Contemporary Collecting Toolkit

Museum Development North West
and Jen Kavanagh

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Cover image: London in Video Games © Museum of London

It can be a major task for museums to collect contemporary histories to ensure our collections are up to date and relevant. For some, contemporary collecting is high on the agenda, but for others it's a new approach and one which may feel overwhelming at first. This toolkit is here to help.

Introduction

© National Football Museum

The Adoration of the Chip
© Ed Hall, photo courtesy of Gallery Oldham

This toolkit is an introduction to contemporary collecting for museum staff, volunteers and trustees who don't have direct experience of acquiring recent material and who want to understand the basics. It aims to provide advice and guidance on how to undertake contemporary collecting projects, outlining some of the practical considerations that need to be taken into account. It provides an overview and will hopefully inspire new collecting initiatives by providing tips and showcasing examples from other institutions. Big or small, contemporary collecting projects can be developed to meet your needs and match the resources you have available.

Commissioned by Museum Development North West (MDNW) through funding from Arts Council England, this toolkit was written by independent curator Jen Kavanagh in 2019. Contemporary collecting enables museums to improve inclusivity for, and tell more stories of, diverse audiences by adding material, oral histories and community stories to collections. New material can enhance collections and support the sector to open up debate around contemporary issues that affect people locally, regionally, nationally and globally.

The case studies included in this publication are to highlight how varied the approach to collecting can be and also how adopting an approach to contemporary collecting supports the aims of an organisation. We intend to update this toolkit 12 months from its publication date with new case studies from museums in the North West that took part in a MDNW pilot programme around contemporary collecting in 2018-19 called 'Re:Collections'. Contributing museums will include Port Sunlight Village Trust, National Football Museum and Gallery Oldham. Watch this space!

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the development of this toolkit, including those who participated in an online survey about what this toolkit should feature and what some of the issues are which need to be discussed. Thanks also to Foteini Aravani, Roz Currie and Bryan Sitch for their case studies.

"Museums should reflect all aspects of the society they represent, not just past achievements. Contemporary collecting acknowledges that society is dynamic, and its evolution is continuous."

Toolkit survey respondent, 2019

What is contemporary collecting?

Our collections are full of rich and invaluable historic objects, and we take great pride and care in looking after these treasures of the past for the benefit of our audiences now and of the future. But what about the history that is being made around us today?

Contemporary collecting is defined as the collecting of objects, stories and material culture that reflect the recent past and what is happening today. Many consider contemporary collecting to cover the past 50 years from the date collecting is being undertaken or within living memory.

Contemporary collecting means adding new content to collections to address gaps identified in existing collections, supported by a rationale of how new objects reflect our recent histories. A great benefit of contemporary collecting is that it can be undertaken in partnership with people and communities, and so can be creative and dynamic. Contemporary histories fall within living memory and therefore can be documented with insights from those who experienced these histories first-hand. Objects have stories and; in collecting the contexts, uses and meanings of new material we add to our collections in collaboration with those who hold this knowledge and information. It allows us to develop rich insights into the recent histories relevant to our museums and audiences.

"Contemporary collecting attempts to rectify past omissions, to give voice to those previously ignored, and to capture a fuller more nuanced record of society whilst material is abundantly available. It seeks to future-proof the museum for as-yet-unknown exhibitions and research."

Owain Rhys and Zelda Baveystock, 2014

Future-proofing our collections and therefore ensuring they remain relevant, representative and thorough is what makes contemporary collecting so important.

There are a number of ways, much like with other forms of collecting, that contemporary material can be acquired. Passive collecting, through offers of donations, is one way, but in order to guarantee a broad and authentic insight into contemporary society, active and collaborative forms of collecting are sometimes more effective.

It is difficult to know what to collect, however, when so much is happening all around us on a daily basis. Major events, such as the 2012 Olympics or Brexit, are somewhat obvious in their historic importance, making it easier to identify them as subjects for collecting that will be seen as important in years to come. The Museum of London, for example, has launched a programme called Curating London, the first project of which is called 'Brexit Talks'.

But what about the everyday experiences of the people and communities around us? How do we decide what to collect and what will be historically significant in the future?

Understanding the benefits of contemporary collecting and how it fits with your collections development policy is a good place to start. This allows museums to then actively seek out objects and stories that fill gaps and bring collections up to date.

Why should museums conduct contemporary collecting?

