Conservation architecture and the narrative imperative:
Birmingham Back to Backs

Introduction

In Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* the Venerable Jorge declaims from the pulpit

> '…the work of this monastery …is the study, and the preservation of knowledge. Preservation, I say, and not search for … There is no progress, no revolution of ages, in the history of knowledge, but at most a continuous and sublime recapitulation' (1992: 399).

This is, perhaps, an apposite image in the present context. In relation to knowledge a traditional museographical idea of curation is invoked, that of connoisseurship; the process of living with and repeatedly handling a collection, which uncovers a knowledge that is hard won, situated and consequently uniquely valuable. Sadly, in public museums connoisseurship is now rarely affordable.

In 2009 Helen Wilkinson, Museums Association Projects Officer, commented on the work that Monument Trust Fellows—retired curators and conservators brought up in the connoisseur tradition—have been doing in their former museums to pass on their knowledge (Wilkinson, 2009: 17). It conjures up the manner of librarian succession in the *Name of the Rose*. The ironic aspect of this is that the interpretive turn in museum practice, the turn away from a belief in the truth of things, underpins the rationale for the Monument Fellowship. The profession is searching for ways to build future specialists' knowledge because it sees this as enabling them to better fulfil the diverse roles expected of them in the (post)modern museum.

What is not questioned very often is whether this curator-centred perspective on knowledge is always appropriate. The contents of the monastery library are ordered according to date of acquisition. This effectively occludes an understanding of the collection *qua* collection. The function of the library and associated scriptorium relies entirely on the librarian's intimate knowledge of where every item is, how it may be used, and by whom. Its scope remains a mystery to everyone else, and the possibilities for its meaningful and useful organization are consequently inexpressible. Museum collections may not be like this anymore—they tend to be catalogued and organized—but there is always a surplus of curatorial knowledge that never finds its way into collection documentation, and this the Monument Fellowship seeks to rescue. The rescue, however, is just that, an attempt to salvage what is in danger. We might ask what processes a museum ought to engage to avoid such crises in knowledge management.

Can the collecting process, and therefore the relationship between collection and community, be rethought to secure a more sustainable knowledge process—akin to 'sublime recapitulation' perhaps? At the heart of the monastery, the scriptorium performs this function. Through the participation of the most appropriate community—an international community of scholar-craftsmen—it ensures a continuous process of copying, translating, annotating

and illustrating texts with the purpose of reinforcing their message and making them accessible to new audiences. The process also generates and sustains a very specific interrelationship between narrative and space. Lived experience is inscribed in the disposition of furniture, tools, materials, collection, and participants; in the disciplinary mechanisms of supervision and observance; in the division and connection of spaces; in the use of light, sound and smell; and in the implication of the scriptorium in an international system of reproducing and distributing books.

In the museum, exhibition making has an equivalent potential. In principle, one has only to identify a model process and the appropriate community of collaborators, and a more sustainable museum can be designed.

This paper considers how the contrasting logics of conservation architecture and interpretive exhibition were played out in the transformation of a dilapidated cluster of buildings—the last remaining courtyard back-to-back housing in Britain—into a museum. A narrative imperative emerges out of the engagement of a community of interest and this shapes the museum space in a radical sense; it embodies a self-sustaining museum process.

Research approach

Samuel (1994) reaffirms the inadequacy of histories born of merely speaking and writing, and the necessity of retrieving a broader and more ancient idea of memory, one that utilizes and addresses all the senses. In this project this is reflected in the types of evidence studied and the approach to their analysis.

The framework is pragmatic in that it engages with the project of achieving solidarity, which is the characteristic expression of freedom in a liberal society. 'Freedom is a positive political achievement of individuals acting together' (Bernstein, 2004: 74). Rorty argues that this can only be properly pursued in a liberal society where any issue is open to discussion and all discussion is open such that 'there are never, in practice, any standoffs' (1989: 51). This does not presume a self-sufficient and unconditioned moral identity, only that one is 'one more creature of time and chance' (Rorty, 2007: 66).

The task here is to find a useful way of speaking about the idea that there may be an interesting, or even productive, relationship between the construction of narrative and the shaping of museum space. The usefulness of explanation is what counts and this is contingent. There can be no *a priori* condition for use value in practical situations; what works for us now will not work for ever. The word 'display,' for example, dominates the discourse on exhibitions. Yet it means too many different things and privileges visual perception in explanation. A focus on 'narrative' shifts attention onto how meaning is constructed. Already the vocabulary that it brings with it enables new questions to be articulated. Extending the discourse on narrative as a force in shaping museum space is thus an attempt to help us to cope together.

