

## Public History Conference, Liverpool, 10-12 April 2008

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Liverpool, upon reflection, provided an apt backdrop for the third IHR Conference on Public History, held in April at the Merseyside Maritime Museum. Last year, Liverpool marked both the 800th anniversary of its charter and the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade with new public history initiatives, including the International Slavery Museum (opened August 2007; <http://nml/ism>) and the building of a major new Museum of Liverpool (<http://nml/mol>). With major urban regeneration still underway to honour its status as European Capital of Culture for 2008, the city was thus something of a currently-evolving case study within which to discuss history as part of our contemporary culture, and our own role in the appearance of that history. Defining those roles, however, is no easy task – indeed, as the opening speeches asked: is 'public history' the history of the public, or history done in public? The issue of 'how to do public history' remained a subtext of the conference and was approached from either and sometimes both angles; and although the dominant focus was undeniably on museums as a medium for presenting history to the public, contributors – mostly museum and heritage professionals, and scholars from different disciplines – engaged with a variety of the diverse approaches to public history. Conceived and organised to provoke both conceptual and thematic discussions, the conference brought together some of the ongoing and more recent debates within the dynamic field, and some of these are discussed below.

A particularly interesting facet of the conference was its emphasis on the comparison of different national contexts. A number of sessions focused entirely on public history within the United States, within Canada, and another compared UK and US experiences, and illuminated how in other countries relationships vary between academic historians, museum professionals and the public. This approach was carried into other sessions engaging with more thematic issues – such as identity, museums as authorities of public recognition, and the representation of slavery – and drew together a breadth of international perspectives, from the US, France, Jamaica and the city of Amsterdam. The latter was included in a session entitled 'Museums and Identity,' where Annemarie de Wildt, curator of the Amsterdam Historisch Museum, shared some of her experiences in trying to create exhibits that would create a shared sense of community and history within Amsterdam. Annemarie's curatorial approach involves creating exhibitions which seek to attract and involve as wide a range of visitors as possible – a recent interactive exhibition explored the huge range of music Amsterdam has produced in its past, and the Museum was pleased to see older citizens listening to today's punk bands whilst the youth discovered the delights of more traditional music.

The Museum has also sought to engage with Amsterdam stereotypes, setting them within a larger cultural whole: one recent exhibition focused on the history of the city's red light district as part of Amsterdam's (ongoing)

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identity and heritage, and explored very current issues of legality and tolerance. This paper provoked a prolonged discussion about the role museums can play in opening a public space for the negotiation of divisive issues and divided identities, and how to articulate tensions between local, national and global identities. Over the past few decades there seems to have been a decided shift in museum dynamics, with the emphasis now very much on learning rather than teaching; as Annemarie said, museums therefore are useful for providing reflective spaces to present contestation in a more neutral manner, avoiding the definitive voice. Yet as Mary Stevens (of UCL) asked afterwards, on the conference blog, 'is "heritagisation" a depoliticisation?... does it help support an argument that prostitution couldn't be abolished because "it's part of our heritage"?'<sup>2</sup> Exhibitions dealing with contested issues need to be careful that a neutral presentation, which may 'normalise' the topic, does not ride roughshod over the very real and current emotions and debates surrounding such topics.

The two sessions on 'How Do We Remember Slavery?' engaged with just such issues, and the conference's concentration on this topic was all the more apt because it was housed above Liverpool's new International Slavery Museum. The five papers given were wide-ranging in their scope and the topic hotly debated. Barbara Bush, Professor of Imperial History at Sheffield Hallam University, explored the bicentenary commemorations, raising the issues of reparations and the problems of the Anglocentric commemorations and chronology of slavery. She found that the role of white abolitionists was often prioritised and even romanticised, although some museums were making an effort to overcome that image, and stressed instead the need for a comparative approach analysing commemorations in other countries, such as Holland, France and the US, to understand the forces at play. By contrast, Wayne Modest (director of the Museums of History and Ethnography, Institute of Jamaica) stressed from the beginning that the bicentenary in Jamaica had not been 'commemorated' but 'marked,' and spoke of the very real present-day issues surrounding the legacies of slavery in Jamaica. In the case of slavery, he felt, public history should not shirk from presenting the complexity of debates, even if this meant engaging visitors at more taxing intellectual levels – and this was something he felt obliged to do in his own museums, which have engaged with slavery through both more traditional exhibitions and modern art installations.

