

Baltic Memories

Or, When A Tribute to Collective Memories Becomes Promotional Tool

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The first session of the ICME-ICOM conference in which this paper has been
integrated is themed:

Integrating Oral History in Exhibitions-From Concept to Implementation.

Whilst the title covers a wide range of issues, the special nature of the Baltic case
ushered a small but intrinsically substantial addition:

*Integrating Oral History in Exhibitions-From Concept to Implementation
From Implementation to...?'*

This question mark is a rather vague and 'rough' way for introducing the following
problematic, which is a fragile issue within the process of integrating Oral History in
exhibitions; it is the follow-up of such exhibitions, the future, the 'then what'? It is
exactly this ambiguously implied intricate balance between the immediate and
obvious effect of an exhibition and its long-term impact on audiences which urged
placing this question mark.

When talking about Oral History as comprising component of exhibitions, it could be argued that the element most overlooked is quite often people, the ‘soul’ breathing life into the objects and, therefore, the actual creators and owners of the displayed material (Duncan & Ley 1993).

And while exhibitions are implemented undoubtedly with the most sincere of intentions to acknowledge the value of human voices and testimonies, it takes little apparently to suffocate these voices under the load of organisational duties by museum professionals or under not so ‘innocent’ circumstances hiding micro-politics and agendas of various stakeholders.

The ‘Baltic Memories’ is exactly such a case in which the homonymous exhibition was organised as a tribute to the former workforce of the Baltic Mills in Newcastle upon Tyne, England. The two-day reunion event took place at the Shipley Art Gallery in Gateshead (the city opposite Newcastle on the other side of the River Tyne) in 1998, four years before the gallery opening. It was intended as a commitment for community involvement, transcending the old industrial reminiscences embodied by the Mills silo and moving forward to the future through the new function of the silo as a centre for contemporary art.

Within this context, main aim is to examine whether this event fulfilled its core and long-term mission, beyond the two-day celebrations and apparent good-will gestures, whether it has been sustainable in terms of embracing locals and amalgamating their voices and aspirations within the art venue’s practices.

To fully understand and evaluate planners’ motives within the process of the ‘Baltic Memories’ exhibition planning and build a coherent narrative, it is necessary to follow the steps below:

1. Examine the Baltic within its historical context and as symbol of the area’s wider regeneration.
2. Moreover, one should associate the ‘Baltic Memories’ event with the general promotional campaign set up for the new institution.

3. Finally, drawing on these factors will enhance the understanding of the building's social history manipulation and arguable exploitation to smoothly and 'painlessly' integrate the new function of the building in people's lives, dressed in such a politically correct and socially acceptable package of a cultural venue.

This assessment comprises part of a wider research regarding the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. Thus, evidence is backed up with a theoretical framework, Baltic-related documentation material, interviews with artists-in-residence and Baltic staff and thought-provoking comments by local residents interviewed for this purpose.

1. Baltic in Retrospect – Within a Regeneration Context

The Baltic Flour Mills were opened in 1950 as a dual purpose factory for flour production and animal feed. At one time Baltic employed 300 people and about 170 still worked there when a serious fire in 1976 caused sales to fall and finally the Mills' closure in 1982. The huge silo warehouse was the only building to remain standing on the south bank of the River Tyne.

The sight of the immense mills lying derelict by the Quayside was one of industrial decay, but also worked as a catalyst for redevelopment schemes and effective re-use of the space.

In 1994 competition was launched to breathe new life into the old riverside building as a centre for contemporary visual arts, a capital facility which was missing from the area. Conversion work began in 1998 and the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art was finally inaugurated in July 2002.

2. Baltic Reinvented – Promoting the New Venue

The new centre for contemporary art was intended from early stages of its development to become a 'whatever you want it to be' venue (B. Creative 2002: 5). Emphasis on the consumerist aspect of the arts centre, in which the stunning views to the River become highlight of the aesthetic experience- resulted in a very operational, functional and almost 'sterile' construction. Catchy definitions for the art venue and ample use of its distinctive typeface all mixed together within a well-elaborated promotional strategy, established the Baltic as 'a place to be seen'. People might go

there for a stroll, wander around and admire the views, eat at the trendy and sophisticated restaurants. Generally speaking, visiting the Baltic is not necessarily connected with visiting an arts venue, as people manifested in their interviews, with a significant 76% visiting the venue for the ‘whole package of amenities it offers’ and only a 16% feeling fulfilled by the exhibitions alone.