The analysis is based on interpretation of four sources of evidence: a television documentary, a design practice archive, observational study, and on-site interviews with museum staff. The Carlton Television documentary material (Tugwell, 2002)—including rushes—reveals participant perspectives as well as the programme makers' sensibility and professional interests. Design project files include minutes of the interpretative committee's meetings, which reveal

the creative interactions within the team and responses to development issues and to input from the expert panel of researchers and community representatives. They also contain a comprehensive collection of exhibition design drawings and a photographic archive relating to exhibition subject matter and interpretive themes, and documenting the room settings and the exhibition. Other key elements include draft texts for the museum guidebook; photographs of in situ wallpaper remnants and paint scrapes; and various detailed briefing documents relating to video, audio and educational programme development. These help in understanding how various interests—educational, historical, architectural, and museological—were accommodated in the realization of the museum. Observational study of on-site interpretation describes the period settings, the talks given by tour guides, and the design of, and visitor response to, the orientation exhibition and the virtual tour exhibits. Analysis focusses on the relationship between interactive behaviours and the form and content of communications. A conversational style of interview with volunteers explores the experience of communicating with the public and developing the content of interpretation. The interview with the site manager focusses on reviewing the museum's events and development programme in terms of motivation, ambition and evaluation.

Between place and people: the logics of conservation and interpretation

Conservation architecture and interpretative exhibition design share some common underpinnings. In both cases creative work is underpinned by research into the past and they share a concern with reconciling authenticity and usability questions. However, some important differences also need to be accounted for.

The logic of conservation architecture is based on an archaeological conception of physical space. On an archaeological site layering is only part of the spatial story; more important is the decipherability of traces. Traces exist where layers touch and over time they can be inscribed in complex ways. Earlier layers are often disturbed and new traces left at a variety of depths. Although:

> The historical development of a site is usually revealed in reverse order ...this is not always the case. ...Older material can quite easily be found at a higher level ...archaeologists use the word *stratification* to convey the importance of interfaces between layers (McGill, 1995: 42).

In practical terms, the interpretation of *stratification* is difficult enough when essentially *uniform* layers of earth have been disturbed and fragmented. In architectural conservation the problem is made more difficult because complex three-dimensional forms and structures, modified over time, carry the traces we wish to interpret (figure 1).

Figure 1: Unrestored fireplace.

In addition, their condition and legibility can be dramatically affected by the microscopic layering of materials such as dust, rust, soot and paint.

Excavation is destructive and rarely the only or the best method of analysis in the conservation of a historic structure. Although, in some circumstances a building has to be dismantled and re-erected elsewhere, usually the challenge is as far as possible to maintain the integrity of the structure during its conservation. Documenting an excavation is a scientific process—systematically measuring and recording physical evidence as it is revealed. The usefulness of documentation only becomes apparent when we have a reason to try to make sense of it.

Architectural conservation is concerned with the preservation of whatever is determined in technical terms to be the 'original' or 'authentic' elements of a building. But the invention of new uses for old buildings also brings a range of other concerns to the fore. Compliance with present day planning policy and building regulations, for example, is often at odds with the historic uses of a building, its configuration and standards of construction. Adding new elements to a building without compromising what is already there can be in conflict with user expectations as regards amenity and aesthetic. The case for rehabilitating an old building also has to be made in economic terms—will it have a long-term market value? The sustainable re-use of buildings is as much a cultural and economic question as it is a technical one.

The logic of interpretive exhibition design is very different. Exhibitions are ephemeral in the sense that their construction is designed to last a relatively short period of time. Indeed, in the attempt to conceptualize them as architecture they have been referred to as 'nomadic architecture' (Locher, 1998), 'demonstration space',[1] 'temporary buildings' (Schulte, 1997) and 'ephemeral vistas' (Greenhalgh, 1988). In Vitruvian terms such redescription fails at the first hurdle; exhibition's firmness, commodity and delight are always compromised by its impermanence. To put this in contemporary terms, the sustainability of exhibition is problematic. The environmental, economic and socio-cultural dimensions of sustainability tend to place exhibition in an

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architecturally ambiguous position. It is scenographic, the inscribed surface of non-place, rather than substantial, the *genius loci* of place making. Everything layered over architecture perverts its timeless quality. Peel away these layers from exhibition and little if anything remains.