That Modest's more challenging approach is not taken up by many institutions was made clear by Ywonne Edwards-Ingram's paper on how slavery is presented at the Colonial Williamsburg historical park in America, where the 'living history museum' tries to include characters from a wide range of backgrounds, but must by necessity present this as somewhat trivialised history that is definitively 'past,' without such strong present ramifications. The opposite approach was taken in Liverpool's International Museum of Slavery, as described by its head Richard Benjamin; he and his team take care to involve the local black community in their projects, and a third of the permanent exhibition itself is devoted to the legacy of slavery in

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<sup>2</sup> [www.livpubhistory.wordpress.com](http://www.livpubhistory.wordpress.com)

Britain's past and present. Helen Weinstein (Professor of Public History, University of York) discussed the British commemorations of 1807 in museums, on radio and television and in public projects, similarly found that there was a tension between the presentation of the history and the legacy of slavery, stressing that this gap was where public history should challenge visitors, listeners and viewers to reflect on current issues. These more extreme cases, and other debates throughout the conference, were useful in stimulating more involved consideration of the difficulties and opportunities that museums have in presenting history to the public.

While the conference's focus on museums somewhat reflects the dominance of museums within the academic field of public history as a whole, I can't help feeling that other media of public history were rather too marginalised – what of the TV and radio programmes, magazines, the archives even, all contributing to the popular and growing industry? The panels discussing other media tended to discuss home-grown projects from Liverpool, but of these the 'City in Film', composed of academics from the University of Liverpool's School of Architecture, was exemplary in taking multifarious and innovative approaches to its AHRC-funded project. Using 'local' amateur films, Julia Hallam and Les Roberts' papers analysed the way various recurrent motifs in these films displayed a sense of civic identity, concentrating especially on the relationship between architecture, public space and civic identity, and the theme of transport within such films to explore issues of mobility, place and identity in Liverpool; Robert Kronenburg discussed how moving and still images of Liverpool can be utilised to understand changing patterns of urban usage. But Richard Koeck's paper outlined a most interesting project which engaged more closely than normal with the public: working with a recent growing interest in archival film material about the city, it examined the re-viewing of old films in their original space of exhibition (as in the recently-renovated St George's Hall), the digital compilation of old archival films with historic maps, and the intermittent display of archival footage on the BBC Big Screen in the town centre. What these papers displayed was the academic engagement with a resurgent public interest, and the last in particular showed how even small public history projects can have a wide reach: in a square in which shoppers do not normally stop, many stood to watch the archival footage of Liverpool for the full twelve minutes.

The lack of a plenary session at the end of the conference was somewhat frustrating, as the chance to draw together the many strands of debate could have brought some cohesion to the proceedings. Nevertheless, several themes emerged more strongly; as ever, questions of how to present contested issues were the ones which garnered the strongest debate, particularly those relating to slavery and identity. Problems and the limits of public history were discussed – for instance, one of the keynote speeches provoked discussion into the feasibility of Gordon Brown's suggestion of creating a museum of British history, specifically to foster a sense of national identity – and as ever, the issue of how to engage and involve the public (and especially children) was of specific interest. Keynote speaker Sandy Nairne, director of the National Portrait Gallery, summed up how the new challenges

to the field of public history are intertwined with this issue (forgive the long quote):

I always used to reckon that if you put a group of curators in a room together and looked in again in that room after about twenty minutes, certainly ten years ago, they would have been arguing about labels. I'd like to think that if you went in now, locked them in the room and after twenty minutes came back, that they would actually be debating podcasts and questions of uploading. I'm not sure that that's yet true, but I'd like to think that that shift from the labelling to the interactive was beginning to take place, or at least they would be debating the earlier question I raised, of what is it that engages visitors and what is the nature of that engagement.

The international papers were particularly useful in bringing diverse perspectives and methods of creating involvement to the conference. Indeed, as should be evident from this review, it was the variety of approaches to public history that characterised the conference; as experiences were shared, often more questions were stimulated than answers given. Yet this diversity in fact reflects the potentialities and energies of the field: conferences such as this denote genuine intellectual engagement with the challenges and issues of doing public history.