

AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITIES

Guidance from a collaboration between Open House at Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge
and the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester



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KETTLE'S YARD



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MUSEUMS
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AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

A recent research collaboration between Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge and the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG), University of Leicester offers new insights on ethical approaches to museum and gallery collaborations with communities.

Inspired by learning from *Open House* at Kettle's Yard—a long-term socially engaged community programme working at a hyperlocal level in North Cambridge over the last seven years—that led to significant organisational change, the framework presents the ways in which museums and galleries can become more useful to, and more used by, local communities.

This organisational shift, or what we might describe as a journey of change, has inspired the development of an 'ethical framework' that exemplifies the archetypal characteristics of The Traditional Museum versus those of The Useful Museum. The framework does not aim to suggest that any museum or gallery, including Kettle's Yard, falls neatly into either category, or has done in the past; rather it helps us to envision an imagined starting point and what an aspirational destination might look like. The framework uncovers and confronts deeply entrenched traditional practice, as well as offers guidance for how other museums and galleries might shift towards becoming more useful and relevant for communities. While not necessarily a linear path, these characterisations intend to show a form of progression, and enable us to visualise the direction of change over time, alongside the ways in which socially engaged community programmes, like *Open House*, can foster conditions for a Useful Museum.

This framework can be used as a starting point by museums and galleries of all kinds working with communities.

THE TRADITIONAL MUSEUM

VS

THE USEFUL MUSEUM

PARTICIPATION AND OUTREACH



In the Traditional Museum, communities are invited to take part in a pre-defined activity, where lazy assumptions of empowerment through participation are made.

Communities are seen as separate or 'Other' from the museum. Assuming a position of superiority, the museum works **for** the community in order to 'save it' or 'fix it'.

Communities might be described as 'hard to reach' and tend to be categorised in reductive ways, for example by their socio-economic background, ethnicity, or health status.

PERFORMATIVE



The Traditional Museum establishes an 'invited space', which might have the appearance of being democratic, but the terms of engagement are often dictated. Participants are placed in a passive role and obliged to enact expected behaviours, ultimately leading to 'false consensus' (Lynch 2011). Inaccessible or specialist language might be used to control and steer conversations, leading to an unbalanced one-way dialogue. The Traditional Museum also acts as delegate, claiming the authority to speak on behalf of the community, under the guise of 'giving voice'.

The Traditional Museum 'talks the talk', but does little to 'walk the walk'. Their practice is often tokenistic and their actions are hollow or 'performative', and of greater value to the museum than communities.



COLLABORATION

In the Useful Museum, the practice of collaboration is central. Collaboration takes place with community partners, as well as internally across museum departments.

More than participation, collaboration brings people together to work **with** each other to make fundamental decisions throughout a process, where the needs and interests of all involved are paid attention to. The rights of communities are respected in the Useful Museum and authorship and ownership of collaboratively-made works are shared (Plumb 2016).

The Useful Museum celebrates difference and recognises that communities are complex, dynamic, and in a state of flux.



LISTENING AND TAKING ACTION

The Useful Museum creates a space for honest and open dialogue with community partners. It finds a way to level the playing field so that all involved develop a shared language that cuts across different knowledge and expertise (Dodd et al. 2017).

The museum supports the community's agency to express their own voice (Lynch 2021), and, importantly, listens to issues raised. It enables dissensus (without alienation), whilst also appreciating the pleasure that comes with agreement.

Responding to community need, rather than making assumptions about what the community may want, the Useful Museum takes relevant, practical and tangible action.

HIDDEN AGENDAS



Knowledge is power, and the Traditional Museum holds all of this through controlling access to fundamental information, shutting down decision-making processes, closing off open communication, and by making agendas ambiguous or hidden.

Even a well-intentioned act of 'sheltering' participants from difficult issues disempowers communities, where the museum controls what participants are entitled to know and what they can and can't decide.

SHORT-TERM



The Traditional Museum often works on one-off, short-term projects, where little trust is built with communities. These activities feel 'parachuted in' (Lynch 2011) and bring about minimal actual change.

ONE-SIDED



The communities are 'passive beneficiaries' (Lynch 2011) in the Traditional Museum. The museum is not attentive to the interests of communities, taking a detached approach that makes many assumptions about what communities actually want.

At the other end of the spectrum, the museum acts solely as an 'agent' for communities, completely obeying their decisions and gives up responsibility of creating a mutually beneficial dialogue (Helguera 2011). Denying their role in the partnership, the museum denies themselves the opportunity to express and assert their own position, contribute to the collaboration, and be deemed 'equal' partners in the process. However, this self-abdication is essentially a form of false renunciation, as the museum preordains this handing over of power, further re-enacting control (Plumb 2017).



TRANSPARENT

Transparency is key in the Useful Museum (Kettle's Yard 2018). This open approach holds the museum accountable both externally with partners and internally.

Budgets, meeting agendas, salaries and fees, processes and protocols are shared, alongside all stakeholders' interests, motivations, and agendas. The Useful Museum aims for a 'radical transparency' that empowers participants to make informed choices (Marstine 2013).



LONG-TERM

The Useful Museum builds long-term, ongoing, and sustainable partnerships with communities based on mutual trust and respect. Allowing time to develop relationships enables a more nuanced understanding of communities and partners, and lets a more equitable process emerge (Kettle's Yard 2018). Partnerships are built over years, rather than months in the Useful Museum. Ongoing commitments aim to make meaningful, real world differences that matter to communities.



MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL

Relationships are built on reciprocity and mutual exchange in the Useful Museum. All forms of expertise are valued and celebrated in the Useful Museum (Kettle's Yard 2018).

All are active agents who share ownership and learn new skills, understanding and knowledge from each other. There is an 'interdependence' between the museum and community (Lynch 2021) and a genuine interest in the needs, aspirations and concerns of all stakeholders.

MAINTAINS THE STATUS QUO



The Traditional Museum is set in its ways and does not see the value of critical reflection, which maintains the status quo. Staff and volunteers might be fearful of change and defensive towards external critique.

This museum focuses on delivery above all else, little time is made for reflexive practice, and evaluation of its activities take place at the end of the journey, often in isolation. Insights from evaluation are unlikely to be used or put into action.

HIERARCHICAL



A top-down approach, where the museum's power is sometimes invisible, sometimes explicit, is utilised in the Traditional Museum. The museum's expert knowledge is privileged; they tightly control and manage the activities, offering only 'empowerment-lite' (Lynch 2011) experiences.

Opportunities for communities to influence and realise decisions are minimal, and where choices *are* offered they are limited and predicated on the assumption that participants are self-directing and capable of articulating their desires in the language of the institution (Morse 2021).

In the worst-case scenario, communities are exploited and used as 'material', mirroring acts of exclusion and furthering marginalisation.



REFLEXIVE

The Useful Museum is flexible, nimble, adaptable, and reflexive. It is thoughtful, considered and willing to undertake self-critique in order to confront and challenge museum thinking and practice. Critique from partners is also encouraged and there is a willingness to accept when change is needed, a readiness to take risks, and an openness to reform.

Time and space is carved out for reflection, which takes place throughout the collaborative journey, not just at the end.

Critical friends (Lynch 2011), who work outside of the museum, help to bring about positive change and are understood as paramount to a reflective museum practice.



DEMOCRATIC

Importantly, decisions are shared (before, during, and after), and activity is initiated and shaped in collaboration with local constituents, from the ground up, in the Useful Museum. All involved recognise and critique the power relations at play, museum practitioners who have traditionally held positions of power, relinquish control to work towards more democratic practice.

There is a value and respect for the differing expertise, knowledge, and skills that each agent brings. This includes acknowledging lived experience as an expertise in its own right.

