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The Role of Museums in Dealing with the Legacy of Conflict in Northern Ireland

Karine Bigand

The function of museums as a medium to represent collective heritage is all the more critical in the case of conflicted heritage. The years since the Belfast Agreement in 1998, with their focus on community relations and the ever-present debate about how to deal with the past, have proved a challenge for museums in Northern Ireland. The country's young museum sector has had not only to adapt to the wider redefinition of museums' purpose and mission that has reshaped the museum world in the last thirty years, but also to promote better mutual understanding in a post-conflict society where divisions remain rife. This article will explore the role given to and taken by museums in addressing the legacy of the recent conflict. It will provide a general description of how the role of museums has been reshaped and, more specifically, has been translated into policy and practice in Northern Ireland. The comparison between several museums and exhibitions from the national, local and independent sectors will present different practices in terms of chosen narrative, displaying and relation with visitors, thereby providing the basis for a reflection on the question of curatorial control when dealing with conflict.

Redefining the Role of Museums

Over the last decades, the general trend for museums across the British Isles and the Western world has been a transition from being temples, or passive repositories of collections, to becoming forums, or socio-cultural actors.¹ The change in the function of museums resulted from at least three factors, namely the political will to democratize culture, the evolution of learning styles, and the effort towards cultural diversity.² Visitors, rather than objects, have now become the focus of museums,³ with a corollary impact on collecting policies and educational programmes. A helpful article to understand the transition undergone by museums is one entitled 'Strangers, Guests or Clients? Visitor Experiences in Museums'.⁴ Its author shows how the degree of priority a museum is giving to the preservation of its collection and the amount of curatorial control it is willing to retain or relinquish will result in varied visitor experiences. Visitors may feel like strangers in typical old-style museums that feel their prime responsibility is to their collection and that tend to display objects with highly prescriptive panels. Museums getting involved in outreach and educational programmes treat their visitors like guests, in the sense that they retain the professional expertise but are willing to make an effort to bring visitors to endorse their view of the world. Finally, visitors can be seen as clients when the museum sees itself primarily as a place of leisure aimed at providing enjoyable experiences to its visitors. This implies minimal curatorial control as the museum refrains from imposing one

¹ See Duncan Cameron, 'The Museum, a Temple or the Forum?', *Curator* 14.1 (1971): 11-24, Kenneth Hudson, 'The Museum Refuses to Stand Still', *Museum International* 50.1 (1998): 43-50, and Andrea Witcomb, *Re-imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (London: Routledge, 2003), 13-26.

² See Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (London: Routledge, 2005), 123-156 and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, ed., *The Educational Role of the Museum* (second edition) (London: Routledge, 1999), 137-145.

³ Lois Silverman, *The Social Work of Museums* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1-21.

⁴ Zahava Doering, 'Strangers, Guests or Clients? Visitor Experiences in Museums', *Curator* 42.2 (1999): 74-87.

version of events on its visitors.⁵ According to Doering, if the most common position for museums today is the second one, social trends will lead them to adopt the third one.

This evolution also results from recent developments in learning theory in relation to museums. Compared to formal learning in schools, for instance, learning in museums takes place on the basis of free choice, is non-linear, and can appeal to multiple intelligences.⁶ Such specificities, when taken into account by museums, have had an impact on exhibition practices — for example, through multi-sensory displays. Even more importantly, research has shown how learning in museums is essentially personally motivated and built in relation to the visitor's personal, social and physical contexts. As a result, learning theory and visitors studies show that no amount of curatorial control can predict what a visitor will learn in a museum:

Why visitors come, with whom they visit, and for what reasons, what they already know, what their interests are, what their prior museum experiences are, and what subsequent reinforcing events occur in their lives play as great a role in learning — if not a greater one — as anything that happens inside the museum.⁷

The redefinition of the role of museums towards one of service to the public has taken place in all types of museums but have more obvious political repercussions in the case of museums dealing with history. In particular, where contested heritage is concerned, the new emphasis on the museum as a service to the public pushes them out of their comfort zone by making a single narrative impossible, thereby forcing them to relinquish their 'interpretative control over the past'.⁸ While this implies renewed curatorial practices, the potential for museums to make a difference by displaying intellectual activism is not to be discarded:

Museums can be trusted incubators for social change, as long as audiences are left to engage topics on their own terms and resolve issues in their own minds. By raising awareness of issues and empowering people to educate themselves on important topics to determine their own position around these subjects and become socially active, museums can have a role in social transformation.⁹

Interestingly, in the 2000s, New Labour fully endorsed the newly defined social role of museums in its cultural policy. Seen as a tool to combat social exclusion and promote cultural diversity, museums and galleries saw their entrance fees waived on the premise that:

Museums and galleries [...] can play a role in generating social change by engaging with and

⁵ Doering 75-8.

⁶ Howard Gardner, 'Challenges for Museums: Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences', *Hand to Hand*, 2.4 (1988): 1, 4-5, 7.

⁷ John Falk and Lynn Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2000), 8.

⁸ James M. Bradburne, 'Visible Listening: Discussion, Debate and Governance in the Museum', *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First-Century Museum*, ed. Janet Marstine (Abington and New York: Routledge), 276.

⁹ Fiona Cameron, 'Contentiousness and Shifting Knowledge Paradigms: The Roles of History and Science Museums in Contemporary Societies', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 20 (2005): 229.

empowering people to determine their place in the world, educate themselves to achieve their own potential, play a full part in society and contribute to reforming it in the future.¹⁰

The 2000s in Northern Ireland saw the beginning of the post-conflict era and the difficult setting up of shared-power institutions. Museums in Northern Ireland were faced with the multiple challenges of following trends in the museum world by endorsing a more social role, of responding to new findings in learning theory by providing multi-sensory and multiple perspective exhibitions and of fitting with New Labour's ambition in favour of social inclusion.

Museums and Community Relations in Northern Ireland

This was quite a programme for the country's relatively young museum sector. In 1983, a report on the museum provision in Northern Ireland considered that only 6 museums complied with the International Council of Museums' standards,¹¹ compared with today's 42 accredited museums — whether national, county or independent. As most of Northern Ireland's museums appeared and developed at the end of the conflict and beginning of the post-conflict era, just as the role of museums was being redefined, it may be expected that they embraced a formal social role in engaging with the recent past. Yet, during the conflict and post-conflict period, their attitude to the past has been largely one of avoidance. At the height of the conflict in the 1970s, museums and schools worked as 'oases of calm', keeping violence at the door by not addressing it and having no debate that could politicise the place. The political context made it impossible for Northern Ireland's museums to become forums and relinquish curatorial control. A new atmosphere developed in the 1980s, with renewed talks and political violence abating. Schools started paying attention to cultural heritage and mutual heritage, and both themes were incorporated in the curriculum in 1992. Museums followed suit as service providers, offering educational programmes exploring the two traditions. As Anthony Buckley and Mary Kenney from the Ulster Museum remarked:

The earlier tendency of evading discussion of sectarian issues was ultimately unsatisfactory. It might be valid not to overemphasize Ulster's ethnicities: to miss them out altogether, however, is to be untruthful.¹²

The sense of escapism from conflict that understandably prevailed in the 1970s was replaced by the will to turn museums into neutral safe territories where communities could come to learn about themselves and the 'Other'. A 1995 review of the Northern Ireland museum sector stressed its new decisive social role, underlining that 'museums have an important role to play in developing cross-community contact in neutral settings'.¹³ Touring

¹⁰ Department of Culture, Media and Sport, Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All; Policy Guidance for DCMS Funded and Local Authority Museums, Galleries and Archives in England (London: HMSO, 2000), 8.

¹¹ Museums and Galleries Commission, *Review of Museums in Northern Ireland* (London: HMSO, 1983), 19.