However, as this critique implies, there is something dynamic about exhibition, which suggests that it may be better understood in different terms. For example, the interactions that people have with its content may be a better basis for understanding exhibition than the physical form it takes. This interaction relates to the present interest in narrative. Exhibition content is experienced, sometimes passively but more often interactively, as narrative.

The idea that narrative can be made available for passive reception, that it is implicit in any arrangement of exhibition elements, has a pedigree. It recalls a pre-modern age in which illiteracy was common and 'display' played the central role in mediating public communications, whether it was the sign of the bull over the entrance to the local inn or the Stations of the Cross inscribed in the monuments and wall paintings of the Christian church.

In classical discourse memory has two parts, anamnesis, that which can be consciously recalled, and the mnemonic, that which rises from the unconscious. It is possible for a trained individual to memorize the precise order of playing cards in a pack. The technique does not rely on cold recall—anamnesis—but on the imagining of a narrative which brings the identity of each card to mind in the correct order—mnemonics. To memorize their order, the cards must be displayed one at a time whilst the narrative is constructed. We remember good stories, especially if they are of our own making, and recounting a story is intensely evocative; it can bring myriad associations to mind. It is this logic that provides the underpinning theory for display.

However, implicit narrative is also uncertain narrative. The ambitions for exhibition generally include some notion of shared meaning, of narrative that carries a sense of shape and direction over from one interpretation to another. The need to tell stories arises out of a struggle to interpret what we see and hear. Simple statements, intentionally descriptive images, single familiar sounds, these are not the problem; what taxes us is the intelligibility of environments that are layered, complex, and noisy.

Exhibition makers attempt to mirror typical strategies of sense making in the way that they frame and configure exhibition elements in time and space. This is why it is so important that they develop an understanding of target audiences in terms of environmental perception, motor skills, learning styles, etc. The decision to produce an exhibition as a discovery space or as a didactic machine should not be an arbitrary one.

The Back to Backs Museum

The Birmingham Back to Backs museum site is remarkable for all the wrong reasons. It is not associated with any influential individuals or notable events. It is in a historically interesting locality but not itself important. It is small and atypical in layout. As a structure, with features such as lintels over doors and bay windows facing onto the court, it is slightly more substantial than most courts were, but it has no architectural merit. It survived war-time bombs and slum clearances by accident rather than design.

Courtyard back to backs were built to cope with the influx of people into the towns and cities of the north of England during the first period of industrial expansion in the early 19th century. Most were built quickly, some, like Court 15, in a more ad hoc fashion. In 1789 the land was leased as a builder's yard. The first two houses were constructed back to back in 1802 on the South West corner of the site. Two further phases of building were carried out in the 1820s and the 1830s to complete the eleven houses, three of which face onto the courtyard. Also, until well into the 20th century, there was a workshop above the outbuildings on the East side of the courtyard (Garnett, 2003a: 12-13) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Ground floor and courtyard plan.

Although the last residents moved out of Court 15 in 1967, businesses moved in and it survived, just. Its uniqueness was recognized not long after the final period of 'slum' clearance in Birmingham was completed in the 1970s, although it took some time before this was formalized.

> ...what had once been the commonest form of working-class housing became the rarest. That alone was probably sufficient to ensure that the court was listed as a Grade 2 building in 1988.
>
> (Garnett, 2003a: 31-2)

With the aim of preventing Court 15 from deteriorating further, Birmingham Conservation Trust commissioned conservation architects S. T. Walker &

Duckham in 1999 to draw up restoration plans. In 2000 the Trust bought the land, freehold, from the Gooch Estate and by 2002 a campaign to rescue the properties raised over £1.3 million towards architectural conservation and museum conversion.

The National Trust also reached agreement with Birmingham City Council and the Birmingham Conservation Trust to 'take over the properties once renovation work was complete, and to guarantee its survival *in perpetuity*' (Garnett, 2003a: 31-2) [emphasis in original]. This was the beginning of a most unusual museum project. In 2002 competitive tenders for the museum design project were invited and Querceus Design produced the winning interpretive design study (Oakenfull and Raines, 2002). The National Trust contributed expertise throughout the investigation and conservation of the building and the development of the museum interpretation and facilities. The museum opened in July 2004.

