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What is a Museum? Difference all the way down

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Abstract

The Mapping Museums research team recently compiled a dataset of UK museums in existence between 1960 and 2020. In doing so, we had to decide what should be counted as a museum. In this paper, we outline the approaches that we initially took to establish the criteria for selection: adopting a conventional museum definition, using key characteristics, and respecting the venue's self-identification; and we describe why they proved inadequate with respect to the heterogeneity of museum practice. We then explain how assemblage theory helped us conceptualize the complex realities of the museum sector and address the problem of selection. This approach has enabled us to develop a non-essentializing model of museums and to outline a more inclusive account of the UK museum sector.

Introduction

What is a museum? That question preoccupied the Mapping Museums research team for several years. We were compiling a dataset of UK museums open to the public between 1960 and 2020, and for the purposes of our study, we needed to decide what counted as a museum. Even more importantly we needed to establish how to make that decision: what should be our criteria for selection?¹

The project, which is based at Birkbeck, University of London, was sparked off by our interest in the late twentieth century museums boom. It is well established that there was a worldwide increase in the number of museums (Hudson 2004). Some commentators in the UK thought that the expansion was due to the growing number of small, independent museums that were established by community and special interest groups, families, individuals, and businesses, but otherwise little was known about them (Morris 1988; Samuel 1994). It was not clear exactly when they opened, where they opened, what subjects they covered, their size or governance, and whether they remained open. Likewise, it was unclear how these new museums may have changed the overall profile of the sector.

This lack of historical knowledge was connected to the lack of data. Since 1988 the vast majority of surveys of UK museums have been conducted in tandem with the Registration Scheme, which set minimum standards for museums, and then with its replacement, the Accreditation Scheme. This means that surveys only compile information on those museums that have been officially recognized as achieving particular standards (Candlin *et al.* 2019). The Museums Association has compiled a more comprehensive dataset, but as their information derives from their membership, it favours those museums that have a professional orientation and can afford the fee to join.² As a result, small museums that may not have an interest in or the capacity to apply for Accreditation or to join the Museums Association do not appear in any dataset. To make matters worse, much of the raw data that was collected has been lost, and it is only very recently that organizations started to track closure (Candlin and Poulouvassilis 2019). This situation has made it difficult to see how the sector has changed over time.

The Mapping Museums research was designed to rectify this situation. We aimed at documenting the museum sector from 1960 to 2020, paying particular attention to the small

independent museums that were often missing from other records, so as to analyze the overall composition of the sector and how it has developed over the past six decades. Establishing this information would then provide us with a basis for thinking about why so many new museums were opened during this period: if we could identify what exactly had opened, and who had opened it, then we would be in better position to understand why. In order to achieve these ends we needed to develop a database of museums that had been open since 1960.

In this article, we outline the four approaches we took when deciding what to include in the database. Our first approach was to use a definition to establish the parameters of the dataset, the second was to use the key characteristics of collections and public access, and the third was to respect a venue's self-identification. As we explain in reference to particular examples, these strategies all proved untenable because they failed to encompass the diversity and complexity of current museum practice in the UK.³ Our fourth approach, and the one that we eventually adopted, was informed by theories of assemblage as they have been explored by the Mexican philosopher Manuel DeLanda (DeLanda 2016), the American philosopher Jane Bennett (Bennett 2010), and the French philosopher Bruno Latour (Latour 2005; Latour and Weibel 2005).

Assemblage theory has already been employed in a variety of ways within museum studies. Sharon Macdonald has used it to direct readers' attention away from the finished products of heritage to the 'processes and entanglements' by which it is produced. For her, taking an 'assemblage perspective on heritage' meant 'tracing the courses of action, associations, practical and definitional procedures that are involved in particular cases' (Macdonald 2009: 118). Tony Bennett conceives of museums as 'governmental assemblages'. He writes that this 'has the decided advantage of allowing for a greater pliability of the relations between texts, things, technologies and bodies that museums orchestrate', and that it allows for museums to be considered in relation to the other assemblages of which they have formed part (Bennett 2015; see also Byrne *et al.* 2011; Morse *et al.* 2018).

These texts have informed our approach, as has *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum 1884-1945* by Chris Gosden, Frances Larson and Alison Petch, which draws on similar theoretical resources. They describe how, in 2002, new funding enabled staff at the Pitt Rivers Museum to transfer information from the original accession books onto a computerized system. This made it possible to gain an overview of what exactly was in the Museum's collection, where those objects had come from, who had made those transactions, and how the collection had changed. Analyzing the data opened up new areas of enquiry for the authors, spurring them to look in detail at the structure of the museum and of the forces that helped to create it. These investigations led them to conceptualize the Pitt Rivers Museum as a 'relational' 'dynamic entity, made up of a shifting mass of people and things' (Gosden *et al.* 2007: 7).

Our research and methods have parallels with that of Gosden, Larson and Petch. In the course of this research we compiled a dataset of over 4,200 museums that have been open in the UK between 1960 and 2020, and gathered information on their governance, location, size, subject matter, years of opening and closing, and accreditation status. Alongside the process of collecting data, we worked with computer scientists who designed and built a database that allowed us to browse, search, and visualize that information (Poulovassilis *et al.* 2019). Gosden, Larson and Petch note that 'the computer catalogue is an active medium, constantly in flux', and likewise our database evolved iteratively over time (2007: 27). It was developed in tandem with our investigations into what constitutes a museum, and even now we continue to add and edit our entries. Indeed, the database is 'a dynamic entity' in its own right.