¹² Anthony Buckley and Mary Kenney, 'Cultural Heritage in an Oasis of Calm: Divided Identities in a Museum in Ulster', *Culture, Tourism and Development: The Case of Ireland*, ed. Ullrich Kockel (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994), 137.

¹³ Alistair Wilson, *A Time for Change ... A Review of Major Museums in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: HMSO/Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 1995), 49.

exhibitions jointly organised by Community Relations Council and the Northern Ireland Museums Council, respectively on 'Symbols' of cultural identities (1994) and 'Local Identities' (1999-2000), provided the most visible endorsement by museums of their new role as social facilitators opening a space for mutual discovery and possible dialogue, even if on a temporary basis.

Striving for neutrality left little room for audacious permanent exhibitions challenging traditional narratives, such was the emphasis on mutual understanding. Despite the change in attitude, a general avoidance of representing conflictual history in exhibitions and galleries could be observed at least until the early 2000s.¹⁴ This was true of older historical episodes, such as the Famine, the 1641 rising, and the 1690s Williamite/Jacobite war, but even truer of the recent conflict. The common point between each of these historical events is the multiple narratives and constant historical debates around them, as well as their being used as markers of cultural identity. The recent conflict in Northern Ireland shares the same characteristics but, without the distance of time, is even more highly politically and emotionally loaded.

From the mid-1990s, the engagement of museums with the past was done through the prism of community relations, with a focus on cultural diversity and similarities.¹⁵ The contribution of museums to good community relations was furthered in the following decade as it combined with New Labour cultural policies focusing on the social role of museums¹⁶ — themselves influenced by a seminal report on museums and social inclusion¹⁷ — and as social inclusion was understood to mean better community relations in a Northern Irish context.¹⁸ The contribution of museums to good community relations was later formalized in *A Shared Future* policy, issued in 2005. Along with the setting up of a common national curriculum, museums were seen as tools to 'encourage understanding of the complexity of our history'.¹⁹ They were to contribute to good relations by building collections and setting up exhibitions and educational programmes representative of the cultural diversity and interests of the communities they served.²⁰ The influence of the *Shared Future* policy was visible in the intensification of educational and outreach programmes in varied formats, such as adult history workshops, storytelling and community

¹⁴ Elizabeth Crooke, 'Confronting a Troubled History: Which Past in Northern Ireland's museums?', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 7.2 (2001): 119-136.

¹⁵ Crooke, 'Confronting a Troubled History', 126-131; Elizabeth Crooke, *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges* (London: Routledge, 2007), 95-108.

¹⁶ Jocelyn Dodd and Richard Sandell, *Including Museums: Perspectives on Museums, Galleries and Social Inclusion* (Leicester: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, 2001).

¹⁷ Group for Large Local Authority Museums, *Museums and Social Inclusion*. Leicester: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester, 2000.
<http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/projects/museums-and-social-inclusion-the-gllam-report/GLLAM%20Interior.pdf> (accessed 20 October 2016).

¹⁸ Elizabeth Crooke, 'Inclusion and Northern Ireland', *Including Museums. Perspectives on Museums, Galleries and Social Inclusion*, eds Jocelyn Dodd and Richard Sandell (Leicester: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, 2001), 68-71.

¹⁹ Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), *A Shared Future. Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland*. (Belfast: The Stationery Office, 2005), 10.
https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm_dev/a-shared-future-policy-2005.pdf (accessed 20 October 2016).