The Useful Museum recognises that historically there has been a paucity of attention paid to the community participants' experiences and perceptions in museum collaborations; therefore, the Useful Museum sets out to amplify these voices through creating spaces where all voices can be heard (Plumb 2017).

WELFARE MODEL OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



In the Traditional Museum community engagement work is 'bolted on' and situated on the periphery. It reflects a 'welfare model of access', where 'add-on services' do little to bring about fundamental change, and are of most benefit to existing audiences who already have an abundance of cultural capital (O'Neill 2002).

It is the sole responsibility of community and engagement teams, departments work in siloes, and there is little collaborative work or joined-up thinking.

The activity is reliant on external, often short-term, project funding, making the practice unsustainable.

THERAPEUTIC MODEL



The Traditional Museum adopts a therapeutic or charitable model (Lynch 2011; 2021), of community engagement work, where the museum 'helps' the community to change and improve, implying a deficit. In so doing, the museum assumes a hierarchical position and those in 'receipt of charity' are expected to be grateful.

The museum assumes it can 'empower' communities through its activity.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IS EMBEDDED

Community engagement is an embedded practice in the Useful Museum, it falls under the remit and responsibility of all staff and volunteers, forms part of their mission and values, and is highly valued and visible (Museums Association 2018). The governance and leadership teams are strategically invested in community engagement activity and a collaborative and an integrated approach takes place across departments to enable more effective work with communities that is rooted in local need.

The Useful Museum is an outward-looking organisation with a live community engagement strategy and where activity is funded through a significant core museum budget (Paul Hamlyn Foundation 2016).

The Useful Museum works collaboratively long-term with community advisors or panel members to conceptualise, initiate and shape activity that is urgent and relevant to communities. Beyond this, structurally, staff and volunteers of are reflective of their diverse communities, who are also represented at board level.



SOLIDARITY PHILOSOPHY

Drawing heavily on the recent work of Lynch (2021), the Useful Museum can be characterised by a philosophy of 'solidarity'.

The Useful Museum recognises and values the strength of communities, and the mutual support they can offer each other. It supports communities' capability building, which in turn leads to self-empowerment, self-determination, and reclamation of their representation. Communities develop and lead their own creativity, using the museum as a community asset to respond to urgent need, and support communities to thrive.

ABOUT THE PARTNERS

KETTLE'S YARD

Kettle's Yard is the University of Cambridge's modern and contemporary art gallery. [Kettle's Yard](#) is a beautiful House with a remarkable collection of modern art and a gallery that hosts modern and contemporary art exhibitions. Between 1957 and 1973 Kettle's Yard was the home of Jim and Helen Ede. It houses their collection of early twentieth-century British and European art displayed alongside ceramics, glass, textiles and furniture, and found natural objects including pebbles, shells, plants, flowers, and fruit. Whilst living at Kettle's Yard they hosted concerts and kept 'open house' every afternoon inviting visitors to discover both the artworks and objects on display. In 1966, the Edes gifted the House and its contents to the University of Cambridge. Inspired by Jim Ede, [Open House](#) is a long-term collaboration between Kettle's Yard, contemporary artists, and the neighbouring communities in North Cambridge. Open House welcomes an artist in residence each year, selected by the community, to explore the local area, collaborate with local residents and create new artwork together.

RESEARCH CENTRE FOR MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES (RCMG)

As part of the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, [RCMG](#) carries out research that stimulates new thinking and creative practice, enabling cultural organisations to become more ambitious and impactful in nurturing more equitable and inclusive societies. Our research combines academic rigour and a commitment to socially-engaged thinking and practice. Collaboration with cultural partners is central to our research practice – we build teams that comprise diverse skills, experiences and perspectives to meet the specific needs and requirements of each project. Our research creates spaces within which different forms of expertise come together. We seek to generate insights—for collaborating partners and the wider sector—that open up new possibilities for museums and their role in society.

RCMG/Kettle's Yard, July 2021

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