Our collections represent people, places and events from the past, and it's important that we continue to collect so that the stories of today are captured too. Contemporary collecting can offer many benefits to your museum or heritage organisation and so is worth investing the time and resource into keeping collections up to date and relevant.

Although it's sometimes hard to fully understand what these benefits might be in the long term when the material is so new, it's important that our collections reflect the people we serve and the places we represent.

When asked in an online survey for this toolkit why museums should be conducting contemporary collecting, peers from the sector all commented that projects of this nature enable our institutions to stay relevant and provide a lasting legacy for future generations.

The benefits of contemporary collecting include:

- Opportunity to expand your collection and bring it up to date
- Collecting objects and stories which connect and resonate with your audiences, making your collection more engaging and accessible
- Opening up new audiences and partnerships by inviting communities to collaborate
- Engaging with current issues and being a space for conversation and debate
- Broadening your skill set by delivering engagement projects, conducting oral histories and working with new types of objects and materials
- Celebrate and highlight links between the past and today

"Without contemporary collecting many stories will be lost to history, especially with the temporary nature of many objects now."

Toolkit survey respondent, 2019

"It is important that museums collect contemporary material in order to best reflect the communities they exist within, and to listen to diverse voices. The modern museum must aim to share diverse narratives and contemporary collecting is an effective way to do this."

Toolkit survey respondent, 2019

"Contemporary collecting enables museums to demonstrate that events from the past have an impact on the present and will continue to have an impact in the future, through the preservation of key objects from the present that we believe will be the artefacts of the future."

Toolkit survey respondent, 2019

How does contemporary collecting relate to collection policies?

Just like with any new acquisition, a contemporary object also needs to fit your organisation's collecting criteria within your collections development policy. When it comes to planning any contemporary collecting projects, have a read of your policy to help you understand how to tailor the aims of the project.

You might not have a specific section in your policy about contemporary collecting, but contemporary objects and stories should meet your collecting aims regardless. Should your organisation decide to embark on contemporary collecting, consider writing in a small section which clearly outlines what this collecting ambition would look like. This will help ensure you take a strategic approach to trialling this new way of working.

When considering any contemporary collecting, think about:

- What story does the object tell and what history does it represent?
- How does this fit with an existing theme in your collection?
- What is the object made from or what collecting area does it sit within?
- What are the conservation needs of the object and how will you store it?
- Who owns the copyright and will this affect how you can use it in the collection?

As you become more familiar with contemporary collecting, you may wish to consider adding your ambition to your organisation's collections development policy to help justify and encourage further collecting.

"The museum collects material from campaigns and demonstrations within living memory in order that the collection remains a living entity."

People's History Museum

"LTM is committed to its collection reflecting the diversity of contemporary London. LTM will collect perspectives, stories and objects from individuals and communities from all cultural and social backgrounds, and will also provide opportunities for people with protected characteristics to contribute meaningfully to the development of the collection. LTM actively engages in contemporary collecting in order to capture a snapshot of what is new, what is changing and what is happening now."

London Transport Museum

Tips for how to collect the contemporary

When it comes to collecting, sometimes it can be overwhelming to decide what to collect, how to collect it, and when to stop collecting. These tips aim to answer some of the questions you might have about contemporary collecting to help you get started.

Start small and see how a collecting initiative develops. Let your collaborators have a say in what is collected and how.

Contemporary collecting projects don't have to result in exhibitions or displays. Clearly communicate to anyone you collaborate with that you are collecting for the purpose of ensuring their histories are captured and not forgotten.

What do you realistically have the capacity to collect? Think about your storage capacity, conservation resource and budget at the beginning.

| **How do you determine what to collect?** Identify the gaps in your collection related to contemporary history by doing a top-level review of what your collections from the past 50 years or within living memory contain. Are there themes which are well represented from past collecting that could be continued and brought up to date? Are there obvious stories missing that could be documented? Write up lists of themes and ideas as a starting point.

| **Have other museums collected this material already?** There are sometimes overlaps in museum collections, especially if material was abundantly available around a major event or in a certain time period. Check if any of the stories or objects you might be interested in collecting haven't already been documented elsewhere to ensure that you put your resource into something that needs attention. Use museum networks and email lists to ask peers.

| **How do you know what is significant?** It's difficult to know what will be historically significant in the future. However, there will be events, trends, community initiatives and anniversaries that lend themselves to collecting projects. Is there a community that is under-represented in your current collection? Is there a significant company or industry that you don't have any information on? Has a major event taken place in recent years that needs to be better documented?

