

<b>Institution: Nottingham Trent University</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: D30 History</b>
<b>Title of case study: Transforming visitor experience across museums and heritage sites Museum organisation and evaluation</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact:</b> The last twenty years has seen a gradual transformation of museums from being collections-focused to becoming audience-centred organisations. Graham Black, a ‘practitioner academic’ with a proven commercial track record, has played an important role in enabling this change. His research has been instrumental in developing alternative approaches to display, activities and events, and online provision. Black argues that the speed of change in the external world - a ‘perfect storm’ involving rapid demographic change, generational shift and the influence of new media - must be matched by an equally speedy response in the definition, mission and public practice of museums (‘Developing Audiences for the Twenty-First-Century Museum’, 2013). Through publications, talks and exemplar design practices his work has helped to shape public debates on museums and user participation/user generated content, and on museums and civil engagement, in the UK, Europe and beyond.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research:</b> Black’s research focuses on the role of the museum as a centre for informal learning, and specifically how the museum exhibition and associated programming performs this function. This means combining research on museum audiences, and their expectations and motivations, with applied learning theory and research specifically on visitor behaviour in the museum environment (<i>The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement</i> (2005)). This is then evaluated within a contemporary environment of demographic change, generational shift and the impact of new media to establish a working paradigm for future museum display approaches (‘Target groups for art and cultural education in the digital era’, Berlin, 2011). He has a particular concern for the role of museums as centres for public history, where the curatorial teams work with their communities to explore the relevance of the past to the present, bringing multiple contemporary perspectives to bear on that past (‘What makes great history in a city history museum?’, Vancouver 2012).</p> <p>One of Black’s key operational concepts is that the creation of an exhibition is only the beginning – that work really starts when the public gain admission. A major focus of his new book, <i>Transforming Museums In The 21st Century</i>, is that museums must concentrate on establishing long-term relationships with their audiences. Since 2008, his research has focused on developing techniques to achieve this, particularly through building in an on-going events and activities programme and making user-generated contributions integral to content (e.g. ‘Embedding civil engagement in museums’, 2010).</p> <p>Black recognises that once history leaves the confines of the academy in the search for a broader audience, it tends to become simplified in ways that historians often think ‘dumbs down’ their research. He recognises, too, the potential conflict between being historically ‘correct’ and communicating to a broad, diverse audience. Yet in echoing the words of Wendell Berry (<i>A Continuous Harmony</i>, 1972), he speaks of his fear of a 21<sup>st</sup> century society ‘adrift in the present’, and of the importance of the democratisation of history as a counter to this. He wants those previously silenced, spoken for or marginalised, to reclaim ownership of their own, and their communities’, pasts. He wants, too, to see these pasts represented centrally in museum displays, and their voices heard through their inclusion. He, therefore, celebrates both the desire of communities to research and record their own pasts, and the growing expectation amongst them to be able to contribute their life experiences and reflections to museum content. He acknowledges that this makes for a ‘messy history’ when compared to the authoritative voice offered by the professional historian. Museum collections, however, are in effect the cultural memory of humankind. He believes museums must encourage their audiences to see themselves primarily as active participants on a learning journey. What is required is much clearer focus on supporting active engagement with content (<i>Transforming Museums</i>, 2012).</p>

For Black, generating 'great city history' in the museum environment (Vancouver, 2012) means:

- a) having a clear vision, and meeting the needs of diverse audiences;
- b) presenting a vivid sense of the past which locates the city's development in time and space;
- c) using a broad range of sources of evidence, and ensuring multiple perspectives are represented;
- d) that museums can, and should be, be authoritative without being authoritarian.

He recognises that communities will have different understandings and uses of the past than professional historians. However, he argues strongly for the quality of the history being represented, and against historical demagoguery and dominant narrative (Museums, Memory and History', *Cultural and Social History*, 8 (2011), 415-27). All our cities and communities have potentially toxic pockets of disputed history, but it is a core to his advocacy that museums must be trusted to present disputed history that counters myth and invention, nostalgia, the false, the romanticised, the unchallenging, the selective, the biased.

Research is now focused on the importance of small-scale interventions in existing exhibitions to augment user engagement and participation, and the ability of these to transform the visitor experience. Supported by Arts Council England, pilots began in early 2013 (see section 4.1).

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1) Monograph: *Transforming Museums In The 21st Century* (Routledge, 2012), pp. 276 (also translated into Turkish). This monograph has been top of the Amazon museology best-sellers list, various dates 2012-2013.

2) Invited paper: 'What makes great history in a city history museum?', *International Committee for the Collections and Archives of Cities, International Council of Museums*, annual conference, Vancouver, 24 – 26 October 2012.

3) Monograph: *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (Routledge, 2nd Edn. 2005), pp. 320 (translated into Greek and Chinese). This monograph has also been top of the Amazon museology best-sellers list, various dates since its publication. For positive academic reviews see review, *Collection Management* 30,4 (2007), 106-8; and <http://www.york.ac.uk/ipup/projects/audiences/discussion/black.html>.

4) Book Chapter, 'Developing Audiences for the Twenty-First-Century Museum', in C. McCarthy (ed.), *The International Handbook of Museum Studies*. Volume IV: *Practice* (Wiley, 2103), 1-28.

5) Journal Article: 'Embedding civil engagement in museums', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 25 (June 2010), 129-146, republished as Ch 22 Museums and Civil Engagement, in Anderson, G. (ed) *Reinventing the Museum* (AltaMira, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2011), 271-290. This text is used by every museum studies course in the USA.

6) Key Note Address: 'Target groups for art and cultural education in the digital era', The Influence of Digital Media on Innovative Art and Cultural Education Concepts Conference, European Foundation Genshagen, Berlin, 23-25 November 2011.

**4. Details of the impact:** Black's research has been instrumental in resetting the museum and heritage display agenda over the last twenty years, placing audiences rather than collections at the centre of the engagement process. His approach combines overview/analysis/evaluation/debate around practice, with action research through the development of policy documents, interpretive plans and exhibitions. Examples include current and past collaborations with the National Trust,

and Birmingham, Cardiff, Leicester and Nottingham City Councils, and work with the Stoke Potteries Museum on the re-display of the Staffordshire Hoard (see section 5.4), and most recently with an AHRC funded KTA to support the small independent Framework Knitters' Museum, Ruddington in developing a masterplan for its future (see section 5.8). Most of Black's past work, however, has involved substantial Heritage Lottery Fund grants (e.g. Galleries of Justice, Nottingham (see section 5.6); Tyntesfield, National Trust; and Newarke Houses Museum, Leicester) as part of wider grant aid from the EU and UK Regional Development Agencies, with a total spend to date in excess of £80million.

Black's impact on display and content practice is reflected in the continuing demand for his services from high-profile **practitioner groups** to offer keynote speeches in the UK and Europe. In the last two years these have included: European Foundation, Berlin (Nov., 2011), European Campus of Local and Regional Authorities for Culture (Oct., 2012), the UK Association for Heritage Interpretation (Oct., 2012), UK Association of Independent Museums (June 2012), UK Visitor Studies Group (Feb., 2012), The Public History of Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine, Science Museum, London (April, 2013), and to Danish curators at the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen (Sept., 2013) (see section 5.3). It is also reflected in his high citations levels in practitioner publications (see section 5.10).

Importantly, his contributions are not created in isolation, but through working with project managers, design companies, museum or heritage organisation personnel and local communities. Most recently, Black has concentrated on the practical application of his approach in relatively small institutions, including those that are community based, through limited scale interventions to augment user engagement and participation. This is reflected in the four current activities instigated over the last twelve months outlined below:

**1. Action research on display that stimulates user contributions (on-going from 2013):**

Supported by an Arts Council England Strategic Fund grant of £105,000 Black, with colleagues from the Centre for Public History, and Museum and Heritage Management, and the East Midlands Museums Service, has distributed small grants and mentor support to a number of local museums to pilot and evaluate display approaches that stimulate self-reflection amongst visitors and generates user contribution, which in turn become part of the displays. The projects test approaches to content acquisition and institutional participatory practice according to the precepts outlined in Black's book *Transforming Museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* and subsequent conference papers. Approximately £50,000 is committed in the current financial year (April 2013-March 2014) to four distinct museum projects across the East Midlands, and an associated website and blog.

