
Article:
Dixon, C. orcid.org/0000-0002-5456-187X (2021) Out of many, one museum. Museums Journal.

Out of Many, One Museum: Place-making, Inclusion and a Sense of Home

Written by Dr Carol Ann Dixon

Introduction

When thinking about establishing a new African Diaspora Museum in the UK it is important to take a multi-way approach informed by reflections on the past, responsiveness to the current lived realities of the communities in focus and consideration of alternative future possibilities for creating a space that serves the needs and aspirations of a diverse, intergenerational spectrum of stakeholders.

Looking ahead, beyond established conventions, to conceptualise new imaginings of museal space is particularly necessary within the UK context, because of the imperialist foundations upon which collection-based cultural institutions in Western Europe are based. Although the 19th century was once characterised positively as a 'Golden Age' for museum-building in the West, it was also the period that witnessed the dissemination of Enlightenment thinking, racist ideologies, and the acquisition of colonially sourced object collections. The default practices for museums established in the Victorian era were to present the aesthetic, cultural and scientific achievements of African-descended people as (at best) marginal, and (at worst) 'Other' to the histories and creative outputs of white European elites, centred as an idealised norm. It remains unsurprising, therefore, that negative legacies of that troubled history continue to position and narrate blackness anywhere in Europe as otherness.

A new national museum centred on African Diaspora histories and cultural heritage offers an alternative topography and consultation framework for deciding on the location, architectural design features, collections, research objectives, future exhibitions and public engagement programmes. A selection of these ideas for transforming traditional approaches to museum development are outlined below. At each stage, collaborative co-production of knowledge with a network of national and international partners is advocated, along with the proposal to take a decolonial approach to pursuing education and participation strands of the museum's core work.

Disrupting the status quo

The significant lack of diversity within staffing and governance structures of the UK's publicly-funded museums, as well as similarly problematic audience demographics, has resulted in the histories, life stories and cultural outputs of Britons with African heritage seldom featuring prominently or centrally within the exhibition spaces of the highest-profile, national institutions. In contrast, a dedicated Museum of the African Diaspora in the UK would not find itself in the same position of restricting certain histories to a time-limited, calendar-based schedule of Black History Month events, or the occasional commemorative anniversary acknowledging the achievements of a notable person of colour, or Black collective. Given that the longevity of the African presence in the UK dates back to the Roman era, it is appropriate that a re-imagining of how we research, curate and present narratives about Britain's multicultural heritage is undertaken to disrupt the status quo.

Decolonial perspectives

Decolonial perspectives on collection development, narrative (re-)interpretation and exhibiting practice are paramount when considering this proposed museum's underlying principles. Historians, curators, artists, documentarians, and other knowledge producers drawn from the Global South, as well as people of colour engaged in these creative outputs from diaspora communities in the Global North represent an important community of experts whose perspectives on decolonising museums should inform the initial policy-making and strategic planning, with a particular emphasis on Africa-facing knowledge systems. For example, the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* – based on the relational premise "I am, because we are" – underpins the decolonial praxis of Botswanan indigenous education scholar Bagele Chilisa (2012), and the inclusive teaching and learning approaches she advocates could inform the future design of the museum's education strategy. Similarly, the Africa-facing artistic and curatorial pedagogies researched by the late Nigerian curator Olabisi ('Bisi') Silva (1962-2019), as detailed in the celebrated edited collection *Àsìkò* (2017), represents contemporary theoretical and practitioner-based expertise of considerable value to the development of an African Diaspora Museum.

Beyond publications, the more diverse the planning teams and consultation networks involved in creating new blueprints for the museum's development, the greater the likelihood of achieving a future space and service delivery outputs that are reflective of and responsive to the expectations and aspirations of African Diaspora communities, and wider national and international audiences interested in furthering knowledge and understanding about multicultural Britain.

A national hub, with regional satellites

A 'hub-and-spoke' network of institutions – comprising a national site, with formal connections to a number of designated satellites distributed throughout the regions and provinces of the UK – provides the optimal framework for creating an inclusive museum. Ideally, the new national site and its satellites would be located in areas of the UK with significant, long-established African Diaspora communities. Having a radial network of affiliated venues would also enable major exhibitions and holdings within the national collection to tour, and rotate around the regional nodes, allowing a broader distribution of localised populations to access the museum's exhibition and education programmes. Collaborations with leading charities and architecture firms committed to widening access to careers in architecture for under-represented groups – including (among others) the Stephen Lawrence Day Foundation and Adjaye Associates – could also be established to enable aspiring architects from African Diaspora communities in the UK to submit proposals to create a new building or renovate pre-existing structures as part of social and environmental regeneration initiatives in urban areas around the country.

Timelines and issues of chronology

Even today, mainstream museum services in the UK still tend to reference enslavement as the point of departure for discussing the early Black presence in the UK, then jump straight to the mid-20th century and the Windrush generation – as though nothing else existed or mattered before, in-between, or after these periods to encompass the depth and breadth African Diaspora histories connected to this nation. By presenting more thematic, internationally contextualised narratives that articulate the long-standing connections and interdependencies

that have linked the nations of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the wider world, the hitherto inaccurate chronologising of African Diaspora histories would be avoided.

International examples of good practice

The organisational structures and track-records of already-established, Black-led museums and heritage spaces, located within and beyond Europe, provide tried and tested development models for designing a new African Diaspora Museum in the UK. For example, the Berlin-based, not-for-profit arts studio and research centre, SAVVY Contemporary, founded by Cameroonian curator and writer Dr Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, successfully combines exhibition galleries, performance spaces, research resources and meeting rooms to support engagement in aesthetic and art-political dialogues about cultural exchange. African American artist and philanthropist Kehinde Wiley's Black Rock Studio in Senegal, and the Zoma Museum in Addis Ababa, founded by Ethiopian curator Meskerem Assegued and Addis-born fine artist and writer Elias Sime, also represent examples of recently established cultural spaces built in Africa to support emerging and established communities of artists, curators and other cultural producers from the continent and the Diaspora, whilst also providing research laboratories to encourage creatively experimental forms of knowledge production and new exhibition galleries open to visiting publics.

Conclusion

Establishing a new, inclusive museal space focused on African Diaspora histories and heritage in the UK requires the laying of conceptual foundations that acknowledge and work positively with the complex, fragmented histories and cultural hybridity of communities connected to the wider world, largely as a result of forced and voluntary flows of people, objects of cultural production and systems of knowledge spanning millennia. Consequently, the consultation and development processes that follow must also read 'against the grain' of established museum practices, to propose new approaches to acquisition, collection interpretation, curation and display.

Some of the suggestions outlined above open up opportunities to apply radically different, dynamic museographic practices centred on cross-cultural and decolonial dialogues. Ultimately, the planning teams, consultation facilitators and stakeholder communities involved in the museum's inception should be aiming to create a space of welcome and creative learning for everyone who crosses the threshold, but which simultaneously also serves for some as a place of recognition, acceptance, well-being and healing.

By respectfully honouring ancestral memories, encouraging poly-vocal conversations, and curating content that opens up the freedom for diasporans of colour to see and be ourselves – without limitations – a future African Diaspora Museum in the UK might one day also signify a sense of home.

References

Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies*. SAGE Publications.

Silva, B. (2017). *Àsìkò: On the future of artistic and curatorial pedagogies in Africa*. Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos.