

PREPARING THE PLOT: INVOLVING OUR COMMUNITIES IN INTERPRETATION

Allison Russell

'What's so important about culture? That's an easy one to answer: culture is a powerful catalyst for change. We believe passionately that culture – in its widest sense, can improve the quality of life for communities and for individuals.'

Culture: a catalyst for change, Living East (UK) 2004

The recognition that culture can play a significant role in bringing about important cultural change is central to this story about a group of museums in the town of Great Yarmouth, in the east of England. They were all located in a part of town where there were significant social problems, and local people were not engaged in the activity of the museums.

In previous centuries, Great Yarmouth had been an important sea port, with the streets lined with the houses of wealthy merchants; it was a place where those who could afford it came for seaside holidays. By the late twentieth century, however, it was rather more a case of those who couldn't afford it who came for their summer holidays to Great Yarmouth – those who couldn't afford the south of France. It is an understatement to say that morale in the town was low: indeed, residents were so aware of the poor image that the town had that when they went on holidays themselves, some admitted that they lied about where they came from.

The museums there had very low visitor numbers and some only opened for the holiday months when they hoped to attract tourists: they had no expectation of attracting locals. Given their common problems they agreed to unite and applied to the UK government's urban regeneration program, which is similar in outlook to the South Australian government's social inclusion initiative.

In SA, the Social Inclusion Board priorities include reducing homelessness, increasing school retention and increasing Aboriginal health and wellbeing through sports, recreation and the arts, amongst others. These are huge, complex long term problems, yet listed in the stakeholders section of document is 'Cultural bodies'.

The UK document quoted above outlines three key themes in its urban regeneration program relating to culture:

- Living life to the full, and encouraging participation in cultural pursuits
- Improving the business performance of the cultural sector (in recognition of the significant economic role the sector plays)
- Creating a regional image: creating a sense of place and of belonging to place

This document makes inspiring reading, suggesting that cultural engagement has a key role to play in social change.

The local museums received a seven year grant from this scheme, and in return they promised to help create change in their communities, through the creation of an integrated, themed heritage experience with joint staffing and marketing. But how were these historical museums which were themselves struggling to stay alive going to change their local community, when their local community gave every impression of being completely disinterested in them?

They decided that the first thing they needed to do was undertake some market research. Given their goal was to achieve social change in the community, they identified three key stakeholder groups whose opinions they sought: the local community, the holiday visitors and the history and heritage minded.

The marketing professional they employed warned them that the results may tell them things they didn't want to hear: given that all the evidence suggested that the community was completely disengaged from the heritage sector's activities, they may discover that whatever they tried, they would fail. Also of concern was the perception that in going after this local market, they may, in fact, alienate their existing audience, the traditional heritage consumers.

Conducting focus group sessions with the different groups, they started to build up a picture of what people wanted from their institutions.

The results were interesting: both the heritage minded and the holiday makers wanted to find local stories in the museums, not generalized ones. What they learned from the locals was that the people of Great Yarmouth cared passionately about their history, even though they didn't visit the museums. They felt cheated that it wasn't better preserved and they questioned why other towns in the county had much better heritage and history resources. Although only paid to come to an hour and half focus group session, they stayed talking for much longer.

The focus groups showed the locals had other ideas about museums and heritage. The people wanted access to the museums' collections, but not necessarily on the museums' terms. They had a clear understanding that the museums were different from the other seaside attractions because they represented the 'real thing', and they understood that the 'real thing' could be promoted to change people's poor perceptions of the town.

In addition, they brought some other agendas which were beyond the scope of the museums involved. The people wanted the building in which last of the herring curing works was located to be rescued and termed into a celebration of a thousand years of the fishing industry, the death of which they mourned.

Although well beyond the scope of their original plans, the herring curing works were converted into a new museum called Time and Tide, which opened in 2004. The £4.7 million project was one of four finalists in the UK's prestigious Gulbenkian prize in 2005, for museum innovation. Working from the premise that the museum should provide its dislocated and divided community with a sense of communal identity and self-esteem, it incorporates interactive components, models, games, puzzles and film shows within its exhibitions.

Following the success of the initial focus group work, the museum continues to work closely with its communities in every aspect of its business: focus

groups are used with each exhibition, and everything from the name of the museum to the design of the building was done with intensive community consultation.

The other museums have also been transformed, and the success that their attempts to engage their community has resulted in increased funding from local government in recognition of the fact that museums and history can, indeed, change peoples lives.

Outreach projects also sprang from focus groups, including a community archaeological dig. Locals were invited to book into sessions on the dig and were trained in what they were required to do, and a complementary program of children's activities was offered. Some of the most disengaged youth in the area were fascinated by the project, and became deeply involved. It similarly sparked the interest of adults in the community, and through the relationships that were formed, a partnership was created with a local adult literacy program, which worked with the people whose self-esteem had been so improved through the project that they felt the desire to join a literacy program.

These are the happy endings of this story: evidence that museums and heritage can play a significant role in urban regeneration and social inclusion, and can deliver outcomes that benefit both the participating organisations and communities they involve. One key message we can learn from the Great Yarmouth experience is that we ignore our communities at our own peril. If people seem not to care about what we are doing, perhaps we are just not doing it right. The museums in this story were like many of us: working hard in small museums, certain amongst ourselves of the value of our collections, but struggling to connect with our communities. The museums in this program took enormous risks which did pay off for them, but there were no guarantees at the outset. However, they had the support of government programs, which believe, like we do, that culture and history's place within it are of vital importance to creating the types of environments which nurture and support its communities. In addition, they formed partnerships that strengthened their work. These partnerships included, obviously, with each other, but also with organisations which have at their core a mission to help tackle some of the injustices in communities.

Most of us are not in historical organisations which are planning for exponential growth. Neither were the museums at Great Yarmouth. Indeed, they were, at best, holding steady. However, this example demonstrates that with courage, vision and an eye for available support, culture and heritage can be made to matter to our communities, but our organisations need to make an effort to engage with those communities who may seem disengaged from us. By allowing those outside our organisations to prepare the plot and tell the stories that are of interest to them, we can benefit more than just ourselves: we can prove what we all know: that history is good for you.