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From junk yard to Aladdin's cave

It is in the nature of museums that their collections grow and increase: to most of them, collecting is fundamental. Since the 1950s the rate of collecting has grown almost literally exponentially. Diverse factors can be seen as having contributed to this. General economic and social change has brought about the rapid evolution of technologies and ways of life, and a vast increase in the availability of material goods of the sort that museums collect. Pressures to collect arise from changing aspirations and attitudes in society generally, such as the growth of interest in past history, and increased funding for museums as leisure becomes more economically important. There are other factors which are internal to museums, for instance, it can be argued, simply the increase in the numbers of professional museum curators, and the realisation that as well as objects themselves, material relating to their context needs to be collected in order that the objects retain their meaning and significance.

There are dramatic statistics to support this perception. In his book, *The British Museum: Purpose and politics*, Sir David Wilson tells how in the nineteenth century, one of the British Museum's famous curators, Franks, enlarged the collections of the British and Medieval Antiquities Department from 154 feet of cases in 1851 to 2,250 whole cases in 1896. The Society for Preservation of Natural History Collections (SPNHC) has compiled statistics showing the huge increase in the number of objects in these collections during the second half of this century. The arrival of large archaeology archives in museum stores is the consequence of archaeology following increased buildings development during the 1960s and 70s. In the Museum of London, the growth in the collections followed the establishment of new subject departments, which was in turn a response to the need to record and collect the twentieth century city (Fig. 2). In the Science Museum, the whole of the collections were housed within its main South Kensington building until the 1950s. Now, they are stored on four major sites, including two new museums established in the 1980s, and occupy an area a third as large as that used by Sainsbury's for its national warehousing. Collections growth and its consequences is a dominant theme in *Collecting for the 21st century*, the recent survey of industrial and technological museums in Yorkshire and Humberside.

The rate of growth of collections is probably the most significant of all in determining whether it is possible to manage them as a dynamic, usable resource. It must be argued, and is widely (although not universally) accepted, that the enormous increase in collecting during the mid twentieth century is not sustainable. The argument is on two grounds: resource implications, and the practicality of making use of collections of this scale. It is extremely difficult to obtain the amount of finance necessary to bring the

existing collections into usable condition: it is impossible to foresee resources increasing at the rate needed to sustain a continuing rapid increase. Furthermore, such vast collections represent an equally vast resource of data and information. To digest this and make it usable will take a considerable intellectual and physical effort.

Physical quantity

The resource implications of ever-expanding collections are not well accepted. The *Cost of collecting* study, published in 1989, addressed just this but appears to have had little impact. Why is this? The *Cost of collecting* produced a formula which could be used to calculate the cost to a museum of acquiring an individual object. The idea was that museums should start to apply the formula and would realise what they were letting themselves in for when they acquired objects. However, there were a number of problems in applying the formula, some practical, some conceptual.

Among the practical problems is that the formula, although it looks straightforward, is actually very complex to calculate. The formula probably does not hold for acquisitions of quantities of individual small or two-dimensional objects, where the cost of documenting and making sense of what can be tens of thousands of objects is not represented by their volume; for an individual object in this category the cost is so small as to be negligible. If more objects are acquired, yet staff numbers and storage volume remain the same, the perception is that space and people becomes more efficiently used, and hence that the cost of the acquisition should be ignored. Theoretically, the formula could be used to earmark funds for future expansion - but this is in practice impossible.

Intellectual quantity

Coping with the physical growth of a collection is one thing - at least it is fairly obvious what needs to be done. But if a collection is envisaged as a model of the world, coping with the growth in size and complexity of that model is a much more difficult task, conceptually and in practice. "The objects must be documented" - but as is well known, Garbage in - Garbage out. Each object in a collection could be seen as a node in the intellectual representation of the real world - a multi-dimensional information net, of which the dimensions extend backwards into time; forwards into the future; out on many planes into the facets of the world that the object represents such as manufacturing technique, social culture, place, aesthetic quality, associations with events, material science; and downwards into the object itself at a microscopic and molecular level. To fully make use of a single object its significance and position need to be found and recorded in all the information dimensions. Each information node (object) added to the net makes it richer, yet more complex and difficult to comprehend; yet unless this is done the collections come to be no more than junk in the attic. The LASSI collections software that is being developed will address this complexity by allowing features of the real world: people, organisations, places and events: to be catalogued in just the same way as objects are - related to each other, and to collections objects. Information thesaurii - the information dimensions - provide the information dimensions. This will

provide the most explicit means so far to set up the net, and it will be fascinating to see what can be done with it. Of course, another way of understanding the significance of collections is to employ expert people. Without them, the information cannot exist. But without a way of recording what they know, in the long term they might as well never have known it.

Ways and means

As a consequence of these reflections, do we need to do anything? It depends, of course, on the circumstances of the particular museum. The tenor of this article is that museums should exercise greater restraint on collecting. I would argue that objects should not be acquired unless they can be fully processed - physically and intellectually - at the time of acquisition. "We'll get round to it later" is a well known trap. The temptation to save objects for the nation/community/interest group is another. Large-scale acquisitions, if they cannot be resourced at the time, cause the physical and intellectual deterioration of the existing and future collections. There is never a better time to find the resources than at the time of acquisition.

Should we all have some sort of bureaucratic control, such as acquisitions committees? The trouble with these is that I am unlikely to be unkind to you about your proposed treasure, because you might later take revenge on me. There is the undoubtedly naive but perhaps not completely vain hope that simply providing better information about the state of the stores and the documentation crisis will bring on an unaccustomed flush of logic and reason. Input from collections management and conservation as well as the would-be acquirer needs to be reviewed - by whom? Perhaps managers have to manage? The hope for the cost-of-collecting was that cost-of-collecting budgets could be set up, to include not just purchase costs but all the on-costs as well.

Constraints on collecting are not unjustifiable. There are types of collection the nature of which naturally imposes this constraint: namely, art collections. Here, the monetary value of the objects is so high that the rate of acquisition is very slow, and it would be unthinkable not to immediately provide all the resources for proper care and documentation of a newly acquired item. If the collections comprise 2,000-odd objects (the National Gallery) it is much more feasible to provide proper resources than if they comprise a quarter of a million (the Science Museum), a million (the Museum of London), six million (the British Museum), or sixty-five million (the Natural History Museum).

"Why are you keeping all this stuff?"

What is more, unless collections are properly cared for, both physically and intellectually, they are inaccessible to their owners, whether the public or museum colleagues, and their existence is extremely difficult to justify. If we ourselves do not think the collections worth the effort of proper care, why should anyone else? Every improvement to the storage, conservation or documentation of museum objects should be justifiable, and justified, in terms of better use and access. If the collections are to survive then being more imaginative about how to 'use' them is a matter of urgency. We have

achieved the museum as physical television - now perhaps we need the alternative museum, previously called the museum store. The ultimate heresy - back to the label as the prime source of information?

The sustainable museum

We are moving into an era which, in the National Museum of Science and Industry, we have designated that of 'the sustainable museum'. We know that we are in the company of many other museums, as they focus their efforts on the backlog of care and documentation. In the sustainable museum, the rate of collecting is in balance with the capacity of the museum to look after and assimilate the additions to the collections. This is not a new idea. The National Trust, as we all know, will not accept properties without endowments to fund their conservation and maintenance. The Sustainable Museum is in fundamental opposition to the view of collecting contemporary material that says one should collect everything possible now and sort it out later when its significance can be appreciated. By that time, its significance will have been long forgotten.

An object is collected because of its associations and context. As we learn in archaeology, "no excavation without recording". Or, without the record, the excavation never happened. Well-organised and cared-for collections can be matched and complimented by the electronic one, which can enable each visitor to construct their own intellectual collection, in their own terms. The museum can itself become not just a complement to local schools and the National Curriculum, but a centre for research, study, interest and discovery. It can take its place as an important provider of the new currency for the future - information. It can join other agencies as they develop a view of themselves as information providers - sites and monuments records, environmental records, local archives. The collections - *all* the collections - can become what we always knew they were: a sparkling Aladdin's cave, full of treasures everywhere you look.

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