**2. Developing an interpretation strategy for a 'Heritage Gateway' in Northampton:** Black worked alongside project managers Focus Consultants (see section 5.1), architect (Purcell), Northamptonshire County Council, Northampton Borough Council, the Churches Conservation Trust, the Friends of Northampton Castle and Spring Boroughs Residents Association to develop and cost a 'high level' interpretive approach to support a history and heritage driven regeneration of the west side on Northampton. The recommendations reflect approaches Black outlined in his two books. Full implementation, with considerable community involvement, will take four to five years. Black is currently working on phase two of this project, looking at proposals and costs in detail, and has just been confirmed as a key member of a team charged with redefining a 'Northampton Cultural Quarter'.

**3. Developing a 2020 vision for Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery:** Black ran workshops with the curatorial and education teams at Tullie House which were instrumental in re-visioning the future role of the museum, and representing this visualisation in a form that could be submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund as the core part of a multi-million pound bid (c£12m), submitted in November 2013 (see section 5.2)

**4. Non-user studies and focus groups for local museums:** In 2012-13, aided by a small grant from the East Midlands Audience Development Officer, Claire Browne, Black was able to train MA students in preliminary non-user visitor studies for two museums: the volunteer-run Ashby-de-la-

Zouch Museum and the local authority-funded Rutland County Museum. The studies focused on local audience disengagement and ways in which this could be redressed. This resulted in a series of recommendations, the bulk of which have since been adopted (see section 5.5). As importantly, the studies gave museum personnel an understanding of the importance of on-going visitor research and both sites now carry out their own survey work. The project will be extended in the academic year 2013-14, with a number of museums now queuing up to be included.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

### Individuals

**1) Founding Partner, Focus Consultants, Nottingham.** This company has project-managed a number of the museum developments upon which Black has worked. It can testify to Black's ability to galvanise museum curators to establish clear future directions for their institutions through the creation of master plans.

**2) Director of Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery.** Graham Black was commissioned to run 'visioning' workshops for the museum, in preparation for the development of proposals for the re-development and re-display of its content. The result was the museum's '2020 Vision' document.

**3) Head of Learning and Exhibition Development at the National Museum of Denmark,** responsible for overseeing the redisplay of the Museum. Graham Black was commissioned to run workshops with the curatorial team to support the development of display approaches for all the galleries in the Museum.

**4) Head of Interpretation at the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke.** She has responsibility for the display of the Staffordshire Hoard, a remarkable Anglo-Saxon find of international significance. She commissioned Black to run workshops for the curatorial team that resulted in a very different approach to the displays.

**5) Regional Museum Development Manager for East Midlands Museums** which accepted an innovative proposal from Black and now funds his MA students to work with small local museums to carry out audience research. Numbers of museums now want to participate in this scheme.

### Awards

**6) Galleries of Justice:** Joint winner of the Museums Heritage Award for Educational Initiatives, 2013; £100,000 Museum Prize 2004; Gulbenkian Prize 1998; English Tourist Board East Midlands Attraction of the Year 1998. Black has a long-term role as an advisor to the museum.

**7) Royal Albert Memorial Museum:** £100,000 Art Fund Prize (the re-named Museum Prize) 2012. Graham Black was commissioned to run workshops with the history and archaeology curatorial team to support the development of display approaches for the history galleries in the museum.

**8) Framework Knitters' Museum, Ruddington:** winner of an AHRC Knowledge Transfer Award (£4,500), where Black has acted as advisor on the long-term master plan, and has been active also in fund-raising for the museum extension (2012 on-going).

**9) Weston Park Museum, Sheffield:** Guardian Family-friendly Museum of the Year, 2008; Shortlisted for the Art Fund Prize, 2008. Acting as a consultant Black ran workshops underpinning the interpretation for the total re-display of what were the old Sheffield City Gallery and Mappin Art Gallery. Total spend circa £19m.

### Practitioner Engagement

**10) The Engaging Museum:** cited by practitioners, non-academics and academics as a major supporting tool when planning new museum exhibitions.

[http://scholar.google.co.uk/scholar?q=The+Engaging+Museum&btnG=&hl=en&as\\_sdt=0%2C5](http://scholar.google.co.uk/scholar?q=The+Engaging+Museum&btnG=&hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5)