| **Who could you collaborate with?** People, communities and organisations are often the owners of and gatekeepers to diverse and important objects and stories. Once you have determined what history you are keen to capture, consider who will be able to assist you to do this collecting in an authentic, ethical and collaborative way. Ensure that the people you are engaging with help you to shape what you will collect.

| **What resource do you have to undertake the collecting?** Scale your collecting ambition around the resource and skills you have to hand. If oral history is being considered, remember to think about what kit you have access to and what training you've received. Is it worth applying for funding to turn the collecting idea into a fuller project or can you collect some objects and stories with the resource you have?

| **What are the aims of the collecting project?** Set some clear parameters of what you're looking to collect. For example, the Museum of London's Punk project, covered in one of the case studies, had clear place, time specific and thematic aims that allowed the project to be focused. Start with clear aims and a relatively narrow collecting ambition and see how it develops. You might just want to collect one object to start with, along with information on what this object represents.

| **What approach might you take?** Active and passive collecting approaches are both relevant so consider what you would need to do to get the material you want. Passive collecting enables you to respond to community ideas and desires around what should be collected, rather than the organisation's priorities, as they may have approached you with ideas or objects. Active collecting allows you to go out and specifically seek the material you want, or attend events to collect in situ.

| **What might the outcomes be?** A benefit of collecting in partnership with people or organisations is that there is creative flexibility in how you collect material. Acquiring objects and ephemera can be complemented and supported by photography, film and oral history. Consider what you have the capacity to collect, and to store long term, and think about how best you could collect a rich insight into the content. Contemporary collecting projects don't need to lead to exhibitions or displays. Ensure you clearly communicate the proposed outputs with anyone you collaborate with.

| **Where do you draw a line at the remit of collecting?** When a theme is broad or a history is vast and multi-faceted, the scale of collecting can feel never-ending. Give the project focus by thinking about what a fair representative sample of the history would be, and always ensure you know how your collecting fits within your collections development policy. Be sure the voices you're capturing are diverse to allow for multiple perspectives to be documented.

| **What is the legacy of the collecting?** When a project is completed, there may be an opportunity to continue community relationships so that your collection continues to be updated. If you have collected material in partnership with a trade union, for example, think about how to empower them to continue to submit relevant material to you so that further gaps aren't created. Creating clear remits and agreements can have mutual benefit to the museum and the community.

Basic step-by-step guide for acquiring an object

You have an idea for an object you would like to collect.

The object is a shirt made for Altrincham FC's campaign against homophobia in football.

How do you go about considering this as a contemporary collecting acquisition and what steps do you need to take to get it into your collection?

OBJECT

Step 1:

How does this fit with your collecting policy? Do you collect material related to football? Or LGBTQIA histories? Or campaigns and protests? Or stories and material specific to Altrincham? Find the aspect of your collecting strategy that the object relates to, helping to justify the acquisition.

Step 2:

How will you get the object? Would the club be willing to donate one? Or do you have budget to buy one? Would you like it to be new or used? Will this change the meaning of the object for your collection? Contact the club and start discussions to see what the options are.

Step 3:

Determine the ownership and copyright status of the object and make sure this is clearly documented. Complete the required paperwork as you would with any acquisition.

Step 4:

What are the storage and conservation implications? Speak to your colleagues to ensure you have the capacity to store or display the object as required. Will it need to be quarantined, frozen or cleaned before coming into your store?

Step 5:

Consider collecting supporting material that would help complement the object's story. Could you do an oral history interview with someone who was involved with the campaign to get the shirt made? Has there been any fan reaction that could be documented?

Step 6:

Write your acquisition proposal and present it to your board. Why are you collecting this object in particular? Consider the wider context of the relevance of the object and what it represents, and include any extra collecting from step 5 in the proposal too.

Step 7:

Collect the object and ensure all required information is fully documented in your collection database while there is the opportunity for context to be captured.

© Altrincham FC

BASIC STEP-BY-STEP - OBJECT

Basic step-by-step guide for a contemporary collecting project

PROJECT

BASIC STEP-BY-STEP - PROJECT

Step 1:

Identify gaps in your collection and develop ideas for collecting project themes. Consider how this fits with your collections development policy.

Step 2:

Consider who you could collaborate with to ensure collecting is authentic and representative of the story you want to capture. