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The paper follows Donatella Calabi's argument that city museums should be seen in political terms, not as inert collections of objects but as places of debate, engagement and collective memory, where narrative can reinforce a citizen's sense of belonging and the visitor's appreciation of the sources of local identity. The paper considers this ideal in the context of CAMOC (Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities), the urban subgroup of ICOM (International Council of Museums). A case study of the Museum of London illustrates the diverse origins of a modern city museum and the many directions it might choose to take. We see how an accident of building design ensures that the museum's present displays are arranged on a chronological basis: in a forthcoming relocation to larger premises the discipline of a timeline will be lost. The implications are discussed.

Keywords: city museums, civics, London, CAMOC

Introduction

This paper deals with a particular type of establishment, museums that take their location as their subject matter. 'City museums' are recognised by UNESCO's International Council on Museums (ICOM) as a subcategory within a long list of specialisms that includes agricultural, maritime, modern art and transport collections. Prime visitor attractions as the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, the City Museum of New York, the Shanghai History Museum and the Museum of London are just the leading edge of a throng of establishments which in varying proportions display aspects of local history, celebrate place-identity and engage with the dilemmas of contemporary municipal life. An international conference held in Rome in December 2005 discussed examples in Amsterdam, Barcelona, Bergamo, Bratislava, Brescia, Cagliari, Capri, Chandigarh, Edinburgh, London, Luxembourg, Marsala, Milan, Modena, Montréal (Pointe-à-Callière), Perugia, Queensland (Redcliffe), Rome, Syracuse, Sydney, Venice and Verona. The most recent publication of CAMOC, the International Committee for Collections and Museums of Cities, includes examples from Angera, l'Aquila, Berlin, Brooklyn, Daxi, Frankfurt, Ghent, Graz, Helsinki, Jurmala, Lisbon, Liverpool, Moscow, Rotterdam, Seoul and Vladivostock. CAMOC promotes an annual workshop hosted by a member institution. The first such event took place fifteen years ago in Moscow. Meetings have followed in Boston, Vienna, Seoul, Istanbul, Shanghai, Berlin, Vancouver, Rio de Janeiro, Gothenburg, Moscow again in 2015, Milan, Mexico City, and Frankfurt. Last year's took place in Lisbon in early May, hosted by the Museu de Lisboa. In June 2020 CAMOC meets in the Polish city of Kraków, whose museum is 120 years old and has 19 branches. It becomes apparent that these institutions are ubiquitous, and the sixty or so museums that hold institutional membership of CAMOC are just a small sample of a much larger universe.

How should we define that universe? The largest and most recent category of new institutions are the Urban Planning Exhibition Halls that have sprung up in every city in China. Designed to impress, often by signature architects, they typically combine a series of small displays of aspects of local history with an imposing central model of the city's planned expansion. Kirk Denton aptly describes them as 'museums of the future'. With little or no collections to display they are essentially empty boxes on which a municipality can project a collective fantasy of modernisation and development¹. Most city museums, by contrast, begin as collections of items. Some have ancient origins in the 'cabinets of curiosities' gathered miscellaneously by municipal authorities from gifts



or archaeological excavations. Others were launched with a pedagogic purpose on the rising tide of municipalism, and built their collections around the belief that an active citizenry should understand and identify with the *genius loci*. Early twentieth century pioneers such as Patrick Geddes in Edinburgh and Marcel Poëte in Paris attached great importance to museums as promoters of collective awareness. In this sense, a city museum was to the municipalist movement as the great national capital collections were to the rise of the nation-state: a shrine to territorial identity.

