, and then in the later hours attracts young people who are at the beginning of a night out.

What particularly struck me about my experience of the ASI however was their emphasis upon hospitality, which has a specifically Nordic emphasis (which resonated with New Zealand museums' adoption of the concept of manaakitanga). Hospitality is one of the museum's values, and it extends across their work. The museum cafe, FIKA, has a national

reputation: it is named for the Swedish daily break, a social tradition involving coffee and treats that brings people together. The building has leased spaces for local universities and other organisations, bringing different public services into the complex. Regular workshops are run separate from the museum programming, offering another community gathering point. The emphasis on food and coming together threads through the museum's offer, from its Christmas season displays of decorated tables to its Nordic Table Workshops. Children's language programmes include time for fika. Late night programming is built around music and food.

This emphasis on hospitality unites beautiful buildings and a quirky collection with various community and interest groups. As I spent time in Minneapolis, a city that is proud of the waves of immigration that have created its highly diverse population, I saw how culture is valued and shared in the city, largely through food and performance.

#### **4.4 Brooklyn Museum and Baltimore Museum of Art: Orienting the new visitor**

As noted, encyclopaedic American museums can be huge, and draining to visit if you are trying to do it all in one day. Gallery rolls out after gallery, and you move at speed, worrying that you're going to miss something. There is also a bewildering array of time periods, media and cultures. It is little wonder that museums are seen as intimidating or off putting for those who do not feel they have the requisite special knowledge.

The Brooklyn Museum has addressed this issue with its *Connecting Cultures: A World in Brooklyn* exhibition. From their website:

*This innovative, cross-cultural installation was developed to create new ways of looking at art by making connections between cultures as well as objects. Located in our first-floor Great Hall, it provides for the first time a dynamic and welcoming introduction to our extensive collections, featuring pieces that represent peoples throughout time and around the world.*

Located adjacent to the entry foyer, the exhibition cuts across time, place and culture to offer an overview of the museum's collection, the exhibition spaces and collection areas visitors will encounter, and introduces the museum's focus on encouraging visitors to consider issues of identity.

The installation is richly designed, offers text and digital interpretation, and presents an intriguing range of collection objects. It offers both a strong short-visit option, and an ideal opportunity for new visitors to 'practice' visiting the museum. The quality of the installation also prefigures the museum's desire to renovate galleries on other floors.

While still under development at the time I visited, the *Imagining Home* display in the BMA's new Patricia and Mark Joseph Education Center operates in a similar manner to Brooklyn Museum's *Connecting Cultures* gallery. Curated from the BMA's collection on the universal theme of 'home', the exhibition features objects from across the globe and throughout time. Interactive features include soundscapes that immerse visitors in the place objects were made, and videos depicting the stories of individuals and families who lived with a reproduction of one of the exhibition items for a month during the development of the show.

The new centre is located in a recently added second entrance to the museum, which includes its store and cafe. Attendants are posted in the gallery during weekends and events, and a reading nook is also located in the space. The room next door to *Imagining Home* is a modestly-sized venue space, which hosts the monthly 'Open Hours' programme, launched alongside *Imagining Home*. The programme invites the public to propose and

contribute to events in the room, ranging from a recipe swap-meet to a conversation about vacant housing in Baltimore.

The exhibition and venue space are complemented by Outpost, a mobile/pop-up museum which moves through various locations in the city and operates in partnership with other organisations. The Outpost is run by an artist who specialises in participatory practice, and draws upon her existing pre-Baltimore work. It contains replicas of works from the BMA's collection and runs activities that lead participants through the same themes of home and identity the Imagining Home exhibition is built on.

These two initiatives were among the big surprises of my trip, and among the most inspiring for me. This was not only due to the quality of the exhibition experiences: I also learned a great deal from the cross-team collaborations that were important in developing these initiatives.

#### **4.5 The Broad, Los Angeles: A 'new' model of visitor hosting**

I consciously timed my visit to the States to take advantage of the newly opened Broad Museum in Los Angeles, which differs strongly from many of the other museums I visited.

The museum showcases the personal collection of Eli and Edthye Broad, and is funded by the couple: therefore, it has no public body stakeholders or governance board to satisfy. It has only two floors of displays and can easily be visited within an hour; it shows American and international art from the past 50 years. The museum is constructed without revenue-generating options such as venue hire or a cafe, has no central reception desk, and has only a small retail operation.

The museum was attracting swathes of media coverage in the lead-up to my visit, with news articles on everything from the building to the collection to the maintenance required to keep the glass facade clean. The museum's digital ticketing and audio guide systems received considerable attention, as did the approach to training gallery attendants. The service at The Broad is modelled on Apple stores, with visitors being served on the spot by roving attendants (to swipe entry tickets or to take payments for purchases) and with the idea of the Genius Bar being followed - that any visitor services staff should be able to answer questions about the museum and the art on display. All staff are equipped with a small iPad to help them answer visitor queries and tell them more about works on displays; they are fully trained on the works on display and receive incentives to demonstrate their knowledge of the collections.

In general, American museums maintain a separation between gallery attendants, whose chief role is to act as a layer of security for the works on display, and visitor services staff, who manage ticketing and take visitor questions. The Broad's approach to visitor staff was seen as singular; a representative media article reported:

*It's the VSAs that may particularly grab museum professionals' attention. The Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Va., may be the only other art museum that has attempted to train staffers to fully meet the seemingly contradictory functions of keeping the art safe while making viewers feel comfortably at home with it.*

*"This is leading-edge, and it's a very positive thing for the Broad," said Kathleen Brown, principal consultant for Lord Cultural Resources (Boehm, 2015).*

That same article sought out a dissenting view:

*Stevan Layne, a veteran security consultant to museums and other cultural sites, is not persuaded that pleasant conversation and detailed knowledge about art should be in gallery attendants' job descriptions. To him, it's a way for museums to cut costs by folding separate security and visitor service functions into one. "I'm opposed to doing that," Layne said. "It can be a distraction from the primary mission" of protecting the art (Boehm, 2015).*

There is an element of labour relations at play here that I do not pretend to fully understand. I also suspect that this division of labour is not seen at smaller museums, galleries or historic houses, where staff (like their counterparts around the world) have less defined roles and a greater expectation that they will pitch in across different areas of an organisation's operations.

I was deeply struck, nonetheless, that this was seen as such a novelty. Not long after I returned from my trip, a similar article appeared in The Dallas Morning News, about a visitor host at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Patricia Ann Jackson. The reporter wrote

*Building an engaged public is one of our chief responsibilities, and we need all the help we can get.*

*At the Nasher Sculpture Center, that help comes from an unlikely source, Patricia Ann Jackson, a native Dallasite who has worked as a guard at the museum for the last three years, mostly in the lower-level gallery, where she has gained a devoted following for her considerable charm and perspicacious, if idiosyncratic, commentary (Lamster 2015).*

Lamster noted that this change had been led by guards, not the museum administration. He then reported on changes that have been taking place at the nearby DMA (as discussed in the second chapter on museum membership programmes):

*"When we went free to the public, we changed our philosophy from being a security model to a visitor-focused model," says Barbee Barber, the museum's director of staff and visitor experience.*

*Barber's very title, with the telling inclusion of the phrase "visitor experience," suggests just how ingrained this shift has become. It is a change modeled not just in the guards' behavior at the DMA, but in their uniforms, which were changed from traditional blue blazers with red ties to a more casual look of khaki pants and polo shirts. "It's much less intimidating," says Barber (Lamster, 2015).*

Nearly every staff member at the DMA I spoke to on my visit noted this change in policy, and clearly saw it as one of the most important recent developments at the museum.

As a New Zealand museum director though, I remain surprised and discomfited at the division of labour - and the glaring fact that the silent figures in American museum galleries tend to be black, as made painfully obvious in American artist Fred Wilson's 1991 sculpture *Guarded View*, which consists of four headless black mannequins dressed in the uniforms of leading New York art museums.