²⁰ OFMDFM 33.

archives projects. In 2008-2009, 17 museums carried 48 educational programmes broadly geared at good community relations, reconciliation and mutual understanding,²¹ partly spurred by the focus of European funding programmes on such outcomes. The Northern Ireland Museums Council itself set up a training scheme funded by PEACE II to develop community-relations skills among curators.²² It recommended the continuation of outreach programmes in museums and that:

NIMC and museums reinforce their links with the community and voluntary sector with a view to advocating the benefits of museums' learning activity as a valuable component in community development, building good relations and in extolling the benefits of cultural diversity, and to further explore funding opportunities for activity with these objectives.²³

The more recent — but belated compared to other UK regions — Northern Ireland Museums Policy, setting out directions for the museum sector for the coming years, enshrined the broad social role of museums in the following terms:

Museums can make a very important contribution to a shared and better future for all based on equity, diversity, interdependence and mutual respect. They can reflect and promote understanding of the history, culture and people of the region and beyond. They can be catalysts for bringing communities together both physically and through formal and informal opportunities to explore the complexities of history and culture.²⁴

While such aspirational statements show that a consensus exists among policy-makers as to the role and mission and museums, they have been difficult to put into practice. Commenting on the Northern Irish museum sector in 2001, Elizabeth Crooke observed that:

There has been little open discussion about what role Northern Ireland museums can contribute, if anything, to the peace process. The museum sector, which has such an important role in the representation of people in Northern Ireland, has, in general, played a passive role where debate about cultural and political identities is concerned.²⁵

Since then, museums have certainly engaged with the past in much of their outreach work, such as storytelling and community history projects.²⁶ Yet, the articulation between good community relations and dealing with the past — in other words, between addressing the symptoms of division and setting them in the historically specific Northern Irish context — is not always clearly made. This was stressed in a 2012 report on *Progressing Good Relations and Reconciliation in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland* by INCORE (International Conflict Research Institute at the University of Ulster) which found that few respondents, if

²¹ Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC), *Learning within Museums in Northern Ireland — Learning Report* (Belfast: NIMC, 2009), 33. <http://www.nimc.co.uk/research-and-publications/download-publication/4/> (accessed 20 October 2016).

²² Crooke, 'Inclusion and Northern Ireland', 69.

²³ NIMC 33.

²⁴ Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure, *Northern Ireland Museums Policy* (2011), 6.

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-museums-policy> (accessed 20 October 2016).

²⁵ Crooke, 'Inclusion and Northern Ireland', 70.

²⁶ Elizabeth Crooke, 'The Politics of Community Heritage: Motivations, Authority and Control', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 16.1-2 (2010): 16-29.

unprompted, mentioned dealing with the past as an essential part of good relations policy; yet many, once prompted, recognised progress in cross-community dialogue about the past and the benefit to reconciliation of dealing with the past through activities such as truth-recovery, storytelling, memorialisation, and acknowledgement.²⁷ While museums have been firmly included in community relations strategies, the ambiguity as to the understanding of the relevance of dealing with the past in Northern Ireland is clear in the limited number of permanent exhibitions engaging with the legacy of the conflict.

Case Studies

Our first case study is the Tower Museum in Derry/Londonderry, which addressed the recent conflict from its opening in 1992; it was the first museum to do so and was clearly an exception at the time. Run by Derry City Council, it was part of the urban regeneration plan and was devised as a contribution to cross-community mutual understanding. From its inception, it offered a multi-perspectival historical narrative in its 'Story of Derry' gallery, in the form of a parallel display of unionist and nationalist perspectives of the crucial 1900-1920 period which ended in the creation of Northern Ireland. To this day, the history of the period is told according to both traditions and the two interpretations face each other in a narrow passage decorated with painted kerbstones similar to those marking loyalist or republican 'territory' in Northern Ireland. One of its staff members recalls the debate and consultation that took place to reach 'an agreed version of the past, a history that was truthful and honest but nonetheless uncompromising in eliminating propaganda, bias, ignorance, dishonesty and partiality' and how the section itself was 'mathematically calculated to give each interpretation exactly the same space'.²⁸ At the time of the Belfast Agreement and until recently, the Tower Museum was the only museum in Northern Ireland to include the conflict in its permanent exhibition, in the form of a film about the post-WWII history of the city. This inclusion had the virtue of existing even if, understandably as the conflict was still ongoing, it separated it from the rest of the history of the city by giving it a special artefact-free interpretation. When in 1995 the museum tried to include artefacts in an exhibition on the conflict, namely a former IRA-rifle, it was accused of republican propaganda and had to remove it.²⁹ Despite such small setbacks, the museum received local appraisal and international recognition as British and Irish Museum of the Year and runner-up to European Museum of the Year within a few years of its opening. Whether it will review its twenty-year-old gallery and the way it displays the legacy of the conflict in Derry/Londonderry in the coming years remains to be seen. Arguably, the guided tours and educational programmes on offer make up for what the gallery might be missing. It can be considered as a pioneer for including the recent conflict in its exhibition from its inception, even before the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994, and for its engagement with the

²⁷ Gráinne Kelly, *Progressing Good Relations and Reconciliation in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland* (Derry: INCORE, University of Ulster, 2012), 58-61.
http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/pdfs/projects/55_Reconciliation_Research_Report.pdf (accessed 20 October 2016).

²⁸ Dermot Francis, 'Museums and a Divided Society: A Northern Irish Case Study', paper given at the *Museums, Peace, Democracy and Governance in the 21st Century – Commonwealth Association of Museums' Triennial Conference*, Barbados (May 5-12, 1999), 1, 5.
http://www.maltwood.uvic.ca/cam/activities/past_conferences/1999conf/CAM%2799-Dermot%20FrancisFinal.pdf (accessed 20 October 2016).

²⁹ Crooke, 'Confronting a Troubled History', 126; Francis 5.

community in defining an acceptable way to display itself and its history.

In contrast, the main national museum in Northern Ireland, the Ulster Museum, did not include any post-partition history in its permanent collection until it closed its history gallery in 2001, a clear illustration of the general avoidance of displaying the recent, potentially divisive, past in museums. The permanent exhibition was replaced by successive temporary exhibitions until the museum closed for refurbishment in 2006. Two of them are worth mentioning as a sign that the ever-changing narrative of the past led to 'the presentation of history in the museum [...] being tested, sampled and evaluated'.³⁰ An exhibition entitled *Icons of identity* ran from 2000, exploring the myths and realities behind nine Irish icons, from the likes of the Virgin Mary and King William III to Edward Carson and Michael Collins. Another exhibition, called *Conflict: The Irish at War*, started in 2003 and was extended repeatedly until 2006. It covered the history of conflict in Ireland in the last 10,000 years, including the 1912-23 period, the two World Wars and the 'Troubles'.³¹ The latter exhibition was part of an outreach programme, for which the Ulster Museum had an outreach officer funded by Peace II and it was administered by the Community Relations Council.³² The programme also included oral history workshops on the recent conflict and public lectures on the role of museums in divided societies. Its main innovation, however, was the feedback wall where comments were kept pinned up throughout the duration of the exhibition.³³ With a multi-perspectival narrative, a multi-sensory experience and a feedback area, the museum reduced its curatorial control over the exhibition and offered the community a place for dialogue about conflict, including the most recent one. The fact that the exhibition was prolonged several times showed its popularity with the public and therefore was a sign that its curatorial practices struck the right chords with visitors.

Because of this promising new take on the past, expectations were high about the new 'Troubles Gallery' that opened in 2009 in the newly refurbished museum. Disappointment and controversy rapidly broke out over the minimalist and over-cautious contents of the gallery, which only contain text and pictures, where the *Conflict: The Irish at War* exhibition had displayed artefacts, including ones used in the recent conflict. The 'Troubles Gallery' is a series of thematic panels following a rough chronological timeline, closer to a series of fact files than a proper narrative of the conflict. The focus is on political violence and the peace process, with every group involved and affected by the conflict being mentioned — paramilitary organisations, police and armed forces, victims and political parties. The impact of conflict on society at large, however, seems to be largely left out, except in the slideshows of archive footage reporting news of bombings, killings and political rallies, which give a sense of chronology, albeit an incomplete one. The museum's

³⁰ Elizabeth Crooke, 'Museums, Communities and the Politics of Heritage in Northern Ireland', *Museums and Their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson (London: Routledge, 2007), 300-312.