Gosden, Larson and Petch note that 'objects can be obstinate ... Some things simply do not fit our plans for them in the way we would like them to, while others suggest new directions for exploration and development' (2007: 6). Our objects were museums themselves, which often resisted easy categorization, including whether or not they were a museum. Heritage and visitor centres, historic houses, watermills, windmills, and lighthouses regularly posed challenges for us, as did displays in town halls, cathedrals, and hospitals.⁴ We repeatedly returned to art galleries that have regular exhibitions but no permanent collections and the question of whether or not they should be included in the dataset.⁵ In all these cases we examined individual venues, considering their contents, displays, and activities. We read

reviews and guidebook entries, and if possible we talked to the founders, or to the staff or volunteers who ran them, asking for their opinions on whether the place should be included in our database. This process of investigation prompted us to examine, re-examine and sometimes reject our own assumptions or approaches, and that reworking continued over time. Our conceptualization of museums was thereby stimulated by the heterogeneity and lack of fit of the organizations themselves.

Our conclusions also echo those of Gosden, Larson and Petch in that we also understand museums to be shifting masses of people and things, and that 'the boundaries between one institution and another seem to disintegrate or at least become entwined' (2007: 11). However, our research differs not only in its overall aims but in the level and scale of its focus and thus in how we reached that conclusion. Gosden, Larson and Petch use an archaeological metaphor to describe the essays in *Knowing Things*, calling them 'a series of trial trenches'. They concentrated on data relating to one museum and looked in depth at selected aspects of that institution and collection. In contrast we surveyed thousands of museums, pausing to focus on individual venues and the challenges they posed for our work of classification. Crucially we also had to apply ideas of assemblage to the process of making selections, and in the last section of this article we describe how we did so.

Discarding established definitions

The most obvious approach to delimiting the mapping Museums research was to use an established museum definition. The most widely referenced definition is that published by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), which in its 2007 iteration stated that:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.⁶

At the time of writing, the terms of the ICOM definition are under discussion.⁷ Between 2017 and 2019 the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM), a sub-group of ICOM, organized four symposia to consider possible revisions to the definition. Some of the papers presented at these events have been published as edited collections or stand-alone papers, and summarize a series of roundtable events held around the world (e.g. Mairesse 2017; Brown and Mairesse 2018; Brulon *et al.* 2018; Chung *et al.* 2019).⁸ These publications are useful with respect to our own project since they indicate the limitations of this specific definition and point towards the problem of museum definitions in general.

In his paper 'Museum in colonial contexts', delivered at St Andrews University in Scotland, the Brazilian academic and Vice-President of ICOFOM, Bruno Soares Brulon, took issue with some of the terms employed in the ICOM definition, and particularly with the phrase 'non-profit, permanent institution'. He argued that some indigenous or marginalized social groups depended on the profit generated by their museums to survive. Thus, the assumption that museums should only be run on a non-profit basis ignored the economic circumstances in which their founders and volunteers operated and was exclusionary in that respect. He also pointed out that museums established by marginalized and indigenous people may not have the resources to acquire permanent buildings and thus to become recognized as institutions, making these requirements similarly problematic. For Brulon, defining museums as permanent, non-profit institutions failed to recognize the practices and circumstances of indigenous and marginalized groups: it 'consistently disregard(ed) the people who use the museum in colonial contexts and who look at it through different lenses' (Brulon 2018: 164).

Brulon was speaking about Latin American museums and more specifically about museums in Brazil, yet his comments have a bearing on our project. If we adopted the ICOM definition then we would exclude museums run on a commercial basis or that were legally linked to a business (even if they did not actively make a profit), did not have permanent accommodation, or that were run in an ad-hoc manner. Hundreds of small independent museums in the UK would fall from view, and so using the ICOM definition would be counter-productive to our study.

More broadly, Brulon was dubious about the merits of a single definition. He argued that as a Western concept exported to other parts of the globe, museums were used as a means of spreading Western values and as such contributed to the machinery of colonialism (See also Mitter 1992; Burt 2013). However, Brulon observed that as the concept has travelled, the form and role of the museum have changed. Museums have been reinvented by different groups and have taken on new, more expansive shapes that diverge from conventional Western models of museum practice. Thus, for Brulon, it is difficult to see how a single definition of museums could encompass the heterogeneity of global museum practice (Brulon 2018).

Delegates at the other conferences in the series made similar observations. At Rio de Janeiro, participants asked 'how is it possible to develop a new definition of museums that respects all the different shades of identities without being universalist (erasing differences)?' They concluded that 'a universal definition serves only as a constricting instrument of the diversity of museum experience'.⁹ Delegates in Buenos Aires put the points even more strongly, asserting that 'it is not possible and not even desirable to attain a universal definition that can be applied in all cultural contexts'.¹⁰ At this event, participants thought that it was more important to ask questions about museums' boundaries, cultural roles, links to the community, and potential for change, than to search for a 'correct' definition.

The Mapping Museums project is limited to the study of UK museums. Nonetheless, there is a high degree of diversity of museum practice within single countries or even regions, and so the problem of imposing a singular definition still applies. Using the ICOM definition as a guide for our project would risk erasing difference, when that was precisely what we wanted to identify. Clearly, we could employ a different definition, such as that of the UK Museums Association, but this uses similar and, in some ways, more restrictive terminology (since it specifies that museums be legally held in trust).¹¹ Indeed, any definition that is devised in relation to normative ideas of professional practice will exclude ad-hoc, community, and commercially operated venues. Thus we decided against using an established definition to make selections for our database.

Key characteristics

Our second approach was to consider key characteristics. If we could establish the minimum requirements by which a venue could be recognized as a museum, we could use them as criteria for inclusion or exclusion from our dataset. For direction, we looked to the Standing Commission on Museum and Galleries' 1963 *Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries*, which was the earliest of all the major surveys we used in the process of data collection (Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries 1963). The review pre-dates the introduction of professional definitions to the UK museum sector and simply required that venues had permanent collections on display and were open to the public (Candlin *et al.* 2019). We decided to follow suit and adopt these criteria.

Initially, this approach worked well. As we were developing our dataset we corresponded with museum staff to check points of detail and they often cited collections as being a point of differentiation between museums and visitor or heritage centres. For instance, when we contacted 'Rum Story', a large venue in Whitehaven, Cumbria, which has extensive displays and dioramas about the history of the area, the chief executive commented that they did not acquire or conserve objects, and they had never classed themselves as a museum, rather as a visitor attraction and an 'experience'.¹²

However, as the research progressed we faced the difficult question of what constitutes a collection.¹³ Take for example, the Strike School Museum in Burston, Norfolk. On 1 April 1914 the two teachers at the village school were dismissed from their posts, prompting the children to leave the premises in protest. The boycott lasted for twenty-five years, and is the longest running strike in UK history. During that time the trade unions and supportive donors raised enough money to build an alternative school, and this tiny one-room building is now a museum. The displays consist of large cut out figures of children and text panels, and eleven artefacts: eight small wooden agricultural implements, two items of early twentieth century children's clothing, and the school register. Of these, only the school register is directly connected to the building and the history of the site. The displays at the Strike School Museum

prompted us to ask: how many objects comprise a collection? Are eleven objects enough? Would a venue that focused on a single object qualify as a museum?

An alternative way of viewing the Strike School is presented by the Norfolk Museums Service website which notes that the museum 'comprises the original Strike School and related displays'.¹⁴ There is, of course, a well-established tradition of site museums, which both occupy and focus on a particular building or site, but these kinds of museums usually contain additional collections (Moolman 1996). For instance, Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet, in Sheffield, is a Grade I listed eighteenth-century industrial works that now operates as a museum. The workshops contain original machinery, there are exhibitions of the scythes and tools produced on the site, and the workers' homes are furnished in period style: there are buildings, artefacts, and interpretation. For us, the issue was that if we concurred with Norfolk Museums Service and decided that the building and the displays at the Burston Strike School did constitute a museum, we would have to treat all historic buildings with a limited number of artefacts on display as museums. In which case, should our dataset include the numerous lighthouses and historic mills that are open to the public and that have information panels and exhibit one or two artefacts? And if we counted historic buildings with small artefact displays as museums, then why not include historical monuments or archaeological sites? Could a stone circle in a field with an information board be deemed a museum, or a ruined castle with an attached education centre?

The criteria of public accessibility also proved problematic. When the Museums Association released their first definition in 1971, it did not stipulate that museums had to be open to everyone. Instead it stated that museums should be 'made available for the research and for the instruction and interest of the public or, in the case of some specialised museums, of a restricted public' (Anon 1976: 5). In the twenty-first century it is now taken for granted that museum access should not be restricted. The Mapping Museums team agreed but, just as we had wondered how many objects made a collection, we began to wonder exactly how many hours or days constitute public access.

Medium and large sized museums generally have regular opening hours, but this is not always possible for smaller venues. Volunteer-run museums often have very few staff, while privately owned museums are often run by the owner who may have paid employment elsewhere and not be regularly available to open the venue. Moreover, some regimental museums are based on military sites with restricted public access. In order to manage these circumstances such museums may have seasonal opening hours, and may remain closed during winter or outside of school holidays. Others open regularly but only for a day or two per month, and only provide access if visitors pre-book. At an extreme, the Wollaton Village Dovecote Museum, in Nottinghamshire, is only open by appointment and only then on the second Sunday of the month from May through to September – so appointments are available on a total of five days a year. The question for us was whether such a venue could be considered accessible: do 'open days' or appointments constitute access?

A related issue concerns the intention or willingness to receive visitors. Many privately owned historic houses have important indigenous contents or collections that are technically open to the public under the terms of the art and heritage tax exemption scheme. This excuses them from paying inheritance or capital gains tax so long as they provide access to the items or buildings in question for 28 days per year. However, in practice it can be very difficult for potential visitors to gain access because owners may require appointments to be made in advance and in writing, and ask for identification.¹⁵ In these cases a historic house may be open in principle but less so in practice.

There is a further issue concerning exactly what is being made accessible. Recent cuts to local authority budgets have resulted in some local authority museums losing their premises. Nonetheless, a few continue to function as 'outreach museums'. Among them is Elmbridge (formerly Weybridge) Museum, which opened in 1909 but had to leave its building in 2014. The remaining staff organize temporary exhibitions, preserve and document some 40,000 artefacts, and have a schools, community and family programme.¹⁶ Here then, the public do have access to the museum collections but only via events and temporary exhibitions.

In the process of trying to establish and use key characteristics as a means of selecting venues for inclusion within our database, we found that most museums are open to the public

most of the time, and that the majority have collections of original artefacts on display. However, there are organizations that are consistently identified as museums that do not share these characteristics, or barely so. The problem is that if they are admitted then there is no clear logic for excluding a massive range of other types of venues: if membership associations with exhibitions are counted as museums, then why not private collections that occasionally open to the public for special events (e.g. Heritage Open Days), and if 'outreach museums' like Elmbridge are included then why not list pop-up museums and temporary exhibitions? In principle, there is nothing wrong with doing so but it was important that the boundaries we put in place were broadly recognizable within the current public sphere. Moreover, such an expansive approach was beyond the time and resources available to us.

In short, we could not establish coherent parameters for our study by using the key characteristics of collections and public access as guides. We duly took another tack.

Self-identification

Our third strategy was to include organizations that self-identified as museums. At the most basic level we considered nomenclature and whether a venue was called a museum, but this measure was insufficient in itself because some businesses are rather poetically called 'museums'. For example, Grandad's Photography Museum was a photographic studio in Colchester where clients could dress up in period costume and have their picture taken. Conversely, there are numerous organizations that are not explicitly named as museums and are still recognized as such, even within official circles. Despite their names, The Weavers Triangle Visitor Centre, the Bovey Tracey Heritage Centre, Whitchurch Silk Mill, The View in Epping Forest, Chedworth Roman Villa, and Saltram House are all accredited museums.

Thus, in addition to considering names, the Mapping Museums research team examined the wider self-representation of individual venues. To some extent this approach worked. For instance, the Colyton Heritage Centre in Devon is described as a museum on its website and in its promotional material, and when asked about its name, the chairperson commented: 'I'm not sure we actually analyzed or went into the 'whys' and 'wherefores' (of its name) in any great detail or ever took a formal decision on this ... I think we just felt a 'Heritage Centre' somehow sounded more dynamic'.¹⁷ The venue was called a heritage centre to avoid the possible connotations of stasis, and to us it seemed to be a clear-cut case of a museum by another name.

However, problems with this approach soon arose with regards to venues where the staff resisted being referred to as a museum or qualified their claim to that status. This was a particular issue among the owners of historic houses that are open to the public. The website of Stonor Park in Oxfordshire declares 'it's no museum' and when researchers spoke to the administrator Sue Gill, she commented 'we do not consider ourselves a museum but a family historic house as the family have lived here for over 850 years and built the house and chapel'.¹⁸ Likewise, Lord Petre, who is the owner and resident of Ingatestone Hall in Essex, emailed us and stated that 'we regard ourselves as a family home which just happens to have a rather jumbled accumulation of family pictures, furniture and memorabilia on display'.¹⁹

These houses are family homes insofar as the owners may live in them (or in parts of them, for some of the time), but they are also ambitious commercial enterprises. In addition to the house and chapel, Stonor Park offers family days out, has a gift shop, two cafés, parks and gardens that include a 'wonder wood', and it hosts Great Antique and Vintage Car Boot Fairs, Ted the Tractor days, the VW Owners' Rally, Luna Outdoor Circus, Handmade Fairs, and Christmas events. Entrance for adults is £15 per person or £40 for a season ticket. It is also available for hire and it hosts weddings. Ingatestone Hall is less corporate but it also has a gift shop and invites school visits and wedding hire, and provides teas in the Parlour Room.

The proposition that publicly accessible historic houses are just family homes is also undercut by the way that 'the family', and the story of their residency is part of the attraction of such premises. Stonor Park has a webpage devoted to the family and its café sells cakes advertised as being made by Rupesh Thapa, Lord and Lady Camoys' personal chef, while the Ingatestone Hall website includes the Petre family tree with portraits of each of the eighteen Barons from Sir William in 1505 to the current incumbent, John Petre. Providing information

about the family is usual in historic houses and many websites feature pictures of the current occupants with their children, and sometimes dogs and horses. That the family are in residence, and the possibility that visitors may see them in a domestic setting, is one of the ways that these houses are marketed to the public (Tinniswood 1989). They are not just family homes.

Another problem with using self-definition as the criteria for inclusion in our dataset was that museums have numerous stakeholders: paid staff, volunteers, the founders, visitors, local residents, neighbourhood councils and tourist boards, funders, policy-makers and, to some extent, authors and researchers, all of whom may disagree about whether or not a venue is a museum. The Caithness community website has a number of pages dedicated to the area's museums, among which is Mary Ann's Cottage or 'the Croft'. That particular page carries a picture of the historic cottage, some visitor information, and a prominent text that states: 'The Croft is not a museum'.²⁰ There is clearly some tension as to the designation of the venue.

Likewise, visitors make their own judgements about the status of a venue. One reviewer on TripAdvisor described Ledbury Heritage Centre in Herefordshire as a 'Lovely museum with a wide range of local artifacts (sic) and an artist's gallery upstairs', while another accepted its given name and commented 'This Heritage Centre is small but perfectly formed!'²¹ Two further reviewers wrote that 'It's a remarkable building, centuries old', and 'A lovely old Tudor building... with black and white timbers overhanging the lovely flint cobbled Church Lane', thereby understanding it as a historic building rather than as a museum or a heritage centre.²² On other occasions, visitors dispute the self-designation of a venue as a museum, usually on the basis of standards. One visitor to the Sherlock Holmes Museum in London wrote, 'this so-called museum is ... old furniture in a small flat... probably the most expensive entry fee in the world to see an ordinary old house with a pile of old junk'.²³ Alternatively members of the public call something a museum that could be more accurately described in other terms. Visitors who attend the studio tour of the Harry Potter film set in Leavesden routinely refer to it as the Harry Potter Museum.²⁴

There are a number of ways of responding to dissension about the status of a putative museum. One is to consider whose views should take priority – ours as the 'experts' in museums, the owners because the venues belong to them, the founders who established the museums and heritage centres in the first place, or the visitors for whom they are opened (at least ostensibly). Each group has a reasonable claim to authority and we could devise suitable arguments to underpin whatever approach we chose. Alternatively, we could have weighed positions against the other. If the owner called their venue a heritage centre, but every visitor who posted on TripAdvisor referred to it as a museum, then for us, it would be a museum. There are however strong arguments against this approach. Gosden, Larson and Petch have noted that museums 'have multiple authors, who need not be aware of their role nor even necessarily of being willing contributors' (Gosden *et al.* 2007), and our research certainly echoed their observations. Small museums are often characterised as being the work of a single charismatic (or eccentric) individual but even in these cases, where museums are apparently founded and run by one person, we found that they were supported and managed by a much wider group: family members and volunteers cleaned displays, worked on ticket desks, ran cafés, took tours, and repaired the collections, and sometimes friends 'museum-sat' during the owner's holidays.²⁵ More broadly, many of the objects on display in small independent museums have been donated, and in that sense the exhibitions are the result of a collective endeavour made by an expansive group of people. Despite initial impressions, these museums are not the work of a single pair of hands.

Moreover, in many instances it was simply not possible to work out how a museum self-identified or was identified by other stakeholders. Many of the organizations that we listed opened in the 1970s and 1980s and have long since closed. Apart from an entry in a survey or a guidebook, few traces are left behind. We sometimes uncovered a note in an enthusiasts' newsletter or found a local history society whose members recalled the venue, but otherwise no evidence as to its identity or status remained. Thus, self-definition definitely had limits as a tactic for making decisions about our dataset.

Unravelling Museums

When we began the Mapping Museums project we thought in terms of official and unofficial museums. There were those museums that had been accredited and formed a normative yardstick for the very model of a museum and there were all the rest, the ones that had fallen out of previous reports, and that we were particularly interested in tracking (see Candlin *et al.* 2019). We recognized that there were differences between accredited museums and those that lacked the capacity or interest in becoming so, but nonetheless we saw the sector as a single entity. In this we echoed the museum profession and academia where it is common to talk about ‘the role of the museum’, as if they were homogeneous entities, and ‘the sector’ in terms which suggest that it is a sphere where all the participating venues have characteristics in common. We no longer think that.

Even if the category of museum is understood in a narrow, official sense, it is heterogeneous. Beyond the name ‘museum’ it is difficult to imagine any point of commonality between the Fakenham Museum of Gas and Local History in Norfolk, which is run by volunteers and has less than 1,000 visitors a year, and the British Museum which, in 2018, attracted 6 million visitors and had an annual income of over £79 million.²⁶ The term ‘museum’ incorporates venues with all kinds of governance and funding structures: museums are owned and managed by bodies as disparate as the National Trust, the Ministry of Defence, local authorities, universities, religious establishments, football clubs, community trusts, and private individuals. These museums show objects and themes of every description from barometers to tanks, or from Methodism to witches, and they do so using a wide variety of display techniques.

The heterogeneity of the museum sector has been commented on before (Hein 2000; Mason *et al.* 2017), but it is also important to register that it is heterogeneous with respect to organizational type. In the UK the category comfortably encompasses heritage centres, historic houses, historic buildings and structures, and to a lesser extent visitor centres and attractions and experiences, all of which, on occasion, are understood to be museums. ‘Museum’ is not a bounded term, but comprised of multiple kinds of organization.

In turn, each organizational category is heterogeneous. Some visitor centres, like that devoted to King Richard III in Leicester have extensive displays on historical events. Others principally provide information for tourists; they are concerned with bus timetables and tourist entertainment, not with exhibitions. The same heterogeneity is also evident in each of these different types of venue that make up the museum sector. The category of historic houses comprises some that are accredited museums, while others may only open their gardens on an annual basis for charity. Some historic buildings have extensive displays or have their indigenous contents and could be reasonably claimed as museums, others are empty of objects and displays. As such, the different categories that comprise the museum sector cannot be simply peeled away from one another. We could not declare that ‘historic houses do not count’ as museums or that they do, rather that some historic houses might count and others may not, and equally there is no possibility of distinguishing museums by drawing contrasts with visitor or heritage centres, because those entities are far too amorphous to be reliably different or similar.

Moreover, it is not only that the museum sector is comprised of different kinds of entities, and it is not only that these different categories – visitor centres, historic houses and so forth – are internally diverse, it is that the individual venues are themselves heterogeneous. This point was brought home to us in two useful conversations, both with the owners of historic houses. When we asked Peter Frost-Pennington whether he saw Muncaster Castle, in Cumbria, as his home, as a museum, or as something else entirely, he commented (with a certain degree of amusement) that it may be a family home for marketing purposes but when applying for funding, it was quite definitely an historic house museum. His wife Iona, the owner of the castle, gave a slightly different answer. She replied that her mother had thought of it as a family home first, and a business second but she envisaged it as a business that she lived in, although then she more forcibly added, ‘apart from at Christmas. At Christmas it’s the family home’.²⁷ For the Frost-Penningtons the castle was a home and a business but the priority of those terms changed depending on the time of year and whether or not it was

open to the public. Robert Parker made a related point about Browsholme Hall, an Elizabethan manor house in Lancashire, where he lives with his family. 'It is a home, a museum, and a wedding venue' he said. 'It's a composite, intertwined', and to illustrate the point, he tightly interlocked his fingers²⁸

Most museums, of all types, are composite venues. They have multiple, interlocking identities. In order to survive, the vast majority of museums engage in commercial activities to generate income, such as cafes and shops, and they hire their premises out as conference, party, and wedding venues. They may also share space and staff with post offices, laundrettes, supermarkets, and charity shops (Orr 2018). In larger, more established museums those commercial activities are often hived off into a trading company, but nonetheless they are part of the same endeavour. Thus, individual venues are not either family homes or museums, cafes or museums, visitor centres or museums, they are both, and usually many things at once. A historic house can be a family house, a museum, a wedding venue, and a conference centre, and a site for car boot sales. Likewise, a visitor centre can be a museum, a community venue, and a tourist information centre. In most instances the 'museum' is one aspect of the wider organization that includes a commercial or civic infrastructure.

Museums are different all the way down. The sector is comprised of multiple types of organization that intersect in non-predictable and complex ways. It has no clear boundaries. In turn, the intersecting organizational categories, the heritage centres, historic houses and so forth, have no precise composition or limits. The individual organizations that make up each of these groups are themselves multiple, composite organizations. And this landscape is not static. Rather, it changes on a seasonal basis as venues close or open for Christmas, and through the years as organizations alter focus, develop linked businesses, or adapt to new remits.

To some extent, it was daunting to conceive of museums in these terms. Sectors, organizations and groups that are generally imagined to be recognizable and consistent began to collapse and fracture under scrutiny. It was as if museums were blurring or disappearing into air and somehow we had to navigate this complex shifting terrain. At the same time, recognizing the pliable multiplicity of museums proved to be an enormous step forward for the project because we did not have to decide if a venue was a museum or something else. It ceased to be a binary choice.

Assembling Museums

Our quandary was that museums do not have an essential identity, the museum sector comprises a heterogeneous mass of overlapping organizations, and there is no neat formulation that conveniently differentiates between museums and not-museums. And yet, these places called museums exist in the world and we seem more or less capable of recognizing them. Guidebooks confidently list them, journalists write articles on the quirkiest museums in the UK, flyers for museum-like venues are grouped together in tourist information offices, and the Mapping Museums research team have had reasonably coherent arguments about whether or not individual venues are museums. The notion of a museum both collapses and functions, it is both an impossible and entirely usable term. So how then, does it hold together and how were we, the research team, to proceed?

Rather than conceiving of museums as being defined by particular people or agencies, or as having specific qualities, we began to think of museums as assemblages. In his book *Assemblage Theory* the Mexican philosopher Manuel DeLanda stresses the heterogeneity of assemblages and their capacity to incorporate a wide variety of disparate components – the material, discursive, political, natural, the human and non-human. For example, he describes communities and organizations as being assemblages that consist of persons, and of material and symbolic artefacts including 'the architecture of the buildings that house them; the myriad different tools and machines used in offices, factories, and kitchens; the various sources of food, water, and electricity; the many symbols and icons with which they express their identity' (DeLanda 2016: 20). The community or organization is not just the sum of these parts, but emerges out of the dynamic interaction between the different components. In turn, each assemblage may be an element within a larger whole. Small communities may form

alliances or coalitions with their neighbours, and organizations may band into associations or form partnerships. Equally, there are complex interconnections between assemblages of different types: communities of all types intersect with organizations of all types that intersect with technical assemblages of all types and so on.

For the Mapping Museums team, thinking of museums as assemblages enabled us to dispense with the essentialist notion that museums are discrete, bounded entities that fit a single model, or have particular characteristics, or that their definition is contingent on a single authority, be that ICOM, the owner, staff, or visitors. Instead they emerge as a conglomeration of multiple components including: to collections, public access, opening hours, nomenclature, shelving, vitrines, lighting, labels, text panels, dioramas, mannequins, websites, catalogues, guidebooks, publicity material, walls, doors, roofs (that regularly need fixing), car parks, toilets, owners, founders, volunteers, interns, visitors, curators, educators, cleaners, conservators, accountants, receptionists, tour guides, and security. We duly took all those components into account when trying to decide whether or not to include a venue within our dataset, balancing the presence of some against the absence of others.

Assemblage theory also resonated with our developing understanding about the place of museums in a broader sector and of their relationship to other kinds of entities, which are also heterogeneous. In this model, individual museum assemblages articulate with each other and with other kinds of assemblage including ICOM, the Museums Association, the Accreditation scheme, local authorities, national government, TripAdvisor, visitor and heritage centres, visitor experiences, monuments, archaeological sites, tractor days, wedding venues, private homes, cafes, and shops. Just as individual museums are understood as assemblages of heterogeneous components, the museum sector becomes a mass of assemblages that are combined in open-ended and non-totalized ways.

Pattern recognition

Conceptualizing museums as assemblages did not provide us with an automatic blueprint for making decisions about what to include in our database. We still had to discriminate between different types of interlocking organizations, many of which share similar components. In this respect another aspect of assemblage theory proved useful, namely the emphasis on how components are configured within assemblages.

Bruno Latour has noted that it is not enough to simply identify something as a network and that thinking about something 'being connected, being interconnected, or being heterogeneous is not enough'. Instead he writes 'it all depends on the sort of action that is flowing from one to the other ... It's the work and the movement and the flow and the changes that should be stressed' (Latour 2005: 143). The philosopher Jane Bennett makes a similar point in her book *Vibrant Matter* where she addresses concepts of assemblage via the Chinese notion of *shi*. The term refers to the style, energy, propensity, or trajectory of an arrangement of things and originated with descriptions of military leaders who were able to read and then negotiate the *shi* of a given situation. As Bennett writes, it 'names the dynamic forces emanating from a spatio-temporal configuration rather than any particular element within it', and might involve the configuration of weather, mood, historical trends, and weaponry. It is 'the mood or style of an open whole' (Bennett 2010: 35).

Following that lead we began to think about how different elements combined in particular arrangements or styles. In effect, we attempted to read the *shi* of museums. After considerable discussion, we focused on three propensities that were manifest in the museums we had listed so far and used them to help gauge whether or not other venues should be included in the dataset. The first was the long-term, intentional care for objects. In today's climate, when funding is being cut and large numbers are closing, museums cannot guarantee that they will care for their collections for posterity. Nonetheless, the intention to care for objects for as long as possible is evident in the attention paid to storage, conservation and preservation, and in the concern to ensure the succession of volunteers or staff. Museums close when anyone ceases to care for the objects. Thinking in these terms led us to exclude galleries without collections and temporary and pop up museums. While these venues do care for objects while they are in and passing through their premises, they do not have the same long-term commitment to particular things.²⁹

The second propensity was a change in pace or style from the surrounding area. Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach have argued that the architecture and layout of museums separates the ordinary spaces of day to day life from the ceremonial (Duncan and Wallach 1980; see also Duncan 1995). Whether this is always successful in the packed halls of Tate Modern or when large school groups visit their local museum, or if such separation is even desirable, is debatable. Even so, museums have mechanisms to encourage visitors to concentrate on exhibits and to behave differently once inside the building or demarcated space. These include stanchions in front of exhibits, signage, spotlighting, guided tours, specified routes through an exhibition, benches in front of important works, and perhaps above all, the entranceway which offers visitors a space to deposit bags and umbrellas, pick up guides, consult maps, and orient themselves to the exhibits within. (Laursen *et al.* 2016). In small independent museums visitors may be welcomed personally by staff or have to wait while the front door is unlocked (Candlin 2016). Notably, displays in hallways and foyers, such as those that are regularly found in hospitals, town halls, and corporate headquarters, do not have a way of demarcating space or signalling to visitors to shift their demeanour: as such we excluded them. We also excluded 'outreach' museums on the same basis.

The third propensity was public orientation. There is a clear consensus that museums should be open to the public and indeed that museums should attempt to remove any barriers to access, but as we discussed above there is no straightforward answer to what constitutes access. Thus, we looked at the infrastructure of venues and the ways in which they signalled openness to the public: Did they have an entrance sign, a website that welcomed visitors, did they publish their opening hours or their appointments system, sell postcards and souvenirs, offer tours or activities, and were there public facilities such as picnic tables, car-parking, cafes, and toilets? Being alert to the detail of material infrastructures and how they catered for or addressed potential visitors enabled us to discriminate between those venues that had limited opening hours but were nonetheless welcoming, and those, like some historic houses that were accessible under the conditions of the arts and heritage tax exemption scheme and were only open to the public in principle.

In most cases, it is relatively easy to decide if a venue is a museum or not. The difficulty comes when the organization has components that are associated with museums but does not have others, or when it could also belong to another type of closely related assemblage. Thus, when we had to make decisions about these problematic or 'grey area' venues we looked to see if they cared for objects in the long-term, had a threshold, and were publicly oriented, and judged accordingly.

Versions of museums

In the Foreword to *Knowing Things*, Michael O' Hanlon notes that Gosden, Larson and Petch have revealed the Pitt Rivers Museum 'to be the least moored, stable, or pre-constituted entity imaginable'. He then goes on to ask 'Is the Pitt Rivers Museum *sui generis*, or are the ideas developed in this volume extendable to other ethnographic museums or indeed to museums in general?' (O'Hanlon 2007). For him, the answer depends on whether relational structures could be detected in other museums, which would in turn depend on similarly detailed research on a given museum's record systems. We have not looked at individual museums with the kind of scrutiny that Gosden, Larson and Petch paid the Pitt Rivers Museum. Rather we have taken an overview of museums that were open in the UK between 1960 and 2020, and have looked at some of the more obstinate museums in detail. Nonetheless, we reply yes, those ideas are extendable to museums in general and to the museum sector taken as a whole.

Our research leads us to conclude that museums in general are not fixed or moored. They share in a wide variety of parts and practices, but there is nothing essential about them, and each museum articulates with a wide variety of other organizations, which are themselves composite in endless different ways. All of it changes over time: daily, seasonally and historically. Yet, despite their heterogeneity, despite being a shifting mass of people and things, museums are recognisable as such, not least because of their propensities and styles of practice.

Given that this entity that we refer to as the museum sector has no natural or self-evident limits, its demarcation will always involve a set of decisions about which organizations are included or excluded. Even if other authors took an assemblage approach as we have here, they may identify other propensities and delineate the sector in different ways. Our particular process of data collection and the specific way that we have conceptualized museums has produced a more expansive account of the museum sector than previous surveys allow. In our version there are far more museums than those documented by the Accreditation Scheme or listed by the Museums Association (although if we had defined our parameters differently there could have been a greater number still). The majority of UK museums are independent and a high proportion of them are small. Closed museums are recognized and documented. The sector is understood to include ad hoc and commercial museums, and venues that fulfil all kinds of roles and functions as well as that of being a museum. This version is accommodating to the messy, complex lived realities of museum practice in the UK.³⁰

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Notes

- 1 For more information on the Mapping Museums project: <http://www.mappingmuseums.org>
- 2 The Museums Association published an annual yearbook of their membership until 2014. Since then the database has been migrated online in the form of their 'Find a Museum' service. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/find-a-museum>
- 3 In addition, we tried a model for selection based on Lakoff's prototype theory, which we have discussed elsewhere (Lakoff 1987) (Candlin *et al.*, 2019)
- 4 S.F. Markham also struggled with the differences between museums and displays in town halls and churches in his museums survey of 1938 (Markham 1938).
- 5 At the outset of the study, the Mapping Museums team decided to follow UK precedent and exclude zoos, aquaria, botanic gardens, and monuments (which are included in definitions published by the International Council of Museums), as well as libraries and archives, unless they had an accompanying museum space. We also excluded virtual museums, partly out of a pragmatic need to limit the scope of the study and mainly because we were interested in the relationship between museum development and location.
- 6 ICOM, 'What is ICOM's definition of a museum' [2018]. <https://icom.museum/en/faq/what-is-icom-definition-of-a-museum/>, accessed 1 November 2019.
- 7 A revised definition of museums – in part shaped by the outcome of the workshops discussed here – was presented at the 25th ICOM general conference in Kyoto, Japan, in September 2019. However, the definition was deemed too radical a departure from previous definitions by rank and file ICOM members, and thus the vote on ratifying the definition was postponed. The proposed definition is currently being revised in light of this response.
- 8 Summaries of the conferences are available here: <http://network.icom.museum/icofom/meetings/previous-conferences/defining-the-museum/>

- ⁹ 'Defining the Museum of the XXIst Century: Latin American Experiences'. Summary of the concluding session in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 17 November 2017. <http://network.icom.museum/icofom/meetings/previous-conferences/defining-the-museum/>, accessed 1 November 2019.
- ¹⁰ Papers from the International Symposium on Defining the Museum for the 21st Century, Avellaneda – Buenos Aires, Argentina. Synthesis in English. November 2017. Available at: <http://network.icom.museum/icofom/meetings/previous-conferences/defining-the-museum/>, accessed 1 November 2019.
- ¹¹ The Museums Association definition, agreed in 1998, states that 'Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.' Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/about/frequently-asked-questions>
- ¹² Celia MacKenzie, Chief Executive, Rum Story, Whitehaven, personal communication, 30 March 2017.
- ¹³ Eugene Dillenburg has also tried to identify essential characteristics of museums with different conclusions, although notably he makes a similar shift in replacing the question 'what are museums' with 'what are exhibits?' (Dillenburg, 2011).
- ¹⁴ Museums Norfolk, 'Museum Strike School', [n.d.]. <http://www.heritagenorfolk.org.uk/project/burston-strike-school/>, accessed 1 November 2019
- ¹⁵ See Mark Brown and Natalie Gil, 'Tax exemption for public access to treasured artworks is "a racket"', *The Guardian*, 27 December 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/dec/27/tax-exemption-public-access-treasured-artworks-racket>, accessed: 14 August 2017.
- ¹⁶ Elmbridge Museum, 'About' [n.d.]. <http://elmbridgemuseum.org.uk/about/>, accessed 1 November 2019
- ¹⁷ Sarah Sharman, member of Colyton Heritage Centre Management Committee, personal communication, 24 April 2017.
- ¹⁸ Sue Gill, administrator Stonor House, personal communication, 30 March 2017.
- ¹⁹ Lord Petre, owner of Ingatestone Hall, personal communication, 27 March 2017.
- ²⁰ Caithness Community Website, 'Mary-Ann's Cottage' [n.d.]. <http://www.caithness.org/community/museums/maryanncottage/index.htm>, accessed 1 November 2019.
- ²¹ FDR47, 'Informative Little Place', TripAdvisor, 31 May 2017. https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g186303-d6920717-r489300344-Heritage_Centre_Ledbury-Ledbury_Herefordshire_England.html, accessed 20 February 2019. OutnAbout007, 'Informative Free, Very Good', TripAdvisor, 3 September 2017. https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g186303-d6920717-r520788866-Heritage_Centre_Ledbury-Ledbury_Herefordshire_England.html, accessed 1 November 2019.
- ²² Richard B., 'Holiday in Herefordshire', TripAdvisor, 24 September 2016. https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g186303-d6920717-r421752759-Heritage_Centre_Ledbury-Ledbury_Herefordshire_England.html, accessed 1 November 2019. Herbie Green, 'Lovely Building Housing an Interesting Eclectic Mix of Items', TripAdvisor, 28 July 2017. https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g186303-d6920717-r398578086-Heritage_Centre_Ledbury-Ledbury_Herefordshire_England.html, accessed 1 November 2019

- ²³ relaxnj0y, 'Clever Plot', TripAdvisor, 2 June 2017. https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g186338-d211907-r489858652-Sherlock_Holmes_Museum-London_England.html, accessed 1 November 2019.
- ²⁴ See for example Monster C, 'An Amazing Afternoon at "The Harry Potter Museum"', TripAdvisor, 28 May 2012. https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g2691242-d2147749-r130770045-Warner_Bros_Studio_Tour_London_The_Making_of_Harry_Potter-Leavesden_Hertfordshi.html, accessed 1 November 2019.
- ²⁵ For an example of small independent museums being portrayed as the work of a single, charismatic individual, see Davies 2010.
- ²⁶ The British Museum, 'Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2019'. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/BM-report-and-accounts-2018-2019.pdf>, accessed: 22 October 2019.
- ²⁷ Peter and Iona Frost-Pennington, owners of Muncaster Castle, Cumbria, personal communication, 15 February 2017.
- ²⁸ Robert Parker, owner of Brownsholme Hall, Lancashire, personal communication [interview], 18 April 2017.
- ²⁹ We should note here that we did include the Whitechapel Gallery because it has a permanent archival collection and linked exhibition space which displays some of these collections.
- ³⁰ In the period between submitting this article and final revisions the Mapping Museums team published a detailed report on the UK museum sector, and how it has changed since 1960 (Candlin *et al.* 2020)

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