City museums are of double interest to the planning historian because of what they reveal about the urban past, and for their potential to provide an arena for discussing the future. In an important comparative study of the role of city museums in Europe, Donatella Calabi has encouraged curators to see their museums as places for reflection and debate rather than just collections of artefacts. Her own work include major contributions to the history of the Venetian Republic, the cities, ports, shops, markets and streets of Europe, the historiography of cities and city planning, and the seminal work of Marcel Poëte, archivist of the City of Paris at the turn of the twentieth century. Unsurprisingly her emphasis on the importance of the museum within the urban public realm. Like Hannah Arendt, she sees this shared space, the space of publicness, both in terms of materiality of buildings and urbanism, and as a dimension of human thought. Physically, she wants a museum to hold up a mirror not just to the historic core, which is the natural focus of archaeological and architectural attention, and of tourism, but to the larger reality of the contemporary metropolis in its entirety. Her interest in the built fabric, as an urban historian, leads naturally into the realm of maps, designs, drawings and images, and from there into the digital universe of virtual urban realities – a different but no less challenging path for museological practice ². She wants the city to be defined on the scale at which people live, work, move, play, go to school or shops according to their daily travel patterns. By implication a city museum should embrace the contemporary metropolis rather just its historic core. The narrative of how the one has grown into the other is an essential element of a city's collective memory. It reinforces the citizen's sense of belonging and the visitor's appreciation of local identity ³.

The challenge of reconciling these different rationales continues to absorb curators and directors today, and is the topic of much museological discussion in CAMOC gatherings and publications. What priority should be given to display of archaeological collections ? Should material be chronologically ordered or grouped thematically ? How can the cultural diversity of the modern city be rescued from traditional stereotypes of race and gender ? The issues are well illustrated in a single case study that takes up the remainder of this paper, the Museum of London.

Dual Origins of the Museum of London

The museum's history is engagingly narrated by Francis Sheppard in *The Treasury of London's Past* (1991). Today's institution originates in two collections that echo the archetypal origin narratives of museum history, but with an additional difference caused by the great peculiarity of London's local government history, in which the original mediaeval city corporation has resisted enlargement, retaining its territorial limits and its charters of autonomy while modern London has grown up around it. So when we speak about 'the City', or the Square Mile, we refer to a territory that corresponds more or less with the two-thousand-year-old Roman settlement of Londinium, and its thousand-year-old Corporation; whereas when we speak about 'London' we refer to the entirety of the metropolitan area inside its encircling green belt, with its subdivision into 33 boroughs since 1963, and its overall Mayor and Greater London Assembly since 2000 ⁴.

Like many city museums, London's has its earliest origins in the collection of ancient objects acquired through the centuries by the historic municipality. As well as a port and a centre of commerce, the Square Mile began in the eighteenth century to develop a specialist vocation as an international financial capital. The continuous churn of redevelopment as homes and workshops were displaced by offices and trading floors brought to light a stream of archaeological findings. Shepherd describes the initial reluctance of the commercially-minded City authorities



to engage with archaeology and accept stewardship of historic findings. From 1826 the library of the Corporation of London's mediaeval Guildhall did provide space for a fast-growing collection of 'antiquities and curiosities', but had no curatorial policy. For example, it showed no interest in the astonishing Roman findings collected by the local antiquarian Charles Roach Smith (fig.1) which went instead to the British Museum in 1856. Not until the later nineteenth century was there a change of attitude in the City towards conservation of Roman and mediaeval remains, and acquisition of artefacts. In 1890s the library collection was organised for public display and opened as the Guildhall Museum, publishing its first catalogue in 1903.



Figure.1 Antiquities of Roman London collected by Charles Roach Smith

London's second city museum was launched in 1910. The London Museum was the brainchild of two wealthy aristocrats, Lord Harcourt and Viscount Esher, who had visited Paris together in 1890 and contrasted the scope and vitality of the Musée Carnavalet with the Guildhall Museum's parochial interest in the antiquities of the Square Mile. They conceived a museum for the whole metropolis, past and present, containing a collection of anything and everything of historic interest connected with London from the earliest times: pictures, china, costume, arms, engravings, miniatures, snuffboxes, manuscripts. Harcourt brought plutocratic connections through his marriage to Pierpont Morgan's niece, and Esher as a courtier brought royal patronage and the offer of accommodation in Kensington Palace, as well as loans of Queen Victoria's collections of dolls, for whom she