³¹ Trevor Parkhill and Marian Ferguson, *Conflict: The Irish at War* (Belfast: Ulster Museum, National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland, 2004); Mike Houlihan, 'City Museum, Society and Conflict: The Belfast Experience', *Museum International* 58.3 (2006): 64-70.

³² Trevor Parkhill, 'Can a Contested History Be Exhibited to a Divided Society?', *Social History in Museums* 32 (2008): 25-30.

³³ Gemma Reid, 'Redefining Nation, Identity and Tradition: The Challenges for Ireland's National Museums', *Ireland's Heritages: Critical Perspectives on Memory and Identity*, ed. Mark McCarthy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 216.

obvious concern about the sensitive nature of the story told and the reaction of visitors is clear in the introductory panel:

The gallery is arranged around particular events and themes. Some of them may be upsetting — most of them remain contentious. We acknowledge the sensitivity and the deeply-held views about the issues reflected here. The exhibition is not intended as a comprehensive account of all that happened but as a broad platform of information about complex issues which have shaped our recent history. We welcome feedback on the approach and on the potential to develop the gallery.

With little narrative, no artefacts, and a strong focus on facts and numbers of victims, the lack of audacity of the 'Troubles Gallery' has been a disappointment to many. Despite involving academics and community workers in an advisory panel, and despite plans for a rich interpretative exhibition being leaked in the press, the museum chose to retain strong curatorial control, not so much in prescribing a version of the conflict but in refusing to interpret it, even with multiple perspectives.³⁴ The museum is currently working on improving the gallery, but little visible change has been made since it opened, despite the numerous criticisms voiced.

At the other end of the spectrum in terms of engagement with the conflict is the Museum of Free Derry, whose purpose, as described on its website is 'to remember and understand the local history of the city and its contribution to the ground breaking civil rights struggle which erupted in Derry in the mid-1960s and culminated in the massacre on Bloody Sunday'.³⁵ The museum was set up by the Bloody Sunday Trust in 2006 as part of its campaign for truth-recovery and acknowledgement of responsibility for the Bloody Sunday deaths, at a time when the Saville Inquiry into the events was still underway. The narrative given is highly subjective and does not attempt to offer multiple perspectives on the period. It is one of what Kris Brown has termed the 'sectional museums' in Northern Ireland which 'represent one communal, group or political voice'.³⁶ Brown argues that with a single-perspective narrative and a defensive message such museums serve to foster the community's self-confidence and cohesion, memorialize its difficult past and redress the wrongs it endured. Because they do not acknowledge the possibility of multiple narratives, sectional museums fit awkwardly in the museum world — the Museum of Free Derry has been granted an interim accreditation by the Heritage Council in the Republic of Ireland but is not yet a registered museum in Northern Ireland — as well as in the debate about dealing with the past. Yet they can be seen as an intra-community storytelling activity, which serves the empowerment and healing of that community. The work done by the Museum of Free

³⁴ Karine Bigand, 'How is Ulster's History Represented in Northern Ireland's Museums? The Cases of the Ulster Folk Museum and the Ulster Museum', *E-rea*, 8.3 (2011). <http://erea.revues.org/1769> (accessed 20 October 2016).

³⁵ Museum of Free Derry website, <http://www.museumoffreederry.org/content/museum>.

This is a much more polished mission statement than that one could find on an older version of the museum's website, where its *raison d'être* was to give 'the community's story told from the community's perspective, not the distorted version parroted by the government and most of the media over the years'. The museum has been undergoing extensive refurbishment over the last two years and will reopen in early 2017. The new website is part of the renovation of the museum.

³⁶ Kris Brown, 'Living with History: Conflict, Commemoration and Exhibitions in Northern Ireland: The Case of Sectional Displays', *Social History in Museums* 32 (2008): 31.

