Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Unit of Assessment: D34 Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory

Title of case study: Birmingham Histories: Engaging with the Public Sector

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)
The project led to improved public access to partner collections via a major website, informed the design of the £10m HLF-funded Birmingham History Galleries of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (including innovative multi-touch software), and firmly embedded a culture of cross-sector collaboration with impact in Birmingham, the Midlands, and beyond.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)
This project was based on research undertaken and led by Richard Clay, Francesca Berry, and Dr Paul Spencer-Longhurst (now retired) into the social and cultural history of Birmingham. The research focused on two particular episodes:

1. the work of Matthew Boulton in founding the Soho Mint, and the role of Birmingham in shaping the visual economy of late eighteenth-century Britain;
2. the development of Birmingham's suburbs between 1880 and 1960 and contemporary visual and cultural representations of suburban life.

It was also informed, however, by Clay's research on iconoclasm, which focused in particular on the representations of suburban and urban destruction in Birmingham. The research involved close collaboration with Birmingham Archives and Heritage Services based at the Library of Birmingham (LoB), and Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery (BMAG), and contributed significantly to the professional development of archivists, curators and librarians working in the partner institutions.

The underpinning research was conducted during the period 2007-2013. It commenced with an AHRC-funded research network project, *Investigating and Communicating the Significance of Matthew Boulton 1728-1809* led by Clay that examined Boulton's role in shaping the mass production of visual culture in Birmingham. The network staged 5 workshops with leading international speakers. Network partners included the Birmingham Assay Office, the Lunar Society, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery (BMAG), and Birmingham Heritage and Archive Services at Library of Birmingham (LoB). Outputs by Clay emerging from the project involved an exhibition, *Matthew Boulton and the Art of Making Money* staged at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts (2009). Focusing on Boulton's role in the 'massification of art' through the Soho Mint, the exhibition challenged traditional art historical hierarchies, arguing for the importance of coinage as a central medium of visual culture.

The project *Suburban Birmingham: Spaces and Places, 1880 – 1960*, an AHRC-funded project (2009 – 2013, £280k) built on the partnership established by the Boulton network and investigated the history of Birmingham in the modern period with a specific historiographic focus on the emergence of suburbs. The research not only examined a neglected aspect of the history of Birmingham, but also sought to address dominant historiography, which had hitherto privileged the city centre as the locus of the construction of urban history. The project team was led by Clay, Berry and Ian Grosvenor (Professor of the History of Education, School of Education).

Clay drew on his research in iconoclasm to examine the representation of ruination in the city's suburbs and town centre between 1930 and 1960, focusing on work by the watercolourist Frank Taylor Lockwood who led the Cadbury marketing team at its Bournville works. Clay examined Lockwood's depictions of rapid suburban growth and, subsequently, bombing by the Luftwaffe, and slum clearance on Birmingham's built heritage. Berry drew on previous research on late nineteenth- and early twentieth century interior design and architecture to examine discourses on domestic interiors in the Birmingham suburbs in the 1930s. Berry showed how the Bournville Village Trust marketed its suburban housing by using photography that was informed by, and that informed, shifting debates about the nature of interior space and the performance of class and

gender in relation to the suburban family. Bringing their established research expertise as art historians to bear on subjects relating to Birmingham and its suburbs, Clay and Berry shaped research by the wider project team that included 2 curators, 2 archivists and 2 librarians from BMAG, LoB and the Cadbury Research Library.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)
R1) Richard Clay and Sue Tungate, eds, *Matthew Boulton and the Art of Making Money* (Studley: Brewin Books, 2009) **[available from HEI on request]**
R2) Richard Clay, *Destruction and production: the work of Frank Taylor Lockwood, 1930-1950* **[available: www.suburbanbirmingham.org.uk]**
R3) Francesca Berry, *Homes on Show: Bournville Village Trust, Feminine Agency and the Performance of Suburban Domesticity* **[available: www.suburbanbirmingham.org.uk]**
R4) Will Byrne, Russell Beale, Richard Clay, 'Suburban Birmingham - designing accessible cultural history using multi-touch tables', *Proceedings of BCS-HCI Interaction Specialist Group Conference on People and Computers*, Swindon: BCS-HCI, 2012, pp.21-27 **[available from HEI on request]**

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)
The *Suburban Birmingham: Spaces and Places, 1880-1960* project helped improve the research skills of staff from the partner organisations, shaped temporary displays at LoB and led to the redesign of BMAG's new £10m Birmingham History Galleries. The displays enhanced wider public engagement with Birmingham's understanding of the city's past, further enriched by their installation of an AHRC-funded follow-on project's multi-user, multi-touch interactives. The new *Suburban Birmingham* website also ensured that similar benefits reached a far larger audience regionally, nationally, and internationally.