Planners’ aspirations to create a ‘chameleon’ venue were materialised by promoting the Baltic in an easily ‘digestible’ package. The very same process of Baltic’s marketing campaign has in fact determined to a great extent its own identity and role, dependent more as it seems to its architectural attributes and advantageous location, rather than its substance as an arts venue. A variety of mechanisms have been employed to establish the Baltic as a distinct and instantly identifiable landmark. It has been hailed as major cultural development complimenting the regenerative efforts of the Quayside; it has been further used for functional purposes, offering its plaza for events, treated as a backdrop for titles and TV news regardless of its relevance; all these point to Baltic’s perception as a stereotype of landscape, reinforced by the dominance of promoted images in people’s everyday lives (Goodey 1986). Baltic’s overexposure as a mere image explains why it is being treated and used by media and people as a context, as incidental rather than as an occasion.

The situation described as above might have clashed the initial intentions and aspirations of local stakeholders to create a place for the people, introducing them to new ideas and helping them to dwell on modern art practices, such as visual arts, installations etc. Rather, it is indicative of the powerful presence and influence of the institution’s first director, Sune Nordgren (according to Goard pers.comm 23rd May 2005). However, no signs or willingness of re-orientation of Baltic’s goals have been observed; besides, having at such an early stage this new original venue in the limelight of publicity would obviously attract audiences on a local level, but also nation- and worldwide.

3. The Social History Factor

Above all, and to nuance this business-like character of the Baltic, its planners have skilfully promoted it as a community symbol, embodying shared collective memories surrounding the area’s industrial past, so that people’s sense of identity is nurtured

and sustained. The inextricable link between the social history factor and people's sense of belonging and place-attachment has been mobilised to elicit public 'consent' for the new institution as part of their local identities. Baltic constitutes a mix of memory and interpretation, a connective link to locals' past, a 'narrative' ensuring that change does not overwhelm continuity. This process of place management had even greater gravity for the 'insiders', for locals who had worked at the Baltic in the past and therefore needed to see their collective memories valued.

Baltic's pre-opening campaign involved events such as 'Baltic Memories' as an effort to acknowledge the past and provide a platform for community active involvement in its programmes. During the two-day event former employees of the Baltic Flour Mills came forward to provide a history of the workforce and the building. Their living recollections were presented at the Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead, through objects, documents, recordings, period photographs and a specially commissioned documentary containing their interviews, all comprising a valuable archive for the Baltic.

The event was greatly advertised by local media, presented as a 'tribute' to Baltic Mills' workers and reassurance that collective memories would live on, according to newspaper articles: 'Project Aims to Ensure Memories of Baltic Flour Mills Will Live on' (Whetstone 1998), 'Tribute to the Baltic Mills Worker' (Fairley 1999). People contributed enthusiastically to the project with their testimonies; The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art respectively acknowledged their response. As Nordgren stated (Baltic, The Art Factory 2002):

As a completely new development, it is important for the Baltic to put its feet on the ground and start from the right social context. 'Baltic Memories' will act as an ongoing project, providing a strong local platform for future work. It is important to get feedback from people who worked there.

Watching the 'Baltic Memories' video has been an emotionally charged experience. Baltic Flour Mills was recalled almost unanimously as a happy place to work and despite the hard physical labour, the companionship and social life of the workers were still vividly remembered pleasures. People were proud of working there; an

employee in charge of quality control insisted on the high standards of the products and fervently pointed out that he had never heard any complaints.

The nostalgic music of the video accompanying the employees' sentimental recollections was not enough to hide the crude redundancy experience; employees involved with staffing found it hard to announce the Mills' closure to their colleagues: 'It was a bombshell when we were told that the factory would be closed and we would lose our jobs'.

Finally, an employee's remarks were the most touching and at the same time the sharpest, 'prophesising' the current situation of disregard and oblivion: 'The photograph of all the staff taken on the last day conveyed a spirit of conviviality, but then it was a matter of shaking hands and go'.

Within this context, the 'Baltic Memories' event 'really is a case of better late than never', one could read in newspaper articles at that time. But even this seems to have failed. A journalist who was present at the exhibition makes revealing comments (Anderson 1999):

The one issue the exhibition fails to tackle is public response to the transformation of the Mills into the high-profile Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. Although a slide display features some stunning shots of the building in its current state and anticipated glories to come, no commentary links this to weave memories seen round the rest of the room. It remains an open question whether the Baltic will ever inspire the kind of local affection that the Baltic Mills demonstrably managed to engender.

Goard, an artist-in-residence who took part in the pre-opening events stated that locals' memories were used as a 'lure' and attract local communities, that their involvement was only a 'gesture', not fully sincere and certainly not sufficient and substantial (2005, pers.comm. 23 May).

