

The most important collection of a small museum

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Abstract

When discussing the development of a museum, we usually encounter two options - one, to build a new one or two, to renovate an existing museum.

In fact, both options are possible. To build a new museum takes more time, financial resources, and a detailed plan. During the planning process, there are many topics that need to be discussed. However, it is not the location of any new museum, nor its architecture, interior design etc. that are the major topics of discussion. The most debatable topic is that of the theme of a new museum. Ultimately, this is based up on the type of collection that the museum is intended to house and how much funding is available to build up the collection that determines the theme of a new museum.

The work required to renovate an existing museum can be considerable and the effect of the renovation will largely depend up on whether the museum has sufficient resources.

Given a lack of resources, how can the small museum innovate? Without an enormous amount of funding, it would be impossible to build a new museum. These questions noticeably affect the development of museum education. Nevertheless, there is no need to be pessimistic. We can solve the issue in a way.

Many museums today place less emphasis on developing their collections. Instead, their main policy for development is to improve their services and activities. If museum staff can utilize limited resources wisely, develop good programmes and activities, giving visitors a positive impression, a new museum can be successful regardless of its theme. It is also not difficult for an existing museum to develop a new face.

The most valuable asset of a museum may not be its collection, but its staff. Talented museum professionals are the important resource for developing any museum. Staff development should become the major challenge faced by museums today.

Museums in Mainland China

There is a trend in Mainland China to re-build provincial museums, many of which were founded in the 1950s. In this drive towards modernization they will erect new premises to increase their space, extend their services and improve their facilities. However their underlying visions will remain largely unchanged. They will continue to serve as a centre for the preservation of archaeological finds, the development of local art collections and in the promotion of provincial culture and history.

Such provincial museums each have large, attractive, and in many cases, important collections and receive substantial funding from the provincial government. Unlike museums elsewhere, a lack of space, collections and funding may not exist. The challenge for many Mainland museums is how they can make better use of these strengths to improve the services that they offer. With new buildings to maintain, it is often difficult to meet the higher costs associated with running a modern facility, and more demanding expectations on the presentation of exhibitions. Regional and thematic museums are usually smaller in scale.

In China, modern museums were introduced in the 1870s, often by foreign scholars and missionaries. In 1874, the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society set up a museum in Shanghai, known as the Shanghai Museum ¹. In 1883, a museum of natural history known as the Siccawei Museum ² was founded in Shanghai by Father Pierre Heude ³ (1836-1902). In 1905, Zhang Jian ⁴ established the Nantong Museum ⁵ in Jiangsu province ⁶. As the first museum launched by Chinese, it occupies a significant position in Chinese history.

Nevertheless it may come as some surprise that all of these early museums in Mainland China were established after that of the City Museum in Hong Kong.

Museums in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, the earliest museum can be traced back to the mid-19th century. It was housed at City Hall in Hong Kong Island's Central District. Opened in 1869, the Hong Kong City Hall consisted of three components: a library, theatre and museum. In its early stages, the museum was managed by the British colonial administration, and had special operating hours. Chinese visitors were only admitted in the mornings and Chinese men and women were not allowed to visit at the same time. These rules were later abandoned. The City Museum was closed in 1933 when the City Hall was partially demolished to make way for the head office of the Hong Kong and the Shanghai Banking Corporation.

After the Second World War, a large influx of immigrants came to Hong Kong from Mainland China. These included scholars and businessmen who would contribute significantly to Hong Kong's rapid growth. One of the most significant arrivals was Professor F.S. Drake ⁷, a British Sinologist, who had taught at Shandong University before coming to Hong Kong. Appointed Professor of Chinese at The University of Hong Kong in 1952, he introduced the teaching of Chinese art and archaeology. In 1953, he began to acquire Chinese antiquities as teaching materials, using a reading room in the University's Chinese book library for the storage and display of these collections. This was the precursor of the University's Fung Ping Shan Museum ⁸ (re-titled the University Museum and Art Gallery ⁹ in 1994), which was the second

¹ 亞洲文會北中國支會上海博物院

² 徐家匯博物院

³ 韓伯祿神父

⁴ 張謇

⁵ 南通博物苑

⁶ 江蘇南通

⁷ 林仰山

⁸ 馮平山博物館

⁹ 香港大學美術博物館

public museum to be established in Hong Kong, and the earliest extant museum today.