The initial AHRC Boulton network enabled curatorial and archival staff of the partner cultural organisations to shape research outputs (notably, Clay's exhibition at the Barber Institute and its catalogue to which a BMAG curator contributed). This formed the basis for the joint AHRC application with BMAG and LoB on the history of Birmingham's south-western suburbs between 1880 and 1960. This was in tandem with a £10m HLF bid for funds for redevelopment of the Birmingham History Gallery of BMAG (see source 1 below). The *Suburban Birmingham* project led BMAG's Interim Director, to say that 'we have achieved a paradigm shift in our collaborative working that will continue to deliver benefits for our staff, our organisation and our visitors' (source 2). The impact of the project can be summarised as follows:

Professional Development
In the *Birmingham Suburbs* project's first year a curator (BMAG) and an archivist (LoB) were bought out to serve as 'Fellows' and conduct research alongside the academic team for one week a month for each year of the project. By working closely with the academics the 'Fellows' improved their:
- research skills (especially with regard to the use of visual evidence)
- written communication of research findings in the form of scholarly texts (published on the website and the multi-touch outputs of the new Birmingham History galleries.
- verbal communication of research findings in the form of presentations given at: Project Continuity Days; the project's launch event in February 2013 filmed by the AHRC for their website; scholarly conferences after the project's completion
- cross-institutional working that resulted from all 'Fellows' making use of all partner collections in their research

As the BMAG Head of Programming, notes, 'The agenda was always to encourage more cross-working between the museums and the partner institutions. It has really empowered our staff. Usually you find a curator is supporting academics at the University to broaden their knowledge. But this has given them greater knowledge and the skills to expand it in terms of curating the collections here at the museum' (source 3). For BMAG Interim Director, 'The project has made a real impact and delivered tangible benefits not least of which is [...] the continuing professional development of partners' staff' (source 2).

Museums Practices and Policy

At the end of the first year of the *Suburban Birmingham* project, the designs for the new £10m HLF-funded Birmingham History Galleries (opened October 2012) were redrawn to accommodate the research findings of curators, specifically by creating more space dedicated to the history of the suburbs. As part of its Community Engagement strategy, BMAG also conducted additional research in 2012 to complement the work of the *Suburban Birmingham* project - commissioning 4 oral history interviews with elder residents of the areas studied by the project.

Wider Public Engagement

Figures show that an average of 515 people visit the galleries each day (sources 4 and 5). As such, the project succeeded in its aim of meeting the demand of the Birmingham public for a gallery that enhanced their knowledge and understanding of suburban histories. However, *Suburban Birmingham's* major website also reaches a much wider audience, promoting the city's collections, its scholarship and its heritage expertise globally.

The project website includes 8 scholarly essays written by the research team that can be read online or downloaded as illustrated PDF files. It also allows access to hundreds of objects that would otherwise remain hidden in the partner collections' stories, offering 6 galleries of over 240 digitised artefacts from the partner collections 120 of which have interpretative texts of c.500 words written about them. Between July and October 2012, the website attracted 400-500 new visitors each month, 11% of hits were on mobile devices, 50% of which were by Ipad. Hits came from: UK, USA, Australia, India, Canada, Netherlands, China, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland, Thailand, Germany, Lithuania, Belgium, Brazil, and Malaysia. Following the official launch of the website in February 2013, those figures rose to 879 per month in March and averaging 627 April-June and the global reach extended to include: Spain, Finland, Russia, Poland, Hungary, Sweden, and Taiwan (source 6).

Visitor Experience

Supported by a £32k AHRC Follow Up grant for *Suburban Birmingham: Hands On*, a team made up of Clay, an SME graphic designer, a computer coder and a Human Computer Interaction user tester from University of Birmingham produced a multi-user, multi-touch version of the website data so that visitors to the partners' collection space could access by intuitive touch 120 objects and interpretative texts from the website. This innovative output is now running on 50-inch, multi-touch interfaces in the BMAG Birmingham History Gallery, the £192m Library of Birmingham (opened September 2013), and the Cadbury Research Library. As BMAG's Head of IT, has noted, 'The multi-touch solution is wonderful, it is great to watch users discussing their memories and debating history more broadly. I think the ease of use is important in this, and of course the content itself which is so rich. The Suburbs screen and the touchtable allow for so much greater interaction between users than most other interactives, and as a result I feel it provides a greater experience, both in terms of enjoyment and learning' (source 7). BMAG's new gallery exceeded its visitor target of 50,200 during its first 6 months, achieving 102,800 visitors, averaging 515 visits per day by July 2013 (sources 4 and 5). Between 23 April and 19 August 2013, there were 31,238 interactions made with the *Hands On* interactive in BMAG, i.e. an average of 265 interactions per day with users accessing over 10,000 images that would otherwise have been inaccessible in the gallery space (source 8).

Further Beneficiaries

Suburban Birmingham laid the foundations for a new culture of collaborative research between the University of Birmingham and the city's major cultural institutions - its impact has subsequently reached far beyond the city.

The Library of Birmingham and BMAG were so impressed by the impact of *Suburban Birmingham* and *Suburban Birmingham: Hands On* upon their staff's professional development and on audience experiences that they became partners on a £2.4m ERDF project, *The Digital Heritage Demonstrator* (DHD), led by Clay and Dr Chapman (Department of Archaeology, University of Birmingham) that began in October 2011. Their support also helped bring in the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust (IGMT) and the Worcestershire HIVE archive as partners.

The project enables academics to work with SMEs and the cultural partners to produce multi-touch solutions that enrich visitor experiences in the partners' display spaces by enabling intuitive access to collections and interpretative materials. To date, multi-touch software has been completed for Birmingham History Galleries at BMAG, the new LoB, the HIVE (shortlisted for the 2013 *Museum and Heritage* national award for innovation), with outputs in preparation for IGMT. As the Interim Director of BMAG has noted, the *Suburban Birmingham* project has enabled a 'blossoming relationship with UB – not least the ERDF project' (source 2).

The project has had a significant impact internationally. Clay and Grosvenor were invited to serve as consultants on the *City of Chicago Cultural Plan 2012* (source 9 - the only other international HEI consulted was University of Toronto) and along with Hemsoll have now submitted a £1.9m AHRC 'Care for the Future' bid focused on the histories of the home with partners in Chicago including: The Smart Museum, The Oriental Institute, the National Public Housing Museum, Hull House Museum, the Electronic Visualisation Lab, and the Art Institute of Chicago), BMAG, LoB and the National Trust. As the British Consul General, has noted, 'University of Birmingham has had a rapid and tangible impact in the Midwest [...]. UB's vision of Triple Helix collaboration between the cultural sector, businesses, and universities has helped to shape the *City of Chicago Cultural Plan 2012.* It is wonderful to hear that the 'Birmingham model' of partnership working is now leading to the development of a major grant application in partnership with the University of Chicago, the city's museums, University of Birmingham and Birmingham's own library and its Museum Trust' (source 10). The foundations of such international, cross-sector collaboration were established by the *Suburban Birmingham* project.

As an AHRC national case study for social impact, the project and its follow-on also featured on the cover of the AHRC's *Impact of AHRC Research* report to DCMS in 2011 and were discussed under two separate headings over 2 pages (source 11).

---

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)
1.   BMAG bid for the £10m HLF grant that funded the Birmingham History Galleries and which references the *Suburban Birmingham* project (available on request).
2.   Factual statement provided by Interim Director, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.
3.   *Uncovering Suburbia's Riches*. Available online at: http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Features/Pages/Uncovering-Suburbias-Riches.aspx.
4.   Factual statement provided by Director of Collections, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery with overall visitor figures for BMAG's *Birmingham History Galleries*
5.   BMAG's *Birmingham History Galleries* Evaluation Report April 2012 (available on request)
6.   Google Analytics tracking data for website use of suburbanbirmingham.org.uk (available on request)
7.   Factual statement provided by Head of IT, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery
8.   Touch data for the multi-touch *Suburban Birmingham: hands on* interactive in BMAG was collated using a 'widget' inserted into the software by a coder in April 2013 and the findings were reported in an email from the coder, John Sear, to Richard Clay on 19 August 2013.
9.   *City of Chicago Cultural Plan 2012*: http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/provdrs/chicago_culturalplan2012/news/2012/oct/chicago_culturalplan2012unveiled.html
10.   Factual statement provided by British Consul General.
11.   *Impact of AHRC Research* Report (2011). Available online at: http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Publications/Documents/Impact-of-AHRC-Research-2010-2011.pdf
12.   Sally Fort, *Birmingham Museums and Art Galleries Community Engagement Year Two: Evaluation Report*, 2012