Derry is a mechanism for dealing with the legacy of conflict, as revealed by the curator's approach to the conflicting versions of the past:

What we should be aiming for is a point where we understand and acknowledge the different perceptions and they become something that we can discuss, rather than fight about. But to get to that point we need to know what they all are. So we are doing it in this area, but we need others to do the same.³⁷

Apart from the Museum of Free Derry, museums in Northern Ireland have shied away from proactively engaging with the background for the conflict and its legacy in today's society. Many have engaged in valuable community relations and outreach work, but the limited number of permanent exhibitions on the conflict and the controversial nature of two of them — one for its lack of engagement, the other for its overt activism in favour of one community — make the difficulty of the task all the more obvious. A fourth and final case study, positioned slightly outside the museum world, provides yet another example. Healing Through Remembering is a cross-community organisation set up in the early 2000s to reflect on ways of dealing with the legacy of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. Among the mechanisms identified by Healing Through Remembering is a living memorial museum, for which the organisation launched a call for ideas in 2006.³⁸ Although such a museum has not yet materialized, an audit of artefacts related to the conflict carried out by the organisation shows that, should it open one day, nearly half a million artefacts related to the conflict are held in private and public collections throughout the UK and Ireland.³⁹ In 2012, Healing Through Remembering used some of the identified artefacts in a travelling exhibition called *Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict*.⁴⁰ The exhibition was shown in five venues in Northern Ireland and the Republic's border counties between April and August 2012.

This exhibition is interesting for its experimental nature and curating practices.⁴¹ Indeed, the purpose of the exhibition was less to provide visitors with a narrative of how everyday life was transformed by the conflict but rather to facilitate social interaction between visitors and collections, between collectors and between venues. This ambition was encapsulated in the introductory text to the pilot exhibition, held in November 2011 in Healing Through Remembering's offices:

It is hoped that the proposed exhibition will stimulate an interest in the original collections lending the objects, inform the debate on a Living Memorial Museum and dealing with the

³⁷ May Redfern, 'The Anti-Establishment Museum', *Museum Identity* 4 (2010): 22.

³⁸ Healing Through Remembering, *Without Walls: A Report on Healing Through Remembering's Open Call for Ideas for a Living Memorial Museum of the Conflict in and about Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Healing Through Remembering, 2007); Healing Through Remembering, *Principles on Dealing with the Past* (Belfast: Healing Through Remembering, 2008).

³⁹ Healing Through Remembering, *Artefacts Audit: A Report of the Material Culture of the Conflict in and about Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Healing Through Remembering, 2008).

⁴⁰ *Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict* exhibition website, <http://healingthroughremembering.org/eoe-homepage/> (accessed 20 October 2016).

⁴¹ Healing Through Remembering, *Evaluation of Response to 'Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict' Exhibition* (Belfast: Healing Through Remembering, 2013). http://web-previews.com/healingthroughremembering/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/HTR_-_Evaluation_of_Response_to_EOE.pdf (accessed 20 October 2016).

past, and also create a network of communication between the collections. [...] It is hoped that once the exhibition is displayed in various locations around Northern Ireland and beyond it will act as a catalyst to help open up a platform in which diverse voices and experiences of the conflict can be heard.