Relatively few New Zealand art museums can afford to have visitor attendants stationed in every gallery, and fewer still employ security guards in tandem with their own staff. Visitor staff in New Zealand tend to be encouraged to think of themselves as customer service representatives, art communicators and ambassadors for the institution. Te Papa has set the trend here in recent decades, with their strong focus on training their visitor hosts, and employing a diverse staff in terms of age, ethnicity, language skills and backgrounds, to reflect the diversity of the museum's offerings and its visitors. As I reflected on this during my trip, I was proud – and quite relieved – to be a museum professional working in Aotearoa

New Zealand, where a bicultural philosophy underpins contemporary museology, and manaakitanga is increasingly seen as a key value in our work.

## 4.6 Conclusion

The ideas and information I took from this aspect of my trip have been the ones that I have most quickly introduced into our daily work at The Dowse.

My observations of museum stores reinforced work we were already doing, and has given us an even stronger framework for our experiments with using our store as a site of engagement with visitors beyond just the retail experience. ASI's emphasis on hospitality fits well with New Zealand culture, especially when thinking about Māori and Pacific communities. While The Dowse is not of a size that warrants an 'introductory' gallery, the spaces at the BMA and Brooklyn Museum were extremely relevant in thinking about how a permanent collection feature could be built into The Dowse's offer.

The larger learning I took from this aspect of my visit was about the need for a museum to communicate its personality through all available channels available - and to create personable and idiosyncratic experiences that don't necessarily require huge budgets, but do require staff to have a strong sense of what makes your museum stand apart from others.

## 4.7 Further information

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# Conclusions

## In brief

### *Digital innovation*

- Leading museums are focusing on developing 'eyes-up' experiences that encourage closer looking, questioning, and further discovery after the physical visit (Cooper Hewitt and Brooklyn Museum)
- Museums are using digital projects as part of their overall branding efforts (Cooper Hewitt, DMA, Brooklyn Museum, media stories on opening of The Broad in Los Angeles and SFMOMA in San Francisco)
- External funding focused on digitally-enhanced visitor experience at individual institutions may be discouraging collaborative development, and projects focused on online users of museums (Bloomberg Philanthropy)
- There is a danger that digital brands may become disassociated from the physical visiting experience (Walker Art Center)

### *Open storage*

- Open storage initiatives continue to offer a more 'free range' and exploratory experience for visitors, compared to modernist exhibition design, and also assure visitors that not all the collection is 'locked away'
- Some open storage displays are becoming tired, and feel static (Brooklyn Museum, Smithsonian American Art Museum)
- There may be lessons for digital innovation projects fuelled by external funding in the model that seems to have been established by the Henry Luce Foundation grants for visible storage (significant initial investment and then dwindling ongoing attention/funding)
- Digital projects are offering alternative ways to blend digitised collections with the physical visit (Cooper Hewitt's Immersion Room)
- New 'orientation' galleries with mixed density displays may offer a more engaging option for contemporary audiences (Brooklyn Museum, Baltimore Museum of Art)

### *Membership programmes*

- Free entry-level membership options are being offered in tiered membership programmes to encourage traditionally non-visiting audiences to attend museums, and to increase repeat visitation (DMA and MIA Minneapolis)
- 'Free' membership is often an exchange of the visitor's data for this access; this data can be used in many ways, from better understanding audience demographics to targeting retail promotions
- The introduction of free membership programmes accompanies a revolution in the understanding of the visitor host role (DMA)
- Collection of significant amounts of data from our visitors creates new ethical obligations for museums over how this data is collected, stored and used

### *Visitor experience*

- Major art museums around the United States have astounding collections, but can feel repetitive when visited in quick succession. Even small displays that buck this trend for can convey a strong and individual sense of place (BMA)

- Museum stores can play a significant role in communicating the vision and personality of a museum (American Visionary Art Museum, Mia)
- Large museums can induct new visitors and help them to engage with large collections through thematically-curated, cross-collection introductory galleries (Brooklyn Museum, BMA)
- Smaller museums can distinguish themselves by cultivating distinctive personalities and ways of relating to people (American Visionary Art Museum, ASI)

## **Application of learning from this research trip**

### *Digital innovation*

At The Dowse we are currently working on putting our collection online. My observations from this research trip have reinforced for me the need to ensure that the way we convey our collection online needs to be consistent with our brand – not just visually, but at a deeper level. Accordingly, we are taking an ‘artist centred’ approach, focusing on showing visitors to the site as full a picture of each artist in our collection as we can by pulling in information from other sources such as Digital New Zealand and Wikipedia.