Community interests and interpretive design

In June 2002 Upton produced two archive reports, the first focussing on the 1840s and 1850s (2002a), and the second on the 1880s (2002b). They survey over twenty contemporary reports on living and working conditions and nine mainly 20th century studies. Life stories of the poor from the former period are documented in relatively rare preserved documents, diaries and letters. For example, in his autobiography George Holyoak writes, sixty years on, of life in Hurst Street in the 1820s and provides some uniquely descriptive, if nostalgic, detail:

> On the adjacent corner of Hurst Street stood the Fox Tavern, as it stands now, but then the sign had been newly painted by a one-armed, short, quick-stepping, nervous faced, dapper artist, and a very wonderful fox it seemed to me. (Garnett, 2003b: 2)

The latter period, from the 1880s to the turn of the century, represents the last from which contemporaries—the grandparents of our grandparents—may have related personal experiences to those still living today. On a visit to the museum on 19 January 2005 Graham Kennell noted:

> I am 70 years of age, born in Birmingham city centre. My paternal grandfather was the son of a clock maker and lived in Dean Street, a stone's throw from Hurst St. ...he used ...to repair clocks & watches as a hobby, often buying timepieces from the Auction Rooms in Jamaica Row in order to restore them. To find that memory again in the 'Back to Backs' was truly a moving experience.[1]

Some of these stories persist in the folk memory. But as history, their nearness is merely tantalizing. In these circumstances the possibility of orchestrating the resources of collection, archive and *memory* is immensely attractive. It expands the scope of the interpretive design process and holds out the possibility of an integrated approach to curation, education and site management.

We see this in the overall narrative spatial concept put forward by Querceus Design (Figure 3). It resolves potentially conflicting requirements for:

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[1] Extracted from visitor comment cards in April 2005.

orientation and education; use of live interpretation and exhibition media; physical, sensory and intellectual access; the readability of the site and the layering of narrative content.
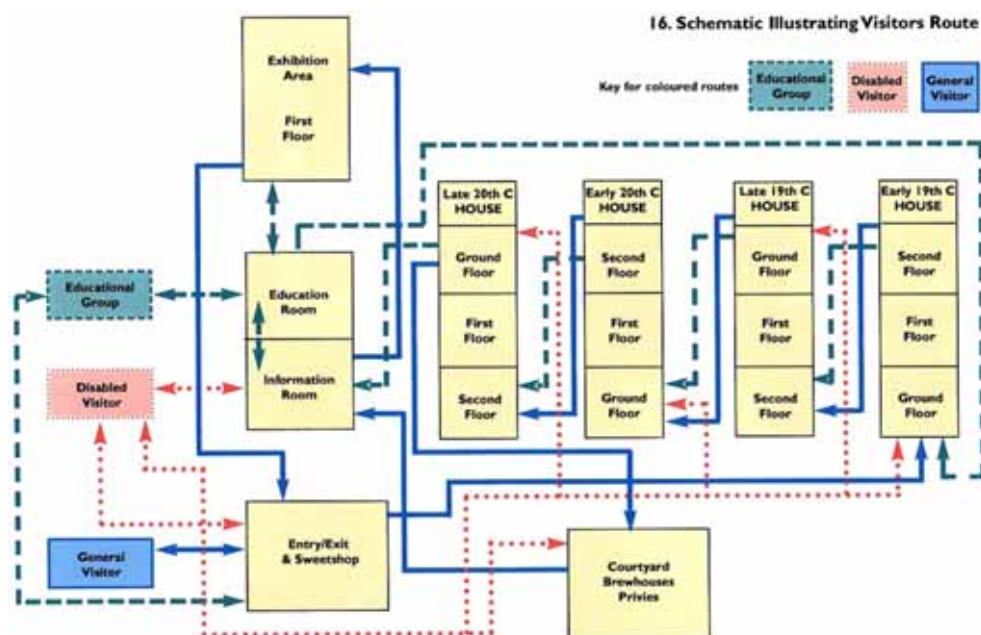

Figure 3: Schematic of visitor routes (Oakenfull & Raines, 2002).