The exhibition was devised as a trigger for further dialogue about the conflict, thereby as part of a wider process rather than an end in itself. The use of ‘everyday objects’, identified in research as a way to promote conversation in exhibitions, is a case in point.⁴² The exhibition was experimental in its outcomes and nature but also in its curatorial practices. The choice of objects and venues resulted from consultation between the organisation and the collectors. None of the five venues were established museums, but rather community-oriented spaces like a church, a library and an arts centre. This deliberate choice can be interpreted as a literal outreach exercise where the exhibition went to meet the visitor in venues that were familiar to them and their community rather than them coming to the sometimes unfamiliar world of the museum. The idea was to display proximity and interest in the community, possibly attract non-visitors and counter the familiar perception — and associated discomfort — of museums as ‘sites of authority’, as ‘the source of expert knowledge and visitors as the recipient of that expertise’.⁴³ Other curating specificities included limited curatorial control in the choice and interpretation of artefacts. All the objects on display were chosen by the collectors or contributed by the public and each contributor wrote the label to their object. The organisation only retained curatorial control in the introductory panel and in the layout of objects. The exhibition included no chronology of events or collection of facts, nor did it impose a narrative of the conflict on visitors. The approach was deliberately a multi-perspectival one, offering visitors the space to explore different stories through an array of artefacts and, in turn, to express their own voice in the feedback area. Consequently, visitors could choose what they related to or not and were under no perceived obligation to follow a prescribed narrative. This was especially important as the exhibition was intended for local populations who often had first-hand or second-hand experience of the conflict and whose stories were not always acknowledged in the past. Like in the *Conflict: The Irish at War* exhibition, visitors’ comments were left for all to see in the feedback area, thereby becoming part of the exhibition.

Although the *Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict* exhibition was modest in scale with only about 50 objects, it attracted an estimated 3,500 visitors, having been on display for 92 days in 5 venues over 6 months. The exhibition has since been on display in museums in Dundalk (Republic of Ireland) and Guernica (Spain), and is otherwise on show in Healing Through Remembering’s offices. While not all of the original non-museum venues were successful in attracting visitors, the other curatorial practices deployed by the exhibition seem to have been appreciated by visitors. Analysis of the feedback shows that it provided a variety of satisfying experiences to its visitors — comments were generally praiseful and the exhibition most frequently hailed as interesting, balanced, memory-stirring

⁴² Kristine Morrissey, ‘Pathways among Objects and Museum Visitors’, *Perspectives on Object-Centered Learning in Museums*, ed. Scott G. Paris (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 297.

⁴³ Kathleen McLean, ‘Whose Questions? Whose Conversations?’, *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, eds. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene and Laura Koloski, (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011), 70.

and thought-provoking. The 'everyday' angle also provided more opportunity for personal engagement and identification with objects or situations, therefore prompting memories and reflection. If anything, the feedback to the exhibition showed the will of people not to forget the past. Some seemed ready to address it by telling their own stories or listening to others'. Some were still reluctant to do so. The feedback also revealed stark generational and geographical gaps in knowledge and perception of the conflict, thereby stressing the need for more cross-community, cross-generation and cross-border dialogue — an activity clearly set within the remit of museums.

Conclusion

The four case studies presented in this article show different museum practices to deal with the legacy of conflict in Northern Ireland and different responses to the possibility for museums to become social actors. The practices most in line with the newly defined social role of museums were certainly that of the *Conflict: The Irish at War* and of the *Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict* exhibitions. Both resulted from a consultative process with members of the community. They offered a multi-perspectival approach, in tune with the absence of a single agreed narrative of the conflict, like the pioneer Tower Museum. They engaged their audiences by encouraging feedback and including comments in the exhibition. Both exhibitions were devised not only as tools to promote mutual understanding, but also as triggers for dialogue and reflection on contemporary issues in Northern Ireland. Such reduced curatorial control left the door open to divergences and disagreement, but this was seen as a risk worth taking for the exhibition to have a social impact.

At a time when the controversy over the Maze/Long Kesh Centre is being reignited, the way museums have dealt with the legacy of conflict in Northern Ireland has a lot to teach us. Interestingly, the most socially involved examples were temporary exhibitions. While their good practices may be difficult to transfer to permanent galleries which tend to be rapidly outdated, the question should be asked about what social role museums are ready to take, especially in a post-conflict society. International examples of museums exerting intellectual activism exist, for instance the District 6 Museum in South Africa.⁴⁴ While each conflict area has its own stories to tell, the possibility to have a social impact is open to all museums, should they be willing to embrace it.

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⁴⁴ Elizabeth Crooke, 'Dealing with the Past: Museums and Heritage in Northern Ireland and Cape Town, South Africa', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 11.2 (2005): 131-42.

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