

# Into Public Space: Learning Beyond the University

Re-shaping Learning Conference, Brighton

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# Societies need learning spaces

Societies – and societies in our times as much as in the past – need public spaces for learning and many other purposes.

Such spaces are, of course, a cultural construct. Their characteristics will, and should, vary depending upon the nature and needs of the society of which they are part.

# Public spaces: key roles

Public spaces play three key roles:

- Spaces of opportunity, for provision of public good
- A defence – sometimes a vital defence – against the threats any democratic society can face
- Places for debate and negotiation of the future

# Museums as public space

Museums at their best play at least some of these three characteristic roles:

- Welcome and accessible to people from a variety of backgrounds
- Encourage participation and inspire creativity
- Encourage intercultural exchange
- Foster engagement with uncomfortable issues of the past, and understanding of their significance for the present
- Treat all visitors and potential users with equal respect

Of course, no museum achieves all of this in practice.



# What kind of public spaces do we need?

Since at least the nineteenth century, we have at least three different kinds of public spaces, each with a distinctive cultural role:



Cultural institutions such as museums, performing arts venues, libraries, swimming pools and community arts centres where specific cultural and educational activities are the primary purpose



Cultural spaces such as parks and protected historic landscapes, where culture and education are an explicit purpose of the space, but not the only one

# What kind of public spaces do we need?

Open spaces such as streets, rivers, wildernesses and the air around us, to which the public has access as of right, but that are rarely if ever directed to explicit cultural purpose



Digital space has emerged recently as a creative and dynamic area for cultural activities that has both enriched and challenged the primacy of physical space

# What kind of public spaces do we need?

Over the last two hundred years, the first of these categories, cultural institutions, has been the primary focus for public policy, and the priority for such limited public funding as has been available, followed some way behind by cultural spaces.

The full cultural potential of open spaces has been largely disregarded.

# What kind of public spaces do we need?

A (perhaps radical?) proposal is that the successful achievement of public policy goals is dependent on the systematic and integrated development of all four kinds of public space.

This does not diminish the importance of existing cultural institutions. The development of expertise in cultural and educational practices in these institutions will be essential to this vision – if we are flexible enough to meet the challenge.

# Cultural rights and democracy

The development of the creative cultural and educational dimension of public space raises fundamental questions of cultural rights and cultural democracy.

- Who decides what is “cultural” and what is not?
- What constitutes participation in culture? Is it merely turning up? Or is it defined by the degree to which users can shape their cultural experiences to their own purposes, with full creative control?
- Who should manage public space to achieve both artistic and educational quality, and democratic participation?

# Public spaces under pressure

In Britain, public spaces are under pressure from many directions:

- Commercial pressures can threaten the integrity of cultural institutions and allow them to become the playgrounds of the wealthy (museum parties)
- Technology can be used by governments to monitor the population (CCTV cameras)
- Faith groups can demand the right to control debate (evangelic Christians on Darwin)
- Museum staff use institutions for our own professional interests (Shaw's "conspiracy against the public")