Neither The Dowse nor Petone Settlers Museum is sufficiently large or complex to warrant digital visiting aids (at least until the price of the technology comes down to the point where it is available to smaller institutions). However, at Petone Settlers Museum we are hosting a prototype of an app designed to support visually impaired visitors to museums and other attractions, using the beacon technology that the Brooklyn Museum’s Ask app employs. The third party developing the app will share usage statistics with us.

I have been able to apply my learning more directly in several advisory roles. These include being part of a reference group for digital developments at Auckland Museum; providing industry expertise to Mahuki, Te Papa’s digital innovation lab; and assessing digital and app-based cultural tourism proposals made to MBIE’s Tourism Growth Partnership Fund, in my role as external Advisory Panel member.

### *Open storage*

At The Dowse we are in the early stages of exploring the possibilities of developing the current collection store to support a visible storage visitor experience, or converting existing gallery space for this purpose. My observations on this trip underlined that these experiences, once developed, need to be refreshed in order to retain interest, and in order to not look dated compared to changing exhibition spaces in the rest of the museum. The ‘orientation’ galleries at the Brooklyn Museum and Baltimore Museum of Art offer a valuable model that mix classic techniques of open storage with more prompts to the visitor to compare and contrast, question, or respond to the works on display.

### *Membership programmes*

I have talked to both The Friends of The Dowse organising committee and the membership at large (via their AGM) about my findings from this trip. The Friends have accordingly gone on to make student membership free, but are retaining charges for other adults.

While we are not employing visitor tracking at either of our museums we have introduced a face to face visitor survey that includes questions about home suburbs and frequency of visit in order to better track where visitors are coming from, and how frequently they visit, so as to better understand where our repeat visitors are coming from.

We are in talks with the Community Development team at Hutt City Council about how we might tie our museums into a membership-type scheme being run across a cluster of low decile schools in Lower Hutt. Currently the scheme focuses on discounted or free use of library and recreation services; as our museums do not charge for any services (and are more distant from the schools than local libraries and pools) we are discussing how membership might work in this context, and be of meaningful benefit to these children and teens.

I have had many conversations with my museum colleagues, and also with other colleagues at Hutt City Council working in urban planning and economic growth areas, about data collection and storage, especially data collection from people who are unaware they are being tracked.

### *Visitor experience*

This is the area where my observations from this trip have been most quickly and directly applied. I have been working closely with our retail manager, communications manager and designer on how our retail offer at The Dowse and Petone Settlers Museum can be used to express the personality and value of each museum. At The Dowse we are increasingly producing our own merchandise linked to our collections, exhibitions and histories. We are also positioning merchandise more strategically in the reception area, including having postcards relating to current exhibitions prominently displayed on the reception desk at The Dowse, where visitors can be prompted to discuss the exhibition with visitor host staff.

At Petone Settlers Museum we are focusing on the kind of tightly-focused, highly localised exhibition topics I found successful in American museums. This is also because we are in close geographical proximity to Wellington Museum, a much larger and better resourced museum also focused on Wellington history. By focusing on the history of the immediate environment, and working with locals who feature in that history to develop the exhibitions, we can deliver a distinctive experience that has true community engagement at its heart.

At Petone Settlers Museum we are also training visitor hosts in a new way, with a focus on eliciting and recording stories from visitors, the majority of whom are locals. This approach to hosting visitors both improves our knowledge of the area (which we can feed into collections and displays) and enriches the visitor experience, which goes from being told a story, to being able to share a story.

At the joint Museums Aotearoa / Museums Australia conference in May this year my colleague Michael Parry from MAAS Sydney and I ran a workshop session for museum operational staff members. In this workshop I presented a case study my visitor experience observations from my trip and the changes we are making at our museums, as a prompt for group discussions. In early 2017 we plan to host a hui at The Dowse for museum staff working in retail, venue hire and visitor experience to extend this conversation and nascent network.

### **Personal development**

I understand now why many people who receive WCMT funding chose to embed themselves in one organisation or visit only a small number of cities. Visiting seven states in three weeks, and over 30 individual art museums and galleries, plus attending a conference, and then preparing a presentation on my trip for a week after its conclusion at an international conference was a demanding self-set task and resulted in a whirlwind visit.

At the same time, the pace and diversity of my trip was incredibly stimulating. The ability to travel to many different cities and canvass the same topics with people in diverse settings allowed me to explore my research areas from many different angles. The opportunity to completely immerse myself in art galleries and museum conversations was extraordinary. I felt a new level of mental energy open up inside my own head; a kind of acuity and grasp that I haven't felt since being deep in my postgraduate study. Holding on to this energy has been my main challenge on returning from the United States, and also a source of great satisfaction.

I have returned to blogging with renewed enthusiasm, and am using my writing to connect more with my local and international colleagues. Sharing drafts of this report online, and other long format pieces on related topics, has enabled me to keep these conversations going. I have launched a weekly email newsletter collating articles and sources of interest to the international museum community.

My trip has given me a more sophisticated and informed way of regarding New Zealand and international museum practice. It has reinforced to me that we as museum workers and leaders must be guided by a deeply-held understanding of the personality of our institutions, which are formed through nature (collections and buildings) and nurture (programming and relationships), and which will outlast individual staff and their individual projects. It came at exactly the right point in my career development, and I know that what I saw and learned will continue to inflect my own work for many years to come.

## Appendix: Sharing findings

### *Social media*

I posted nearly daily on The Dowse's Facebook page while travelling, reaching over 18,000 viewers.

<https://www.facebook.com/thedowseartmuseum/>

### *Presentations and media appearances*

- Museums and the Web Asia (Melbourne, September 2015)
- National Digital Forum conference (Wellington, September 2015)
- National and State Libraries Australasia digital citizenship conference (Wellington, October 2015)
- Auckland War Memorial Museum staff (Auckland, November 2015)

Presentation notes are available:

<http://best-of-3.blogspot.co.nz/2015/10/museums-and-web-and-national-digital.html>

<http://best-of-3.blogspot.co.nz/2015/11/cultural-institutions-and-social-compact.html>

Interview on Nine to Nine, RNZ National

<http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetoon/audio/201775527/arts-commentator-courtney-johnston>

Interview on Standing Room Only, RNZ National

<http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/standing-room-only/audio/201783587/teching-out-museums>

Appearance on The Dowse Art Museum podcast

<http://dowse.org.nz/news/podcast/2015/podcast-international-gallery-lessons>

### *Online publishing*

Draft sections of this report were published for feedback on my blog

<http://best-of-3.blogspot.co.nz/p/long-reads.html>

The engagement era

<http://best-of-3.blogspot.com/2016/02/the-engagement-era-and-artists-place.html>

Actually, the labels were really bloody good

<http://best-of-3.blogspot.co.nz/2015/12/actually-labels-were-really-bloody-good.html>

Hello Barbie

[http://best-of-3.blogspot.co.nz/2015/11/hello-barbie\\_30.html](http://best-of-3.blogspot.co.nz/2015/11/hello-barbie_30.html)

A reading list for Museums and the Web and NDF

<http://best-of-3.blogspot.co.nz/2015/10/a-reading-list-for-mwa2015-and-ndfnz.html>

'Museums and the social contract' in Tauhere | Connect Wellington: Emerging Museum Professionals journal, May 2016 <http://www.tauhere.org/>