Baltic's archivist Malkin (2005, pers.comm. 5 May) as well as Watt (2005, pers.comm. 17 May), the officer in charge of public programmes pointed out that the 'Baltic Memories' event was only a way of documenting and acknowledging the past and using history to back up the marketing campaign, 'make people talk about it,

make a statement and move on', as the latter admitted. Even going back to the first director's statements is enough to realise the cynicism and irony surrounding this allegedly 'place for the people' (Baltic: The Art Factory 2002: 48-49):

Keeping the original features (i.e. of the building) would pose a problem, because you would have sentimental references to the old building. The inside of the Baltic is a rational building(...)

Today, local communities evidently sense this lack of essence and connection on the part of the Baltic:

Baltic has potential, but it is uninspiring, pretentious. It stands as an isolated piece of development (sic) and fails to attract audiences from local communities. More consultation should have gone into the planning, so that people felt it belonged to them. I continue to view it as little more than a wardrobe for the 'emperor's new clothes'.

The Baltic has not indeed substantially involved locals so far; no job opportunities have been provided, no community consultation about issues such as the predominance of the Baltic in the surrounding landscape and the subsequent physical changes, no inclusive programmes and exhibitions have been organised to engage and trigger locals' interest. People expected a more 'democratic' and less 'trendy' environment. They are disappointed and frustrated with the thoughtless and elitist use – better, under or mis-use – of the space, find the art housed in it too confined and irrelevant to their needs and finally feel alienated from a place rightfully their own, a place which should be realm of their communal socialising.

Discussion

All the above lead to the researcher's arguing that the setting up of the 'Baltic Memories' event was a masquerade, cleverly marketing the differentiated function of the old silo and encouraging residents to embrace it as part of their local identity. At a first glimpse one cannot but acknowledge the exhibition's intentions to place value on people's collective memories and embrace them as real stakeholders of the Baltic. These messages, however, have been so quickly and conveniently forgotten, sacrificed on the grounds of a falsely perceived modernisation, that one eventually doubts its intentions. People's oral histories have been evidently manipulated as promotional vehicle during a frenetic pre-opening period. The cultural elements of

placeness continuation, evolution, stability and familiarity have been eroded, as people themselves acknowledged in their interviews, since the emphasis has shifted from identity to superficial generation of images (Robinson 2001).

It becomes evident from the previous discussion that people are substantially connected to the local vernacular, seeing it as a symbolic point of reference to their social history past (Higgins 2005: 183-190). They seem to value everyday activities which associate with their distinct and unique sense of identity, rather than superficial and boastful nostalgic gestures. Heritage demands responsibility on the part of stakeholders in the understanding of issues of ownership, community empowerment and participation. It can be meaningful only when it adds value to people's lives and empowers their sense of belonging (Smyth 1994, DCMS 2002).

Conclusions

It would be unscientific and unfair, though, to be condemning and make rather unconsidered and hasty predictions for the Baltic's future. The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art is apparently undergoing a period of changes and reconsideration of its organisational culture under a new director. These changes will hopefully aim at more inclusive and substantial programmes and exhibitions, embracing locals' cultural needs.

Within such a context, this case has been treated only as a constructive paradigm of understanding processes of oral history manipulation. Main aim is to retain some amount of scepticism when it comes to implementing projects in which people are the issue in question. These require sensitivity and careful handling, so that a balance is maintained between the tangible outcome and individuals' interpretations and expectations.

It is not a mere matter of transforming people's narratives into objects for display. Exhibitions based on oral history are undoubtedly more demanding than any other kind of museum exhibition, in the sense that the subjective, the experienced of a unique individual should be incorporated within an organised, coherent context. However, for such exhibitions to be successful, it is even more important to infuse into people the feeling that they are not just being used and disregarded, but

meaningfully approached, consulted and involved. Inclusiveness is the key to sustainability. In this way, people will identify with cultural institutions' efforts and support future ventures; and this pride in their own heritage could be argued that is indeed an investment, the most effective and long-term promotional tool for cultural institutions.

Public Interviews (through questionnaires)

A sample size of 100 questionnaires has been an important element of the Baltic case methodology. Although it is by no means representative in an accurate way of populations' perceptions of the Baltic, there has been an effort to eliminate bias to a great extent by:

- completing the questionnaires during five days within the time-period 13th – 31st July, both on weekdays and on a weekend.
- including interviewees from a variety of ethnic and age backgrounds. 59 male and 41 female visitors have been interviewed and amongst them 48 were locals and 52 tourists.

Individual Interviews

D. Goard – Artist-in-residence, worked on the 'B4B' (i.e. Before Baltic) pre-opening programme together with other local artists. Interviewed on 23rd May 2005.

G. Malkin – Archivist, The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. Interviewed on 5th May 2005.

J. Watt – Education and Public Programmes Team, The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. Interviewed on 17th May 2005.

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