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Creating the Modern Museum: the Museum of Liverpool

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the processes employed to create the Museum of Liverpool. We wanted a museum that is story-led; relevant; that captures the personality of the people of Liverpool; that involves local people; that is full of dialogue, voices and emotion; that is flexible, intelligent, active; and which changes the way people think about the city and themselves; that is primarily for local people, not tourists.

We believe we have set new standards for a city museum, created a new type of city museum: one that is democratic and emotional. It is full of opinion, of politics, of debate. It has broken a number of museum taboos. But it is a museum that is loved by the people of Liverpool.

The Liverpool context is difficult, with high levels of poverty, and this is relevant to the creation of the museum. Over the last 200 years Liverpool has been transformed from one of the world's richest cities to one of the poorest in Europe, though great wealth and extreme poverty have always coexisted among the city's population. Through these experiences, Liverpudlians have developed an attitude, one forged through diversity and change, opportunity and adversity. Liverpudlians see themselves as different, and independent, with a fair degree of scepticism for authority. Liverpool people – Liverpudlians – have a strong self-image. Economics, migration, location, events and a distinct cultural heritage have contributed to our identity.

We at National Museums Liverpool feel that we have created a city museum that is also a human rights museum – on the grounds that urban life can be characterised as being detrimental to human rights, in terms of the inevitability of inequality and various forms of discrimination. The modern museum is a very different entity for the model that became so familiar to us in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Keywords: Stories, Dialogue, Emotion, Identity, Human rights

In a relatively short space of time in the 18th and 19th centuries, Britain was transformed from a small, weak agrarian country, where most people lived in villages, to the

world's first industrial nation. This transformation laid the foundations for the building of the greatest Empire the world has ever known.

Britain's population exploded as our economy grew, and as we found the means to feed more people than ever before, through improvements in agriculture, scientific discoveries and inventions, and the manufacturing of goods to trade with the rest of the world. Centre stage in this process of profound change were our towns, destined to become big cities, and leading the cast was the town of Liverpool, about to become one of the greatest ports in the world.

People poured from the countryside into our towns looking for work, and this changed the towns beyond recognition, creating extremes of astonishing wealth and grinding poverty, and establishing the pattern of big cities that is still familiar to us today – Birmingham, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield and others, which were all small settlements before industrialisation transformed them. The most extraordinary story of all these cities is the growth and subsequent decline of Liverpool.

The Museum of Liverpool tells the story of Liverpool and its people. Six thousand objects and countless images, stories and interactives form the Museum's exhibitions, and together they reflect Liverpool's history, geography and culture.

If ever there was a city that warranted a large scale museum to explore its extraordinary history, that city is Liverpool. This is why, in 2001, we suggested building a new museum on our land by the River Mersey, to replace the popular but tiny Museum of Liverpool Life. We said that our ambition was to create the "the world's greatest urban history museum".

Creating a new museum means most obviously designing a building, but the true measure of a museum is not the building that houses it, but what it contains. Making sense of the incredible Liverpool story was a challenge we met initially by working with a Californian design company, BRC Imagination Arts. After many months of discussions we emerged with the exhibition concept that can be seen in the Museum today: deceptively simple, but hopefully compelling and effective.

We wanted a museum that captures the essence of this most remarkable city, that has an authentic Liverpool 'voice', that deals with the 'wider' Liverpool found in nearby Birkenhead, Bootle and Huyton, that appeals to different generations, and that is capable of frequent change.

We wanted to *explain* Liverpool. We wanted our visitors to *understand* Liverpool. It is very easy to grow up in a place and to love it, but actually to know very little about why it is like it is. Liverpool is very easily misunderstood, not least because in living memory it has been a poor city, plagued by unemployment and poverty. But less than 100 years ago Liverpool was one of the greatest cities on earth, and only through knowing this, and understanding why this was, can anyone understand the modern city.

Liverpool, like many cities, has a history that is full of ups and downs. For hundreds of years no more than an insignificant fishing village, it became possibly the greatest port in the world, the main port in the biggest empire the world has ever seen; and then it went into a decline that was almost terminal.

