

conference reoprt

# Musing about museums, tourism and the visitor experience

Ian Day is still absorbing all he learnt in Rotorua among international colleagues attending the Intercom 2008 conference. Here he picks out some personal highlights.

## PROGRAMMED FOR PROVOCATION

We came, we listened, we schmoozed, we departed. Over 150 delegates from 18 countries, with 50 papers delivered over three days – what a schedule! This outstanding conference was memorable for camaraderie, thought-provoking papers and the hospitality extended by Greg McManus and his team at the Rotorua Museum of Art and History. The conference theme, ‘Museums, Tourism, Visitor Experience’, is a primary concern to many of us in the museum, culture and heritage sectors. Each day addressed different areas of debate. On Day One we discussed ‘Museums and Tourism’, and on Day Two we looked at museums from the perspectives of the tourism industry and the tourist, with the visitor experience as the final day’s theme. There was lively debate throughout.

New Zealand speakers did us proud. Dame Cheryl Sotheran, Director of New Zealand Trade and Enterprise’s creative and tourism portfolios, opened the conference with her analysis of the current global economic crisis and its implications for our sector. Tough times generate alternative forms of currency and different priorities, so museums should find new opportunities rather than worry about threats. Freelance curator and writer Ian Wedde echoed this insight in a woodland glade while delegates breakfasted al fresco. He noted an overuse of the term ‘authenticity’, warning that this risks becoming a catchphrase without substance (his actual words were “coloured smoke”), whereas it could and should grow from a culture upwards. He conceives of the museum as a social space encouraging understanding, one in which imagination is re-engaged and which caters to niches, not masses.

## HISTORY’S LOW POINTS AS HIGHPOINTS

The highpoint for me was Day Two’s session entitled, ‘Dark and Dangerous Tourism’. Often poignant and occasionally humorous, presenters addressed tourism and human suffering. Camilo Sanchez from Bogota suggested that museums should be safe places for unsafe ideas. His deadpan delivery outlined how Columbia’s drug culture has affected the country’s



Figure 1: (L-R) Nguyen Thi Tuyet (Vietnam); Michael Gondwe (Malawi); Camilo Sanchez (Columbia); Keltie McManus; Greg McManus; Wycliffe Oloo Omondi (Kenya); Terry Nyambe (Zambia); Inga Karaia (Georgia). ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: GREG MCMANUS

emerging tourism industry. Marijuana costs only \$5 a kilogramme in Bogota, attracting young tourists, mainly from Israel, buying dope, getting stoned and wandering aimlessly through the city's museums. His humour belies a tougher reality. Colombia's problems with armed paramilitary groups mean that many countries issue travel advisories. This has constrained development of tourism infrastructure, particularly museums.

Kate Craddy, Director of the Galicia Jewish Museum in Krakow, discussed Jewish tourism in Poland, which is centred on the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. Her museum was established to remember Holocaust victims, celebrate Galicia's Jewish culture and history and challenge the misconceptions and stereotypes engendered by Auschwitz. Craddy argued for a new iconography, encouraging Jews and Poles alike to think about the past and their common future, valuing surviving remnants of pre-war Jewish life. Buildings that were once synagogues are now auto repair shops, while re-used dance and music halls and Jewish schools stand testament to a vital culture which did not end with the Holocaust.

David Fleming gave an account of the establishment of the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, England. This overtly political museum aims to tackle racism and its accompanying ignorance head on. Fleming described a place of controversy, of commitment and confrontation, arousing different emotions and reactions in each visitor. Irate and derogatory letters appeared in the local media when the museum was first mooted, yet since opening,

visitor numbers have been consistently high. The displays and exhibitions have triggered positive reactions from younger visitors, particularly among those from disadvantaged communities.