The Hong Kong government established its second museum, named 'City Museum and Art Gallery'¹⁰, in the new City Hall¹¹ in 1962, developing collections of Chinese antiquities, Hong Kong contemporary art, China trade art as well as artifacts and photographs related to Hong Kong's history. In the mid-1970s, the government made a further step towards museum development. The City Museum and Art Gallery was divided into two thematic museums in 1975, namely the Hong Kong Museum of Art and the Hong Kong Museum of History. Since then Hong Kong's museum services have been greatly expanded so that today there are altogether twelve government-run museums.

The activities of the government museums in Hong Kong encompass four areas: (1) exhibitions, (2) publications, (3) lectures and (4) outreach services including traveling exhibitions and the loan of teaching materials. Except for those housed in historical monuments, government museums operate in purpose-built buildings with updated facilities reflecting a substantial level of investment in museum education. The following are some details of the four flagship museums in Hong Kong in the year 2005-2006:

(1) Hong Kong Museum of Art¹²

HK\$58,000,000 expenditure
(US\$1:HK\$7.8), \$7,000,000 revenue,
500,000 visitors, 15 exhibitions, 6,000 sq.m.
exhibition area, 13,000 items of collection

(2) Hong Kong Museum of History¹³

\$64,000,000 expenditure, \$3,200,000
revenue, 560,000 visitors, 16 exhibitions,
8,000 sq.m. exhibition area, over 90,000
items of collection

(3) Hong Kong Heritage Museum¹⁴

\$74,500,000 expenditure, \$2,400,000

revenue, 660,000 visitors, 22 exhibitions,
7,500 sq.m. exhibition area, 75,000 items of
collection

(4) Hong Kong Science Museum¹⁵

\$61,500,000 expenditure, \$7,600,000
revenue, 970,000 visitors, 16 exhibitions,
6,500 sq.m. exhibition area, 500 items of
exhibit.

In spite of the recent growth in museum services, there is a great deal of criticism from the community on the performance of these public museums. In recent years, the government has been looking into the feasibility of building a number of new museums as part of a new development planned for an area of reclaimed land in the West Kowloon District. The aim is to develop world-class collections and facilities, as well as exhibitions and visitor services.

Like other countries, Hong Kong is eager to improve its international reputation by building landmark museums that will appeal to tourists. What in this case is the definition of 'world-class'? For many, this is a large physical space, outstanding architectural design, and unique collections. The government has allocated a large piece of land in West Kowloon for new museums and wishes to build up sizable collections that will interest tourists. An attractive collection is apparently the main way to attain a world-class standard. In Hong Kong, the only works available for acquisition are Chinese art and antiquities, and Hong Kong art. The strengths of Hong Kong's public and private collections are these traditional and modern art forms. Hong Kong's existing museums, run by both the government and universities, already cover the general disciplines of Chinese art and culture, making use of their own

¹⁰ 香港博物美術館

¹¹ 大會堂

¹² 香港藝術館

¹³ 香港歷史博物館

¹⁴ 香港文化博物館

¹⁵ 香港科學館

collections and loans from artists, collectors and other institutions to promote art appreciation and an understanding of heritage.

While it may be good to establish another museum of Chinese art in Hong Kong since visitors will find its collections interesting, any such new museum will have to compete with existing museums in Hong Kong not to mention the many provincial museums in Mainland China. It would be difficult for any new collections to surpass others.

Some are of the opinion that there is no need to build any more museums in Hong Kong. In order to achieve a world-class museum, it will have to be in an easily accessible location, substantial funding will have to be spent on collection development, and resources put into visitor services. Despite such an investment, there remain fears that the new museum will not attract local audiences. Some scholars, therefore, suggest that the focus of any new museums should not be multi-disciplinary but thematic to reflect interests in subject areas that are not covered by existing museums.

This proposal gives rise to another consideration. Since Hong Kong has no comprehensive collections of the arts of other countries, it is likely that there would not be collections available to support these popular themes. For instance, the cultures of Japan and Korea are very popular in Hong Kong. Any new museum would be well received if it were able to present more exhibitions about East Asia. In addition, by showing more works from Western Asia, a new museum could educate Hong Kong people more about the Islamic world. While the cultures of Asia could be a suitable theme for future museum development, there are no collections on which it could be based.

Museums in Japan

Hong Kong could learn a great deal from some Japanese examples. Soichiro Fukutake

¹⁶, President of the Benesse Corporation in Okayama ¹⁷ Japan and his family have developed two private art museums on the small island of Naoshima ¹⁸, in the Inland Sea of Japan ¹⁹. They invited the famous architect, Tadao Ando ²⁰ to do the architectural design.

Through the Naoshima Fukutake Art Museum Foundation the museums commission or purchase the artworks of both Japanese and overseas artists. Permanently displayed in a natural setting, these works allow visitors to have a dialogue with nature and art. The first project on the island was the Benesse House which was opened in 1992 and combines a museum and a hotel with ten rooms. A hotel annex, which is an oval structure with a central pond, was completed three years later. The additional six rooms all open from the water court and face the Inland Sea.

The second project, Chichu Art Museum ²¹, is an underground building, about 600 metres to the west of Benesse House. It was inaugurated in 2004 and displays the works of three artists: the Impressionist Claude Monet (1840-1926) and two American artists, Walter De Maria (born 1935) and James Turrell (born 1943). Each gallery is purpose-built for one piece of art.

Apart from the two museums, Fukutake has converted four old village houses into art installations. While the houses' exteriors (the traditional roofs, posts and walls) are preserved, the interiors have been designed by an invited artist. These Art House projects, first executed in 1998, provide visitors with an opportunity to experience the relationship between contemporary art, architecture, local history and nature. They also capture the memories of the villagers living there.

The realization of Soichiro Fukutake's

¹⁶ 福武總一郎

¹⁷ 岡山

¹⁸ 直島

¹⁹ 瀬戸内海

²⁰ 安藤忠雄

²¹ 地中博物館

dream in Naoshima demonstrates how successful small museums can be. Each Art House is an installation artwork while the two museums house a very limited number of works. However, visitors do not feel that there is a paucity of art as they are surrounded by art and nature and can learn how old and new are connected. Many visitors travel a long way to visit this remote island and to become captivated by both natural and man-made beauty.

By combining art, the preservation of heritage and nature, Soichiro Fukutake and Tadao Ando have offered a wonderful model for museum development that can also inspire visitors to live well and treasure the environment.

Another good example is the Miho Museum²², a private museum in the Shiga prefecture²³ of Japan. It is designed by I.M. Pei²⁴ whose most recent project is the Suzhou Museum²⁵ in Mainland China which opened in October 2006. The Miho Museum features a 200-metre-long tunnel and a 120-metre-long bridge, which connects the visitor centre and the gallery building. Pei's design was derived from the Chinese story of the Peach Blossom Spring²⁶. Like the Peach Blossom Spring, the Miho Museum is positioned in the hills like a paradise which was once lost and is now found.

Both the Miho and Naoshima Museums are private institutions far from urban centres and do not have large collections. However their architecture and displays leave a strong impression on many art lovers and professionals showing how important extraordinary structural design can be for the success of small museums.

A final example from Japan is the private Mori Art Museum²⁷, opened in 2003 in Roppongi Hills in Tokyo. Located at the top of the Mori Tower designed by Richard Gluckman it benefits from spectacular architecture and views of the city. It has established itself as a museum showing high

quality and innovative exhibitions developed in partnership with artists and other institutions and collections around the world. In hiring David Elliot who had previously directed the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Stockholm, Sweden as its director, the first foreigner to hold such a position in Japan, the Mori Art Museum has invested in its staff rather than collections to increase its international reach. Its cutting edge and stimulating exhibition programmes include contemporary art and design, Japanese and Asian art as well as more conceptual global themes. The Mori Art Museum has commissioned installation art works for the building, and is now beginning to consider developing a collection of its own.

The strength of small museums

A museum is judged 'small' due to physical size, size of collections, number of staff and budget level. Some small museums are housed in historical buildings, which already provide a point of interest. Others are built with creative architectural designs that arouse the attention of many visitors. If a museum is weak in the areas of funding and collections, and does not have attractive architecture, can it become 'world-class'? There are surely many museums that suffer from space and budget constraints and yet have their own reasons for why they are still in operation. Some of them are part of a large organization, others preserve local materials or donations, while others still aim to promote tourism.

The University Museum and Art Gallery (UMAG) at The University of Hong Kong has a history of over fifty years. Due to inadequate resources, its collections are

²² 美秀美術館

²³ 滋賀縣

²⁴ 貝聿銘

²⁵ 蘇州博物館

²⁶ 桃花源記

²⁷ 森美術館

relatively poor, comprising only 1,600 items of Chinese art and its exhibition area is about 1,100 sq. metres. It has two wings. An old wing, built in the 1930s, is a historical building originally used as a Chinese book library with few modern facilities; the new one, opened in 1996, provides extra exhibition, office and storage space. Occupying the lower three floors of the University's T T Tsui building, where the other eight floors are used as classrooms and offices, its architecture was not designed with a world-class museum in mind. In spite of these difficulties and weaknesses, the Museum has become more widely recognized in art and academic communities in recent years.

In the year 2005-2006, the UMAG held 21 exhibitions and produced 10 publications. Its annual expenditure was HK\$10,000,000 of which 60% was covered by the University and the remaining 40% of \$4,000,000 was covered by sponsors and donors. It attracted 60,000 visitors during that period, which represents a record number in the Museum's history. Credit for this achievement is due to the hard work of its staff.

With such limited resources, the UMAG has to rely on loans from artists, collectors and cultural bodies to organize creative and interesting exhibitions. While it occasionally has opportunities to show world-renowned masterpieces and important archaeological material, this is not its principal aim. The Museum uses its resources to display fine art as well as historical materials to reflect the cultures of China, Hong Kong and other nations. Over the past three years, the Museum has held five exhibitions on the history of Hong Kong using photographic reproductions, which are educational and popular. To reduce expenditure further, many aspects of museum work is done in-house by its existing staff. This includes display, design, carpentry, electrical work, translation,

catalogue production, photography and educational services such as guided tours.

Clearly, for a small museum such as the UMAG, a team of capable and dedicated staff is its most important component and the most valuable asset. In particular, the small museum depends on the expertise of its staff in its development. While small museums may be able to bear the disadvantages of inadequate collections, funding and space, they should not lack adequate management skills.

All museums can attain world-class status!

A 'world-class museum' can be defined as a museum that leaves visitors with a good and memorable impression. If this definition is acceptable to all, why can a small museum not attain world-class status?

In planning new museums, it is not necessary to secure fine and large collections, a good geographical location or even a large piece of land. Expert staff can stimulate collection growth, raise funds, and improve programmes to attract visitors. The success of museums in Japan are a vivid example. The key consideration in deciding the theme of a new museum should not be the availability of collections, it should instead be what the public wish to learn.

It takes a long time for a museum to become world-class. Hong Kong and Mainland China should take care in developing their museums. Large museums may become white elephants unable to achieve an outstanding reputation through lack of innovation in its exhibitions programmes and out-moded management. The experience of a small museum with poor resources, such as the UMAG of The University of Hong Kong shows that the development of museums depends on the development of its staff's expertise.

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²⁸ 楊春棠