# The Sackler Centre for arts education





# The Sackler Centre: Philosophy

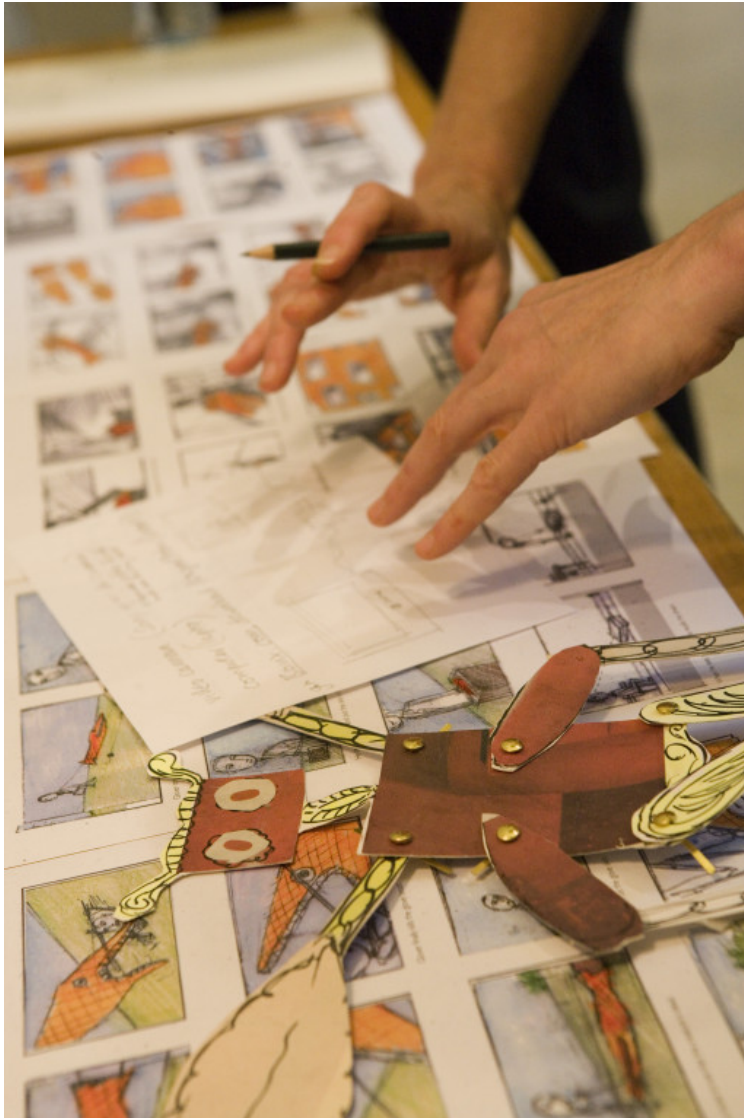


The Sackler Centre is the V&A's centre for learning through creative design:

- A state of mind, a way of thinking, not just a building.
- Brings together the expertise and resources of:
  - The Museum and its staff
  - Creative professionals
  - Audiences
- Helps visitors know good design by experiencing it
- Embeds digital learning as well as traditional craft/design practice



# The Sackler Centre: Philosophy



- Design can change the world, and is central to the quality of our lives.
- Everyone has talent; we find and develop talent through creative activities, inspired by the V&A's collections.
- Difference, debate and exchange – between cultures and across disciplines – is a source of cultural dynamism.
- Thinking, making and participating – all ways of learning – are essential life skills.

# The Sackler Centre for arts education



# Adults, Students and Creative Industries



Courses and workshops new year courses and term-long courses on the history of jewellery, C20th interiors and Baroque. Expanded workshop and masterclasses programme.

# Adults, Students and Creative Industries



Talks, seminars and study days including a new programme of monthly lectures giving a platform to visiting specialists and academics, and a Craving, Caring and Collecting seminar strand run with conservators and curators.