Paul Williams, then working for Ralph Appelbaum Associates, has examined atrocity museums in depth. His case study museum commemorated the victims and atrocities of Cambodia's 'killing fields'. Like Auschwitz, the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide is a former concentration camp, but it lacks the infrastructure of Auschwitz, operating at a very raw and primal level. Williams described rooms where human blood still stains the ceiling and tiers of human skulls that overseas tourists handle on a regular basis. Local children exploit tourists by charging for photographs while posing against a tree once used as an execution post for children. Perhaps his most telling example of Western tourists' interaction with the museum – it certainly caused a lot of discussion from the floor – concerned an American family (Mom, Dad, and the kids) who treated the museum and exhibits as though they were in a shopping mall. The children ran around and played amidst the relics of horror, so Mom pointed to a skull with bullet holes and, in a loud voice, threatened the children with a similar fate.

## HEALING POTENTIAL

The floor discussion that followed was impassioned, yet was put firmly into perspective when Michael Gondwe, delegate from Malawi, talked of growing up in an isolated African village and hearing people speak of Hiroshima. When he eventually visited the Hiroshima Peace Museum, the experience there deeply affected him. He had heard that Liverpool's International Slavery Museum had employed indigenous African curators when designing the Museum's displays, to ensure balanced narrative. Gondwe suggested that the museum send travelling exhibitions to Africa, where they might play an active role in helping to heal social and cultural wounds that exist in some African communities to this day. His heartfelt insistence that never again should such atrocities as slavery and Hiroshima be inflicted upon the world was palpably powerful.

**INTERCOM** is one of the International Committees of ICOM – the International Council for Museums – and its focus is museum management. Greg McManus of Rotorua Museum and Art Gallery is Chairman of ICOM New Zealand and a Board member of Intercom

## WELL WORTH THE JOURNEY

Even now I am still trying to absorb all that I heard and learnt at the conference. I am conscious that I have only glossed over a mere handful of the presentations that I attended. I have not tried to analyse issues raised at the conference in great depth, nor have I written of all the highlights. There was a stunning Maori performance, a video-conference with Ralph Appelbaum discussing the International Spy Museum in Washington and other pertinent papers that linger in the mind. Inga Karaia, from Georgia, gave a presentation of the treasures in Georgia's Museums - when asked for a museological perspective on the recent Russian invasion, her body language and silence spoke volumes.

A number of the overseas delegates were only able to attend INTERCOM'08 because of assistance from the Getty Foundation. Some of them required three or more travel visas to get to Rotorua and endured considerable hardship getting there. For others, like me, it was a mere two hour drive. The next INTERCOM conference is likely to be in either Mexico or Kenya. Would I attend another INTERCOM conference if circumstances permitted? Absolutely!

**Ian Day** is currently Director of the Waikato Coalfields Museum in Huntly. A graduate of the Museum and Heritage Studies Programme at Victoria University of Wellington, Ian segued into the museum world from an artistic career as a sculptor, painter, printmaker and art dealer.

## HELPING COLLEAGUES WITH VITAL WORK IN AFRICA.

Michael Gondwe explained to Intercom delegates how his museum in Malawi works at a subsistence level. It has no electricity, very little funding and few staff. His biggest concern is to stop people dying, so that his museum can have an audience. Malawi is rife with AIDS and HIV. Gondwe is aware that exhibition is a medium that can have a far-reaching effect in educating Malawians about disease and other issues which threaten lives and livelihoods, including female circumcision and the ritualised rape of pubescent girls, all done in the name of culture. He came to the conference hoping to meet people willing to undertake internships at his museum. He can offer no money, no airfares, just heartfelt gratitude and a warm welcome. Michael Gondwe is Education Co-ordinator at the Museums of Malawi, Chichiro, PO Box, Blantyre, Malawi 3. If you are interested, Michael can be contacted by email: [mikemiggondwe@yahoo.com](mailto:mikemiggondwe@yahoo.com)



Figure 2: Intercom delegates are welcomed onto the marae at Te Puia  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: GREG MCMANUS



Figure 3: Terry Nyambe (Zambia) and Michael Gondwe (Malawi).  
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