Ostensibly the space of the museum is organized to facilitate guided group tours. However, the narrative framing and animation of the museum space has another significance; it sustains community participation in the museum's development by placing volunteers at the heart of an interactive communication process. They learn content and method on a ten-week training course, but on site every tour is slightly different (Pybus, 2005). Guides elicit stories from visitors and constantly refine and vary the content of their presentations. The richness of the narrative space derives partly from this interpretation and partly from a general social-historical engagement with life stories. Upton reported specific information about Court 15—number of residents, where they were born, and their occupations (2002a: 3-5 & 2002b: 2-4), but the lives of some individuals and families emerged more vividly than others from the research. The decision to tell the stories of the Levy, Oldfield and Mitchell families, featured in the 1840s, 1880s, and 1930s houses respectively, was an early one and formed part of the interpretive design brief (Oakenfull & Raines, 2002: 2).

The houses in which these families lived did not necessarily coincide with those designated for the respective period settings. In the 1840s, watch maker Lawrence Levy and his family lived at 28 (now 63) Hurst Street on the NE corner of the site. This house now provides ground floor reception and first floor exhibition space. No. 1 house, back of 50 Inge Street, where the Levy's living and working spaces are recreated (figure 4), was where pearl button makers Sophia Hodson and her three eldest children, lived and probably worked.

Figure 4: 1840s house, Levy kitchen.

This transposition is justified in terms of narrative logic—House 1 initiates a chronological sequence—and in terms of architectural compromise—although it does not correspond to any archaeological trace of the Levy family, it does enable functional museum spaces to be provided. Evidence of interior fittings and of decor was generally fragmentary and much had not survived at all (figure 5). However, the period interiors comprise the core of the museum and rely on a sense of completeness for their power to engage visitors' imaginations and stimulate interactive responses. Gaps left by the architectural conservation process, which is exclusively evidence based, therefore became questions of interpretive design. For example, Querceus Design researched and designed four fireplace surrounds (figure 6) and the interior fit out of the corner sweetshop.

Figure 5: Paint scrape from house 3 evidence of 19th century stencil wall painting.
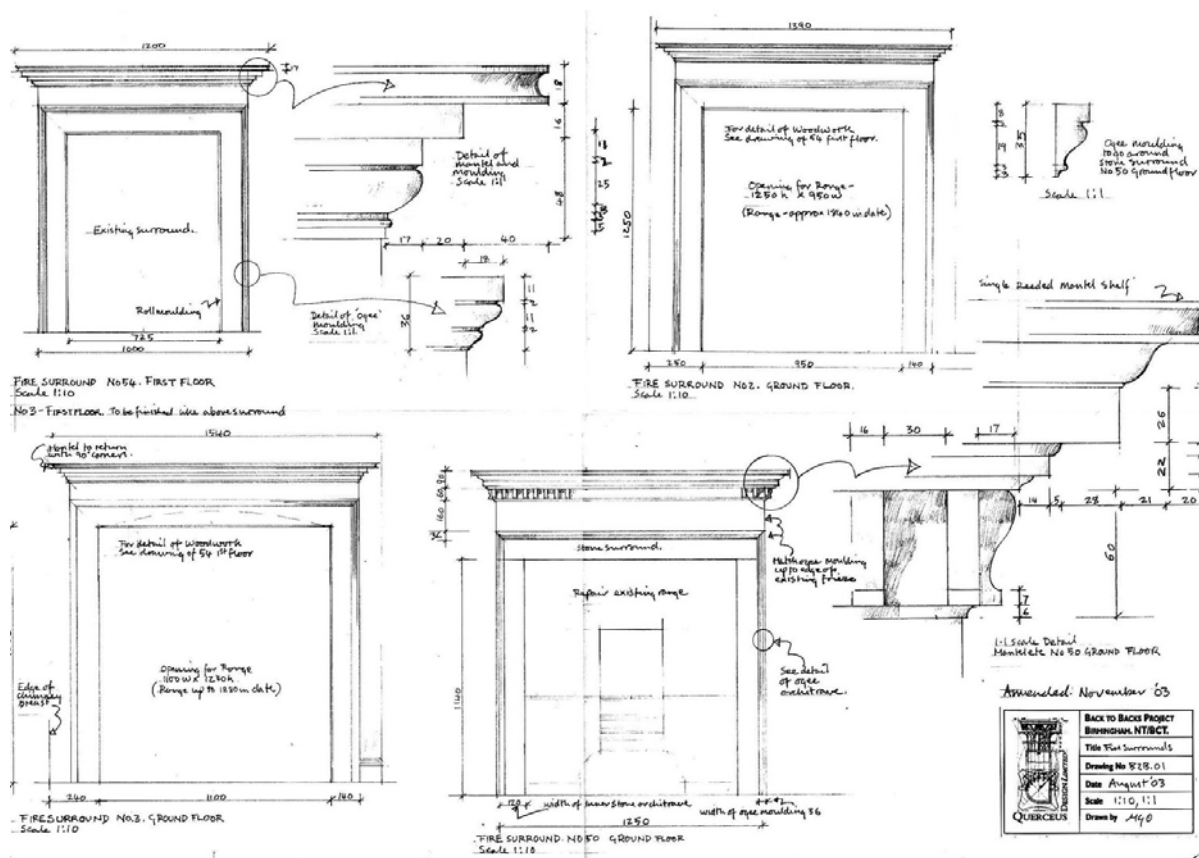
Figure 6: Fire surrounds for ground floors of houses 2, 3 and 50, and first floor of house 54. Design drawings by Michael Oakenfull reproduced with permission.

Interestingly the second floor of 50 Inge Street was left in its stripped back condition as part of the museum tour. This 'reflexive' moment reveals to the visitor the extent to which the re-creation they are experiencing in the rest of the museum is an interpretation.

Recovering ordinary lives

Kavanagh offers two alternative ideas of history, the struggle to *understand* ourselves and 'the ultimately impossible task of *recovering* the past' (Kavanagh, 1996: xiii). The former idea implies that perspective is all important in constructing a clear picture of who we are, individually and collectively. We co-opt the professional to provide context and perspective, but ultimately this struggle to make sense of things is about speaking to ourselves. The latter idea is different. The task of recovering ordinary lives is undertaken in the spirit of rehabilitating our ancestors, of restoring to them their ability to speak to us.

This is intensely hopeful but literally impossible. The living can reminisce; the dead, however, must speak through what they leave behind and through the memories of the living. The key problem is one of interpretation, of finding ways to communicate which collapse, as far as possible, the distance between present and past mind sets. The museum asks visitors to suppress something of their attachment to the present *zeitgeist* and to take an imaginative journey into a recovered past. Imagination, in this specific shared sense, sustains the Back to Backs museum process. It has an immediacy about it; visitors participate in the elaboration and re-inscription of knowledge. This is the

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journey that the museum guides themselves have taken in developing their individual approaches to interpretation.

In museological terms what connects the Back to Backs museum site with wider concerns is not initially apparent. However, once one considers the interests and methods of social historians, particularly in seeking a 'living history' the project comes alive. Alongside co-option of experts and reminiscence, the other processes engaged in shaping the museum narrative make sense of the site on a number of different levels, including ones that establish its wider significance. Scenography extends the narrative frame to embrace reception, orientation, tour and reflection. Dramaturgy invokes the lives of selected individuals and families. This is complemented by the display of contextualizing material, some of it very detailed—like the exhibit on bugs and rodents—and some dealing with the development of the northern industrial city, specifically Birmingham.

This clearly represents a more pragmatic and populist perspective than the academic mainstream view of social history as 'total history' (Davies, 1993: 3-4). The methods of folk life studies, which connect an everyday material culture with a rural way of life, are turned on the problem of studying industrial urban communities. To activate individual, communal and archival memory it deals with lived experience, family history, and the traces of ordinary lives to be found in parish registers and rates books. Along with the popular interest in genealogy and conservation activism, it is the kind of history that Samuel connected with the 1960s 'historicist turn in national life' (1994: 146-150).

At the Back to Backs museum site managers co-ordinate a team of interpreters who manage the flow of visitors through the museum and initiate a two-way flow of information. Visitors' stories are captured during tours and from their written feedback. Further information and ideas derive from events; the educational programme, for example, engages family as well as local school and college groups. Artefacts and spaces in the museum are used to bring every-day activities to life. Some of the more effective reminiscence work with the elderly involves handling objects. In this way the interpretation constantly evolves, becoming richer and more nuanced. This in turn informs continual improvement, reconfiguration and renewal of the museum environment. The space of the museum is designed to be possessed by the imagination. On every guided tour the process is *enacted* and every tour literally *takes place*.

Sites overlaid with narrative

Urban sites change. Buildings are demolished or converted to new uses. Interiors are remodelled and redecorated. Furnishings and everyday objects come and go with the people that own them; they are redistributed and overlaid with new meanings; they wear out and are replaced, discarded, and forgotten. This is an incredibly mobile 'material culture;' people pass everyday things on most often without ceremony and without the story of ownership and use. Consequently, once dissociated from a particular time and place, they are extraordinarily difficult to bring back together.