Six or seven years ago, when contemplating creating a new museum that told this rollercoaster story, staff at National Museums Liverpool asked ourselves the question: what do we want to achieve?

Our answers included the following:

- we wanted to be **relevant** to all, taking into account diversity of population, inclusivity and a layering of access
- we wanted to capture the **personality** of the city and its people
- we knew we had to **consult and involve**, with a lot of **participation, dialogue, opinion and debate** – we needed to include **voices and identities**
- we knew we needed lots of **partnerships** – the museum had to be extensively networked with and outside the city
- we wanted **flexibility** (not an overreliance on permanent display)
- we knew the museum had to be **intelligent** – analytical not antiquarian
- we wanted **quality** – dignity, importance, prestige and cultural authority, unlike most city history museums
- we wanted the museum to be **active**, not passive
- we were aware of the **time** dimension – a museum is a long-term commitment
- we wanted to **explain the modern city** through analysis of the past
- we wanted to **change the way visitors think about the city and themselves**

Because of this approach, we created a museum that quickly became the most popular in England outside the capital city of London; that won the 2013 Council of Europe Museum Prize; and that has set museum-based urban historians a new benchmark, so that scores of museums have approached National Museums Liverpool to find out our ‘secret recipe’ for a successful city museum.

The Museum project began in 2001; it cost about 100 million euros, measures about 10,000 square metres, and the first phase opened in July 2011. The final phase opened in March 2013. The Museum of Liverpool occupies a prime site next to the famous River Mersey in a part of the city that is a favourite for walks and cultural exploration.

But the urban context in which the Museum was created is a difficult one: Liverpool is one of the UK’s poorest cities, with a high welfare bill, low life expectancy, major health challenges, high unemployment, low skills levels, low educational attainment, suffering the consequences of recession and cuts in public sector spending. Creating a new museum of the city in this environment needed great care and thought, or it would be doomed to fail in terms of being taken to the hearts of local people – the ultimate aim of a city museum, anywhere in the world.

We always wanted the Museum to be people-led and story-led rather than collections-led, but also to be object-rich (it contains about 6,000 objects, large and small); we wanted it to be multi-disciplinary, to have a real Liverpool voice, using humour and involving many Liverpudlians in content-creation; to be democratic and inclusive, and for a visit to be an emotional (though not celebratory) experience in an emotional city.

At no time did we perceive the museum as something which would set out primarily to promote the city to visitors – this was not designed for tourist appetites, but as something which had grown out of the city. A city history museum has to deal in uncomfortable truths as well as in more positive stories – it has a far more important psychological and educational role to play than that of a mere tourist attraction.

The Museum has four main galleries: *Global City*, *The Great Port*, *The People’s Republic* and *Wondrous Place*. It has other spaces too – the Skylight Gallery, *Little Liver-*

pool, History Detectives, City Soldiers, community and education facilities, atrium areas, as well as shop and café.

This arrangement of main galleries is based upon an in-depth analysis of the Liverpool story: any new city museum must produce its own storyline structure, and each will be different from all others.

Global City deals with the relationships Liverpool had (and has) with other ports and nations around the world – something which is, of course, very influential in a city that was a great trading port.

Liverpool played a key role in the making of Britain and its Empire. The British Empire was made up of a large number of countries in Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe and the Americas. War and trade helped expand the Empire, while racism, patriotism, religion and science justified its existence.

Liverpool became rich by trading across the Empire and beyond. As trade routes expanded, distant lands became accessible and new cultural influences, people and ideas entered the city. The Empire helped define Liverpool and the people who live here, and the legacies of the British Empire can still be felt all over the world.

The Great Port is concerned with the trades and industries that came to flourish in Liverpool, especially in the docks.

In the Roman period (43–410 AD) Meols, on the north Wirral coast, was the main trading port in Liverpool Bay, while Liverpool was no more than a small farming settlement. The natural tidal inlet of the ‘Pool’ on the banks of the River Mersey formed Liverpool’s early harbour. The Mersey has a high tide about every 11.5 hours. The Mersey’s tides are particularly high (as much as 11 metres, or 33 feet).

In the early 18th century large ships visiting Liverpool’s tidal ‘Pool’ had to anchor in the middle of the river to avoid being grounded at low tide. They were unloaded by smaller craft, but this was expensive and time-consuming, and exposed ships to strong winds and swift currents.

The town’s answer was to build the first enclosed, commercial wet dock in the world in 1715. Engineer Thomas Steers enclosed part of the Pool with brick walls and wooden gates, maintaining the water level in the dock, regardless of the river tides.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, new industries flourished in Britain. This period is now known as the Industrial Revolution. Factory jobs drew people from the countryside, and towns and cities grew at an extraordinary rate.

Liverpool’s proximity to manufacturing towns in the North of England and the Midlands, and its west coast location, meant that merchants could take advantage of new trading links with North America. A huge increase in international trading meant vast quantities of raw materials, like cotton, were passing through the port before being distributed to manufacturing towns. Finished goods, such as clothing and metal ware, were exported around the world. By 1857, the value of Liverpool’s export trade amounted to 45% of the UK total (London’s share was 23% and Hull’s 13%).

Rapid development of the dock system was needed for these millions of tonnes of imports and exports. Docks and warehouses were built to enable the loading, unloading, storing, and distributing of the raw materials and goods. Horse-drawn carts carried goods around the city. The railway system and inland waterways carried cargo to factories and markets across the country.

By the early 20th century there were many ways to travel to, from and around Liverpool. Ferries have crossed the River Mersey since the 13th century. Passengers travelled by horse tram or carriage to catch a ferry or board a transatlantic liner. Birkenhead opened the first street tramway in Britain in 1860, and Liverpool had an extensive tram network until 1957. Queensway road tunnel opened in 1934, conveying vehicles underneath the river between Liverpool and Birkenhead.

New roads, canals, and eventually railways, changed the face of Britain's landscape. In 1830 the Liverpool and Manchester Railway (L&MR) opened. It was the world's first timetabled passenger railway. The route had a massive impact on the economy of Liverpool, and brought changes to the whole country.

By the end of the 19th century, Liverpool's four major imports were cotton, sugar, timber and grain. The port received its first import of cotton in 1709. In 1850, 1.5 million cotton bales were imported, and cotton accounted for almost half of the city's trade. By 1910 cotton still made up 30% of the value of imports into the port.

The Liverpool Overhead Railway (1893–1956) ran alongside the docks and warehouses on Liverpool's waterfront. Every day thousands of people passed under and along the Railway (LOR) to work. There was a vibrant mix of professions along the River.

The docks provided the main employment, with thousands of men working to load and unload ships and to move the goods to warehouses for storage. Rope, crate, barrel and sack manufacturers set up close to the docks, and blacksmiths and engineers serviced horses and wagons. New communities also grew up near the docks as seafarers from China, West Africa, Europe, the Philippines and elsewhere settled in the city.

Public houses, cafés and canteens ensured the workers were well-fed, and numerous laundries serviced the ships in dock. The Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, insurance and shipping companies all had offices along the docks.

Merchants were often involved in associated industries that grew up around the port to process the raw materials like sugar, cotton and tobacco. They often developed interests in banking, insurance, ship owning and ship repair, and many profited from the transatlantic slave trade.

It was common for young boys to be employed on the docks. For example, boiler boys were employed from the age of 14, cleaning and inspecting ships' boilers, bilges, engine rooms and funnels. They worked in terrible conditions for very little pay.

The Port of Liverpool emerged from the Second World War in apparent good health. After years of wartime hardship, demand for goods grew and Liverpool's docks and shipping companies flourished. By the mid-1960s, a record 28 million tonnes of cargo were passing through the port every year.

But the world was changing, and Liverpool suffered as Britain lost industrial primacy and the Empire dwindled. By the 1980s Liverpool's economy was in real trouble. To tackle high unemployment and miles of derelict dockland, new uses were found to regenerate Liverpool's docks, such as the residential, shopping and dining experience at Albert Dock close to the Pier Head. With the demise of the docks Liverpool's character changed. No longer a port city, it became a city with a port.

The People's Republic looks at the social history of the city, the stories of the ordinary people who lived and worked there.

Liverpool is unlike any other British city. The rollercoaster curves of the city's fortunes, from 12th century local fishing port, to 19th century global port, to late 20th century decay and depopulation, has forged a powerful identity. The city's location on the west coast of Britain has created a long history of migration and settlement. People from Ireland, Wales, West Africa, Scandinavia, Russia, China, Europe and elsewhere have created a unique cultural mix.

Over the last 200 years Liverpool has been transformed from one of the world's richest cities to one of the poorest in Europe, though great wealth and extreme poverty have always coexisted among the city's population. Through these experiences, Liverpudlians have developed an attitude, one forged through diversity and change, opportunity and adversity. Liverpudlians see themselves as different, and independent, with a fair degree of scepticism for authority. Liverpool people – Liverpudlians – have a strong self-image. Economics, migration, location, events and a distinct cultural heritage have contributed to our identity.

Indeed, Liverpudlians are seen by others as different. Liverpool may once have been a Lancashire city, but it had stopped being that by the middle of the 19th century. It is the least 'English' of all English cities, and has more in common with Dublin, Belfast and Glasgow than with Manchester. This sense of independence, of difference, is what makes Liverpool *The People's Republic*.

Liverpool has been home to many different peoples and still attracts newcomers today. People move home for many different reasons – to escape poverty, make a better life, find work, get an education, for love or to escape persecution and war. Everyone who passes through the city leaves something of themselves here. Liverpool carries within it the character of those who have lived here before us. Their legacies define the city and shape the lives of people living here today, even the accent. The marks we leave may be small, but together they are what make Liverpool unique.

Earning a wage has never been easy in Liverpool. Although the busy 19th century port offered employment, especially in the docks, work was hard and often casual. More recently, employment prospects have risen and fallen like a rollercoaster of hope and depression. When trade declined in the 20th century thousands of people lost their jobs. These jobs have never been replaced. The city is now heavily reliant on public sector employment, which makes it particularly vulnerable to changing government policies. Despite recent economic growth, Liverpool's job security remains depressingly low, with unemployment consistently higher than the national average.

Probably the most unusual exhibition gallery in the Museum is *Wondrous Place*. It is hard to think of many other cities where a museum would allocate so much space to a gallery devoted entirely to creativity, but the story of Liverpool is one in which entertaining and performing play a central part. The Museum sets out to explain why this should be, and does so by looking at all the changes the city has experienced over the past 300 years.

Liverpool has always inspired and challenged, prompting strong creative expressions of many kinds. The city's grassroots art, music and sport scenes have been the backbone of the city's cultural creativity for decades and a vibrant contemporary arts scene flourishes. To quote the 1960 Billy Fury song, Liverpool is a 'wondrous place'.

For example, we have the music: the Merseybeat sound dominated the 1960s charts, making Liverpool's music world famous. The Liverpool sound was unique – mixing rock 'n' roll, skiffle, country, folk, blues and pop. The Cavern and the Iron Door were two key clubs for the new sound. Across Liverpool, music blasted out of social clubs, town halls, cinemas, church halls, and ballrooms. By 1963 Merseybeat was a national phenomenon. In 1964 Liverpool group The Beatles led the British musical invasion of America, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Of course, creating a purpose-built museum involves not just designing exhibits, but also the building itself. The Museum of Liverpool occupies an outstanding new building on Liverpool's historic waterfront.

At one time, the Museum of Liverpool was destined to form the lower levels of architect Will Alsop's "Cloud" structure (the so-called "Fourth Grace") but after the collapse of this proposal in July 2004, National Museums Liverpool set to work on a stand-alone museum right next to the River Mersey. Happily, after many discussions, our ambition was matched by funding from the North West Development Agency, who took the brave decision to back the idea in July 2005, and we were up and running.

To design the building we appointed Danish architects 3XN, who responded to our requirement that the museum be shaped around a central core; should contain four large exhibition spaces; should have excellent views to the city and the Mersey; should respect the topography of Liverpool's Pier Head; and should blend in with its surroundings, being modest in height, and complementing rather than competing with its neighbours, the Three Graces and the Albert Dock complex.

The resulting structure is a striking addition to the Liverpool cityscape. It is clearly a 21st century building, but one that can meet our testing interpretive, curatorial and operational needs. The building has an unusual geometrical design, and is clad in 5,700 square metres of German Jura limestone. Its 28 metre picture windows give spectacular views of the city, the Wirral, the River Mersey and beyond to Wales. These views are a key part of the concept of the Museum, giving visitors a unique perspective on the city.

Beneath the Museum's elegant, rippling skin lies a massive 2,100 tonnes of structural steel (equivalent to 270 double-decker buses), 1,500 square metres of glazing, 7,500 cubic metres of concrete and 20 tonnes of bolts. The building occupies an area 110 metres long by 60 metres wide, and at its tallest point is 26 metres high. That makes it longer than the pitches at either Anfield or Goodison Park, and more than twice as wide as the *Titanic*.

The Museum's interior is arranged around a central core, with 8,000 square metres of public space and four large exhibition areas. The building's steel structure allows the largest galleries, which are 40 by 28 metres, to be column-free, maximising the available space.

The spiral staircase in the centre of the atrium is both visually and technically impressive. This has been cast in-situ, using concrete with steel reinforcing bars. It is effectively a beam spanning between the ground and second floors. There are no supporting columns, giving the impression that the staircase is 'floating' in the space.

As well as creating an outstanding urban history museum, it was important for us to create a building that would limit our impact on the environment. To this end we adopted

an innovative arrangement of plant and equipment, and implemented several energy saving measures.

The Museum is powered by its own energy centre, using state-of-the-art renewable and energy-efficient technologies with a combined heat and power (CHP) plant. The CHP system will meet the Museum's daily requirements for heating, cooling and power, and will reduce our CO₂ emissions by 884 tonnes/year. This will help us cut energy costs while also delivering on climate change goals.

Our rainwater harvesting system accumulates and stores rainwater from our roof and terraces. The collected 'grey' water is used to flush our toilets, reducing our water consumption. The large picture windows incorporate a system designed to meet stringent thermal, acoustic and solar insulation requirements.

Together these features contribute to what CNN called in its documentary, 'The Road to Durban: A Green City Journey', "one of the greenest museums on earth".

We believe we have created a new type of city museum: one that is democratic and emotional. It is full of opinion, of politics, of debate. It has broken a number of museum taboos. But it is a museum that is loved by the people of Liverpool. It has been described by a distinguished travel writer, Simon Calder, as "the miracle on the Mersey". Member of Parliament and former Government Minister Andy Burnham, himself born in Liverpool, has said that the museum is the "heart of Liverpool". A visiting German journalist wrote in February 2013:

We simply don't have museums like this in Germany. The people here, they go into your museums as if they are going into a pub. There's noise, there's life. People laugh or they cry. It's a place they feel free. I was amazed.

The Museum of Liverpool is the winner of the 2013 Council of Europe Museum prize. The Council of Europe citation reads:

The museum traces the social, economic and political history of a city which is one of the most socially diverse in Britain. According to the Committee, the museum has an outstanding capacity to get people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities involved and promotes in such a strong, convincing form the Council of Europe core values.

But more than this, the citation went on to refer to the value of the Museum of Liverpool as a promoter of human rights:

The Museum of Liverpool provides an exemplary recognition of human rights in museum practice, the Committee underlines. The interaction with local community is excellent with numerous activities involving children, youth, families and elderly. It promotes mutual respect between ethnically and socially diverse parts of the society, addresses human rights through contemporary debates and dialogue and maintains an open and inclusive policy aimed at bridging cultures in every aspect of its work.

Ultimately, we at National Museums Liverpool do feel that we have created a city museum that is also a human rights museum – that is what we set out to do, on the grounds that urban life can be characterised as being detrimental to human rights, in terms of the inevitability of inequality and various forms of discrimination. The modern museum is a very different entity for the model that became so familiar to us in the 19th and 20th centuries.