# Digital programmes



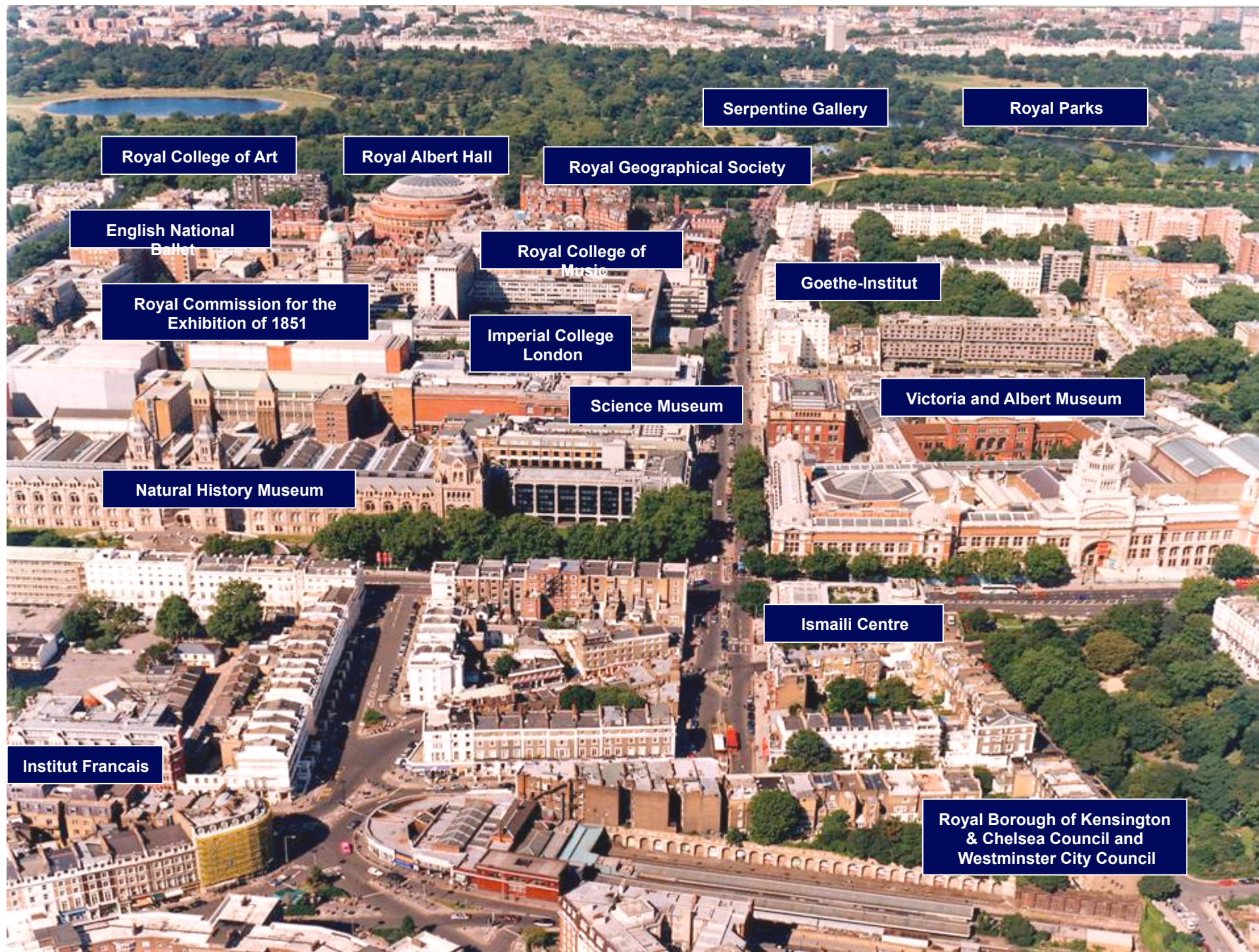
Creative digital learning Key audiences are young people, adults and students.

# Exhibition Road

- Birthplace of the modern concept of culture as a creative and dynamic process
- A premier cultural and learning quarter for London









# The transformation of the Exhibition Road area

The project has two main elements:

Redesign of the streetscape and the tunnel led by the local authorities (RBKC, Westminster and the GLA)

Management of the joint cultural and educational programme for the area as well as other wider cultural and educational projects, led by the Exhibition Road Cultural Group (ERCG)

ERCG is working in partnership with the local authorities



# The Exhibition Road Cultural Group: formed 2003

Aim to develop the talent that is in everyone

Deliver scholarship, learning, access and 'fun' as mutually supporting activities

Working together to release the cultural, environmental, creative and intellectual potential of the area

Add value through collaboration

# Local to global

Exhibition Road Music Day, part of the international festival Fete de la Musique

Co-ordinated in 2006 by the Goethe-Institut, the Ismaili Centre and the Institut Francais

Workshops attended by 14 schools from RBKC and Westminster



# Sciences and arts

Triangle Projects unite the innovation expertise of the Royal College of Art and neighbouring Imperial College