Narrative, however, can deal with the absence, semblance and remembrance of things as easily as their presence. One way of looking at the production of social history is as the accumulation and interpretation of all the smaller community, family and individual histories that can be told through studying

the archive and drawing on living memory. Public records, family history and reminiscence provide imperfect and incomplete evidence, but when they link places with people we have the makings of a living history. Although it '…rarely provides accurate dates or statistics' oral history plays a crucial role because '…it can provide evidence of lives that might otherwise go un-recorded' (Lloyd, 2001: 36). The recovery of lived experiences in the construction of social history is not a once-and-for-all process. Narrative is necessarily cumulative, a community achievement, in this context, an iterative process of configuring archival evidence, life story, and material culture, and making overall sense of them. Layering this narrative on a space gives it a sense of shape and direction.

Current thinking suggests that exhibition narrative is the platform for, or generator of, visitor experience and not its substance (Ames, 1992: 319). The scenography of the Back to Backs overlays a series of period snap shots on selected parts of the reconstructed site (fig. 2). The settings are specific, the physical detail rich, and the guided tour elaborately rehearsed and choreographed. There are sound effects, smells, tactile elements and a physical encounter with the cramped spaces. The tour is intensely interactive; imaginations are activated; people ask questions and volunteer stories of their own. In short, they become participants in the event.

Former residents wanted the atypical nature of this particular court to be explained to visitors (minutes: 4 May 2004). This underpins the interpretation and advisory groups' decision to focus on interesting individuals and families. Through its configuration the narrative overlay is specific to the site; it seems naturalized. Simultaneously it constructs a functional myth (Jackson & Carter, 1984)—enacted memory by its nature is elided, discontinuous and open to interpretation, yet it engenders understanding on a human level—an image of lives lived. The lives are represented but they are not representative.

Conclusions

At the beginning of 2010 the *Museums Journal* asked whether social history museums were 'giving power back to the people'. The tentative answer was yes; by focussing on ideas of community partnership and social inclusion, social history in museums leads to their democratization. It seems that most museum professionals may have now absorbed social history's values (Steel, 2010: 25). However, collecting and caring for collections are still regarded as central to social history museums even though they find these particularly problematic. At the Back to Backs Museum the contents of the 1970s tailor shop belong to the site, but virtually nothing else is 'original.' In museographical terms many of the everyday objects cannot even be authenticated (Pearce, 1992: 121). Their open display and availability for handling, so crucial to the interpretive process, also guarantees their ephemerality.

Perhaps Hooper-Greenhill's notion of the *post-museum* ought to be invoked. If 'the great collecting phase of museums is over,' their ideological foundations are under threat. What is left, that might lend coherence to the museum process, is a focus on interpretation and the intangible heritage (2000: 152-3). This does not mean simply re-inventing folk history, with its emphasis on preserving culture through re-enactment. Bringing the approach up to date offers the prospect of a dynamic, participative process. As existing information

migrates to the digital realm and new information is largely created there, global resources can be drawn on to address local interests.

The opportunity for people to interact with real things and with each other in the museum has to be orchestrated. Using space to shape the event of communication creates a special sense of place and embodies the museum process as a participative activity. Regarding sustainability, in an age of global information systems, distributed knowledge, social software, is it really necessary to remove so much material culture from circulation and turn it into a curatorial problem? Everyday things naturally become obsolete, are lost, and decay. This does not mean that they need disappear. Narrative is the key, the process of renewing knowledge through sublime recapitulation. The task is to conceive the museum in terms of an integral process, inscribed into its physical (or virtual) space, which radiates from that centre across the globe and is largely self-sustaining. This is a question of designing renewable narrative space. The museum that engages a community of interest—visitors and non-visitors—as (co)producers has the potential to adopt a radical form of organization and to invest its activities with a vitality and potential for change that may be lacking in a museum dominated by professional interests (Tchen, 1992: 313-8). The Back to Backs museum provides an example of how knowledge can be organized into a self-renewing system and thereby provides a glimpse into one possible museum future.

Note

1. El Lissitzky's 1926 concept for 'Raum für konstructive Kunst' quoted in Bertron, Schwarz, & Frey (2006).

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