

Extract from 'Use or Ornament? The social Impact of Participation in the Arts', François Matarasso (Comedia 1997)

6.4 THE CITY SEEN FROM WITHIN

The contribution that the arts and local cultures can make to the image of cities has been widely discussed (Bianchini & Parkinson 1993), often in terms of place marketing and competing for business relocation. Less thought seems to be given to how the city's own inhabitants interpret the new messages through which they are represented, but the arts can be equally effective in repositioning the internal identity of places. They retain a perceived 'specialness': they require care and attention, and both their processes and their products are often seen as enshrining lasting values. As one local resident in Hounslow put it during a visit to Redlees Art & Craft Stables: *'The kids need something like this: it'll teach them to make things and not buy things or just watch TV.'*

In a society increasingly confused about what matters, the arts offer a positive way of expressing not only personal or group values, but political vision. An obvious example is the re-orientation of Greater London Council's arts policy after 1981, but this kind of dramatic change is exceptional, and its effectiveness has been questioned (Lewis *et al.* 1986). More common in recent years is the kind of shift of policy emphasis exemplified by Nottingham City Council's re-positioning of the Museum Service since the early 1990s.

Towards an inclusive Museum Service

When the administration passed from Conservative to Labour control in 1990, the new ruling group inherited the 25th most disadvantaged council district in England. Today, unemployment in Nottingham stands at 15.5% (a good 6 points above the national average), rising to 40% among young African-Caribbean men and 47% for young Pakistani men; 42% of households are in receipt of Council Tax and/or Housing Benefits.²⁹ In response, the new Council prioritised an Anti-Poverty Strategy designed to focus all services on alleviating these problems by:

'Channelling resources to those most in need; making services easier to use; improving co-ordination of services; involving people in decision-making; providing services which are sensitive to people's needs and hardship; and raising awareness of and commenting/campaigning on issues.'³⁰

In this context the role of the city's museums, which were seen by some to have been relatively favoured in previous years, came under scrutiny. They faced accusations of elitism, and it was not easy to show how they addressed social deprivation. At public meetings in the early 1990s, anger was expressed by members of the city's Black and Asian communities at displays which were seen as 'imperialist and racist'. Part of the reason this was so important is the sense, rooted in their 19th century origins, that museums enshrine what a community believes is most valuable about itself. At the same time, and partly because of this, a museum is seen as belonging to local people (many of whom will have contributed to its collection over the decades) in a way that more recent cultural institutions do not. Getting it right matters.

The appointment of an outreach officer in 1991, and her subsequent work and partnership with the marketing department, began to transform that situation by devel-

'When you prepare for visitors, be sure that the choices you make also improve your community for the long term. Plan to win the war, not just the battle.'

National Trust for Historic Preservation, USA²⁸

Nottingham's Museums: Castle Museum; Brewhouse Yard Museum; Natural History Museum (Wollaton Hall); Green's Mill Science Centre; Canal Museum; Newstead Abbey; Industrial Museum (Wollaton Hall); Museum of Costume and Textiles

oping links not just with Nottingham's culturally-diverse communities, but also with many other disadvantaged groups. The Circle of Life gallery, which opened in 1993 and looks at life stages through the cultural artefacts of all the city's communities, has been a milestone in this evolution. At the Social History Museum the *Tracing the Trailblazers* exhibition – about the first immigrants to Nottingham from Jamaica – was a popular and important validation of local African-Caribbean culture and its contribution to the city. Alongside these the outreach worker has run a programme of participatory activities, often led by artists, to introduce new visitors to the museum: weekday use by groups of older or disabled people is now common. The advice of a disability consultancy group had a marked impact on access in physical and other terms.

All this has begun to have an impact on how the museums (and by extension the city which they represent) are perceived, at least among their new audience. Surveys show that most black visitors see the Circle of Life as the best display at the Castle museum, though they feel still see room for improvement. Interviews with African-Caribbean people involved through outreach work confirmed these broadly positive views: as one person said '*It was an eye opener to see what they offered to the community. It's nice that they try to incorporate different activities*', although, she added, '*maybe they didn't have as much as they could have had*'.

Outreach work with mental health service users addressed different, more personal than cultural, concerns, but were if anything even more successful in encouraging them to visit the museums independently. Reviews of marketing initiatives with other marginalised groups also suggest that new users are changing their feelings about the museums.³¹ As with the HOME festival, it must be stressed that this is a relatively small-scale programme with a partly symbolic purpose entirely appropriate to a museum initiative. The impact is no less important for being currently focused on new and existing museum users (and the museum service itself). Expectations of its potential to change how people feel about their museums should be in proportion to the resources at its disposal, but it illustrates the potential of developing a participatory element in museums to renew relationships with local people.

It's very good: you could spend a couple of days here. My brother came from Australia and we spent the day here'.