They are intended to generate innovative new products based on scientific and technological invention that are precisely matched to user needs



# Historical and contemporary

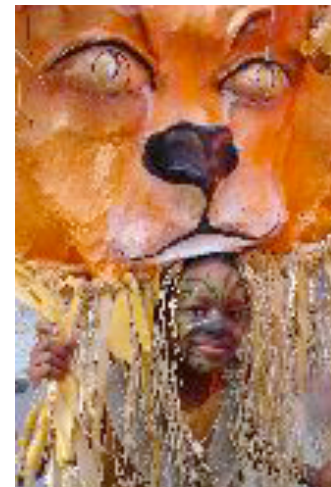
Priceless – Moti Roti and Exhibition Road Cultural Group

Co-ordinated and led by the Serpentine Gallery



# Culture and education

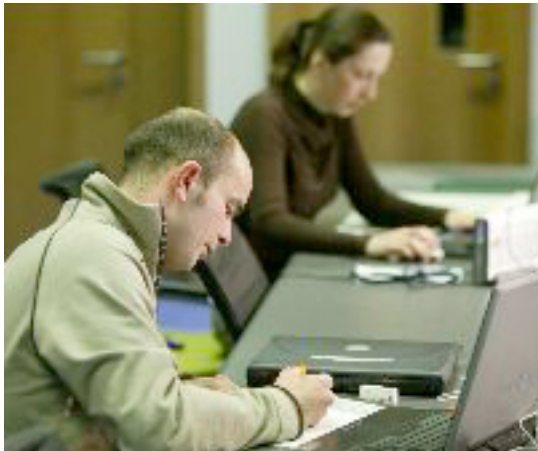
A collaborative approach to diversity programmes such as Black History Month and Big Draw (led by the V&A and the Natural History Museum) have proved successful





# Knowledge and creativity

Supported by substantial investments in new infrastructure



# London events



Big Draw Meets Carnival – Carnival artists in Exhibition Road

# international partnerships

Collectively the institutions of the Cultural Group interacts with almost all countries of the world

Bolivia

Botswana

China

Ghana

India

Korea

Peru

Russia

Thailand

Turkey

UAE

USA



English National Ballet  
perform in Beijing



China Go Global – Industrial  
Design Collaboration  
between Tsinghua University,  
Beijing and RCA



# Explore Sites and Sounds 21 June 2008



# Working with local communities

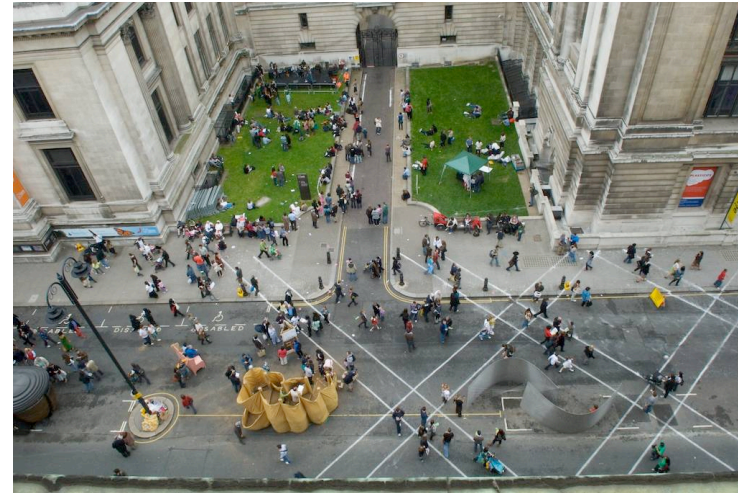
Involving London's communities such as the London based Thai Music Circle or the London Samba Band





# Visitor figures

Total visitors	68,000
First time visitors	15%
Visiting one new institution	40%
BAME audiences	25%
Visited three or more sites	55%



# Evening performances





# Creative Quarter

A day of activities to introduce 16-19 year olds to careers in the creative industries



# Creative Quarter - feedback

“I just loved knowing how science, electronics and creativity could all be linked together” (Student)

“This is an excellent fit with the new creative and media diploma and I think this should become a fixture on our calendar in future years” (Teacher)

# Richard Florida and his critics

- Creative class: 30% of US workforce
- 3 t's – technology, talent, tolerance
- Creativity index – creative class; innovation; high-tech; diversity

Richard Florida : The Rise of the Creative Class (2002)

# Richard Florida and his critics

- Service class as 43% of US workforce – is it really “a necessity”?
- Steve Malanga questions whether gay friendly = technological development
- Tom Bentley says the issue is values not wealth. Opportunities and well-being depend on trust and cooperation



# The Museum of Lost Virtues

Neil Postman, Professor of Communication Studies at New York University, set the agenda at an ICOM conference in 1989.

“My pet project would be a Museum of Lost Virtues, which would have four sections: one devoted to the measuring of honour, another to the meaning of civility, a third to the meaning of magnanimity, a fourth to the meaning of loyalty. Well, that’s enough of my fantasies...”

Not lost property, lost visitors, lost cities or even Peter Pan and the lost boys, but lost VIRTUES.

# The V&A: a utopian museum?

The V&A itself is a product of the grand utopian tradition.

William Morris, that inveterate utopian, was a seminal influence on the institution in its early years and is now well-represented in its collections.

What did he say about museums and museum education in his utopian writings? In *News from Nowhere*, the past (buildings, museums, works of art and literature) were merely catalysts for the achievement of an ideal society.

# Characteristics of utopias

What has utopianism to do with museums and other public spaces? More, perhaps, than we might think, if we consider their characteristics:

- Embody the concept of perfection
- Removed either in time or in space or both from ourselves
- Defined by rules or principles that determine their perfection
- A deliberate critique of contemporary conditions
- A place where (time as) change has ceased

# Micro-utopias

By definition, we cannot experience full utopias. But we are surrounded, or have surrounded ourselves, with micro-utopias. Micro-utopias are hybrid spaces that have some utopian – and dystopian – features.

- The Shakers, New Age Travellers, Robert Owen's New Lanark Mill
- Disney World (the Magic Kingdom)

# McTopia: Eating Time

John O'Neill, in his luminously brilliant article *McTopia: Eating Time* (Utopias and the Millennium, eds Kurmar and Bann) defines the dark side of McDonald's as dystopia:

- Nowhere because it is everywhere
- McArch is “both an opening and an unopening”
- A place “where happiness is blocked by the removal of change, variety and imperfection through endless repetition”
- Kids work in McTopia... they do not play there
- In no case does the customer choose or reject the items picked out of the assembly line

# Micro-utopias

Everywhere – in everything we experience, embedded in almost everything we think – are micro-topias: statements and actions that reveal our concepts of the ideal society, and our unconscious submission to the dystopias of others, and our attempts to enact them:

- Academy schools
- The Big Society
- The England football team

And the big one...



# Mu-topia: collecting time

Are museums the most persistent and long-lived, the most numerous and extensive, yet the least noticed of micro-utopias: Mu-topia – the utopia of the muses.

- Display of perfection
- Objects removed from time/eternal
- Object removed from risk
- Framed by principles: the transforming power of objects
- Critique of real life: behaviours tightly controlled

# The South Kensington Museum

The founder of the South Kensington Museum aimed to spread out among all classes of society, to improve the quality of industrial design, and to raise standards of art and design education – a utopian vision of museums as places for public education.



# The South Kensington Museum

But in time, the staff of the Museum ceased to be a teaching order, and became instead a contemplative order. The institution slept for 100 years, a different kind of utopia/dystopia than that of its foundation.

# Should utopianism in public space be discarded?

Perhaps not. As Milan Simecka, a passionate critic of utopias has said:

“A world without utopias would be a world without social hope.”

Public spaces like the Sackler Centre embody utopian aspirations. Utopian spaces are not “real”, yet they are as necessary to the health of our social interactions in public spaces as dreams are to the health of our minds and bodies.