made the costumes, and sets of her ceremonial robes. Shepperd describes how the notions of a 'royal treasure box' and 'London Carnavalet' were fused under the inspired leadership of the Museum's first Keeper, Sir Guy Laking, a fashionable playboy and collector of antique arms, whose father had been Queen Victoria's physician and confidant⁵. Laking robustly deflected complaints and legal threats from the City of London, who claimed a breach of the Corporation's ancient chartered privileges. He had a flair for showmanship which quickly established the Museum in the public imagination. In 1912 when workers digging the foundations of the London County Council's headquarters on the south bank of Thames opposite Westminster discovered the remains of a Roman boat, Laking supervised the excavation of the 22-ton keel and ribs and led them ceremonially back to his Museum at Kensington Palace (fig.2). From the Franco-British Expo at White City in 1908-9 he acquired some spectacular tableaux by the model-makers Thorp of London, including a display of the Great Fire of 1666 with electronic fire effects that remains popular to this day.



Figure 2 Sir Guy Laking, First Keeper of the London Museum

The London Museum's positive policy towards collection was continued by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Keeper from 1926 to 1944, who combined an outstanding archaeological reputation with a commitment to gather 'all classes of material from every period'. He pioneered the Museum's fashion and costume collections, and had a foresight to acquire a horse-drawn hansom cab at a time when such vehicles were still plying the city's streets. Relocated to Lancaster House, Wheeler built up the museum both as a visitor attraction and a centre for urban research, bringing in the London Society, the *Survey of London* and the Royal Archaeological Institute as tenants. However, his proposal in 1927 to merge the London Museum with that of the Guildhall fell on deaf ears. The two establishments continued to exist in rivalry, tempered by an understanding that the Guildhall would limit its acquisitions to the Square Mile, leaving the rest to the London Museum.

Neither museum had a permanent building of its own and both were bombed out during the Second World War. The London Museum reopened in 1951 at Kensington Palace, temporarily readmitted by Royal Warrant on the proviso that it should look for a home elsewhere. Guildhall Museum reopened in 1955 in the Royal Exchange beside the Bank of England, likewise on an interim basis. As neither of London's city museums had their own premises, merger began to seem attractive. Negotiations began in earnest in 1959, with central government acting as broker, and by 1963 a board of governors was already meeting, with Viscount Harcourt in the chair and six members appointed by the government, the Corporation of London and the London County Council respectively, each party being committed to contribute an equal share of capital and running costs⁶. A site for



the museum's new building was identified in the vast area destroyed by wartime bombing north of St Paul's Cathedral, beside the roundabout that terminated 'Route 11', the London County Council's dual carriageway along London Wall, and immediately to the south of the City Corporation's ambitious comprehensive Barbican redevelopment⁷. Legislation followed in 1965, building started in 1971, the Queen Mother laid the foundation stone on March 29th 1973, and the world's largest city-museum opened its doors on December 2nd 1976.

The Museum of London at the Barbican

The Barbican complex was designed by the youthful architectural partnership of Geoffrey Powell, Joe Chamberlain and Christoph Bon. Followers of Corbusier, they conceived the entire site as a megastructure with residential towers, educational, cultural and social facilities linked by a series of elevated decks and walkways, releasing the ground and subterranean levels for vehicle circulation, parking and storage. In the Modernist boom of the Sixties the Barbican's upper-level pedestrian system triggered proposals to extend the typology of podium and tower development across the fabric of London⁸. Though these plans were quickly abandoned elsewhere a vertical segregation concept continues to dictate patterns of movement around the Barbican today.

The Museum of London was the work of another young architectural team, Philip Powell (no relation) and Hidalgo Moya. The design incorporated the Barbican's elevated pedestrian deck, with the complication that their museum had to be wrapped around the retained livery hall (at street level) of the Ironmongers' Company. No less committed Modernists than the Barbican designers, their approach was less dramatic and more humanistic or people-centred⁹. They preferred white walls to Brutalist shuttered concrete, believing that design should aim above all to avoid stress through a simple circulation plan, easy ramps between levels, full-length picture windows opening onto gardens, and 'attractive but unassertive' settings for displays¹⁰. In their concern with internal user comfort the architects gave less thought to the external aspect of the Museum of London, relying on a large drum containing a sunken garden in the middle of the Route 11 roundabout to give visibility (Fig.3).



Figure 3 Powell and Moya's scheme, external model in 1966

Unlike Powell and Moya's subsequent work at Wolfson College Oxford, or Chamberlin Powell & Bon's adjacent Barbican project, the design was not well received. The lack of a formal entrance at ground level proved problematic from day one, when the H.M. the Queen arriving to inaugurate the Museum had to enter via the shuttered steel delivery bay on London Wall. The roundabout rotunda with its sunken garden soon became rat-infested and its ungainly external elevation was likened to 'a pillbox ready to repel invaders'¹¹. The upper-level walkway system baffled successive generations of visitors, despite repeated schemes to improve signposting and way-finding. The internal layout plan obliged visitors to follow a single route through the city's chronology, from prehistoric to modern times (fig.4). The architects planned this descending pathway through historical time



as an intelligent response to the constraints of the site, while also suggesting it would offer visitors a more agreeable experience with less chance of incurring ‘museum fatigue’¹². However it cramped the opportunities for display.

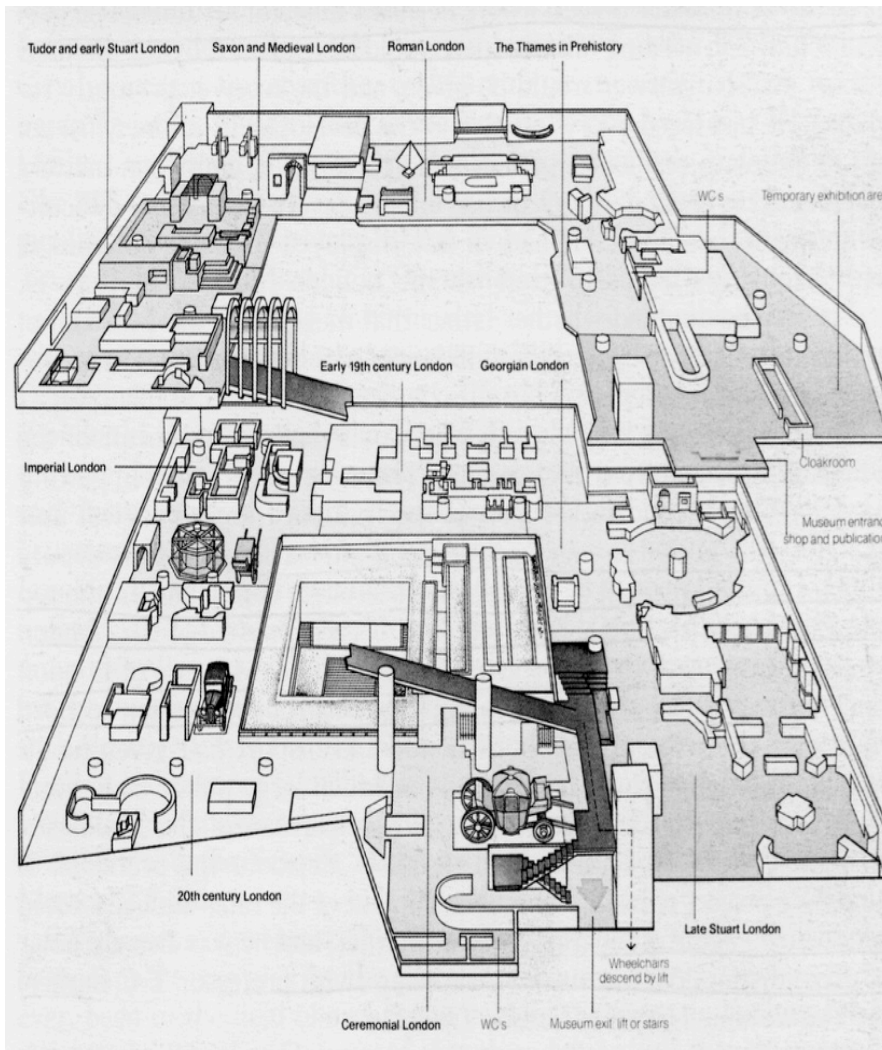


Figure 4 Powell & Moya internal layout proposal in 1966

Since its opening in 1976 the Museum has had several refurbishments. Its nineteenth century coverage was completely overhauled in 2001 under the directorship of the historian Simon Thurley¹³. His successor the architect and museum designer Jack Lohman initiated new galleries of Modern London, expanding the museum’s display area by 25%. No sooner had they opened than a further phase of refurbishment and expansion was announced, involving building over the top of some surviving fragments of the city wall of Roman Londinium. The project was to be financed through the construction of a new office tower beside or over the main entrance on London Wall. But in 2012 the arrival of a new director brought a radical shift of strategy. Instead of struggling to further expand the tight envelope of the Powell and Moya building, the Museum of London would find a new home.

Sharon Ament was recruited from the Natural History Museum where as Director of Public Engagement she managed annual visitor flows of over four millions. An exponent of ‘stretch thinking’, she aimed to double the Museum of London’s visitor numbers from 900,000 to 2 million and expand the schools programme to reach every child in the city. In the tradition of Guy Laking and Mortimer Wheeler, she emphasized the need for contemporary as well as historical coverage, making her mark with acquisitions such as Thomas Hetherwick’s Olympic cauldron immediately after the London Olympic Games of 2012, and ‘fatberg’ of congealed grease and



wet-wipes that was found to be blocking the sewers of Whitechapel in 2017. Every aspect of her agenda for the Museum of London underlined a need for more space.

Relocation to Smithfield Market

Fortuitously, the City Corporation possessed at Smithfield a former market hall, derelict for forty years, that enjoys protected status as a historic building, having been saved from insensitive commercial redevelopment through the intervention of the House of Lords. The General Market dates from 1876, has a handsome domed interior generously illuminated by a clerestory lantern and is lined externally with street-facing shops and market traders' premises. Its immediate neighbour, the Poultry Market, was destroyed by fire in 1958 and rebuilt in the 1960s with Europe's largest clear-spanning roof of reinforced concrete: this virtuoso shallow dome was engineered by Ove Arup and is also listed (fig.6).



fig.6 Smithfield - the General Market and Poultry Market Buildings

The Poultry Market is about to be vacated by the relocation of the wholesale meat trading to new facilities in outer London. In terms of location, the two buildings could hardly be better, sitting nearby the mediaeval foundations of the Charterhouse and St Bartholomew's Hospital, and immediately beside (indeed partly over the top of) the Farringdon Station complex which is about to become a point of prime metropolitan centrality as the intersection between London's east-west Crossrail line and the north-south Thameslink¹⁴. Furthermore, the successful growth since 1990 of a rival financial office district two miles to the east at Canary Wharf, has encouraged the City Corporation to reconsider its priorities and emphasize other values besides the single-minded pursuit of commercial profit: there is a new emphasis on residential liveability, on quality of the public realm, and on the City's still remarkable concentrations of historic buildings, educational facilities and cultural performance spaces. Investment in the relocation of the Museum of London to Smithfield has become part of a larger rebranding programme known as Culture Mile. In a press release dated March 28th 2019 Catherine



McGuinness (Policy Chair, City of London Corporation) is quoted as saying: ‘Our ambition is to redefine the Square Mile - already established as a leading global financial centre - as a world class destination for culture, creativity and learning’. The press officer’s Note to Editors adds: ‘ Culture Mile is a corner of London’s working capital where creativity is fast becoming the most valuable currency’ ¹⁵. Symbolically, an art installation now marks the closure of one of the high level walkways radiating from the Barbican (fig. 6).



fig.6 Korean house by Do Ho Suh on the Wormwood St walkway, April 2019

At the time of writing, the Museum of London is obtaining final consents for its closure, relocation and reopening in three years' time. The principal architects of the new buildings are Stanton Williams, designers of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden and University of the Arts at Kings Cross, and since both markets are listed, the design team also includes the historic buildings specialist Julian Harrap whose projects include Nicholas Hawksmoor’s church of St Anne, Limehouse, the Neues Museum Berlin, and Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. The physical resource at their disposal is enormous, since each market building has a deep basement for refrigerated storage, besides a multiplicity of exterior street-facing units.

In place of the present single-track layout the new museum will offer visitors a choice between six zones. While each of these areas is named after a different concept of time - ‘imagined’, ‘temporary’, ‘deep’, ‘real’, ‘present’ and ‘past’ - chronological organisation is strikingly absent. Having so long obeyed the rule that historical periods follow in an orderly sequence, each with its own *zeitgeist*, the Museum of London is about to break free. Over the summer of 2017 the museum launched its proposals to the public with a festival that celebrated both the richness of its historic collections and its rapport with modern living Londoners. The market buildings were dressed with billboards featuring portraits by Vicki Grout, a photographer of the city's youth culture and dance scene (fig.7). The captions elided the name of the establishment into ‘Museum of Londoners’.



Figure 10 : Smithfield General Market, Summer 2017

Conclusion

The Museum of London's imminent transformation echoes wider museological trends. Reviewing the experience of American city museums, Rainey Tisdale suggests that the sector is finding it difficult to adjust to twenty-first century expectations and mores: many 'seem to be operating under an outdated 20th century model and are having trouble articulating and demonstrating their public value. The public doesn't necessarily want to learn what history museums want to teach them, and they don't necessarily want to learn in the ways that history museums are offering.' She argues for precisely the approach to be pursued in London, people- rather than place-centred, mirroring the diversity of contemporary urban residents ¹⁶.

Donatella Calabi, however, reminds us that a city museum should be able to embrace both perspectives. A museum can hold up a revealing mirror to the life, work and play of the people of a city; but the physical fabric of solids and voids is equally relevant as the setting for collective memory and identity ¹⁷. Buildings and property lines have to be understood in a chronological sequence to explain their enduring presence across many human generations, as well as the processes of replacement and morphological change. The less background knowledge visitors have of the passage of centuries, the more important becomes the museum's ability to sort the infinite confusion of people, objects and places into a lucid time-line: Anglo-Saxon trade takes shape within the ruins of Roman Londinium; Tudor London precedes the Great Fire of 1666; Georgian London grows according to the template for late-17C reconstruction; the Modern Movement's ideals became reality after WW2; and so forth. While the Museum of London in its future Smithfield home will offer the visitor a multiplicity of routes and temporalities, the constraints of space on its present site, and the requirements of an entrance on the Barbican's elevated pedestrian deck, have forced the Museum to organise its displays around a single chronological path, beginning with the Palaeolithic settlement of the Thames basin and ending in the familiar setting of contemporary London. Loss of museological flexibility has been compensated by cogency of historical narrative. And if the purpose of a city museum is to nurture collective memory as Donatella Calabi suggests, a clear chronological narrative is all-important, and few architectural settings have been better equipped to provide it than Powell and Moya's Museum of London at the Barbican.



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Notes on contributor

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Picture credits

Figure 1 Antiquities of Roman London, from Shepherd, *Treasury*

Figure 2 Sir Guy Laking, from Shepherd, *Treasury*

Figure 3 Museum external model 1966, from Powell & Moya, *Proposed Museum*

Figure 4 Museum internal layout 1966 from Powell & Moya, *Proposed Museum*

Figure 5 General Market and Poultry Market, from www.museumoflondon.org.uk, accessed Sept 15 2019

Figure 6 Korean House on walkway, author's image

Figure 7 Billboards around General Market, author's image

Endnotes

¹ Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, ch 11

² Calabi 'Memory Narrative Display' 2009

³ Calabi, 'First Elements' 2012

⁴ Davies, *Reforming London*; Travers *Government of London*.

⁵ Shepherd, *Treasury*, 45

⁶ *Antiquity*, 'Museum of London' 1963

⁷ City of London, *Barbican Redevelopment 1959*

⁸ Hebbert, 'Walkway Experiment' 1993

⁹ Saumarez-Smith, 'Architecture & the Museum' 1995, 246

¹⁰ Powell & Moya, *Proposed Museum*.

¹¹ Owen, 'Urban Treasure' 1998

¹² Powell & Moya, *Proposed Museum*.

¹³ Werner 'World City on Display' 2001

¹⁴ Hebbert 'Crossrail' 2014

¹⁵ City of London *Play the Mile*.

¹⁶ Tisdale 'City Museums & Urban Learning' 2013

¹⁷ Hebbert 'Collective Memory' 2005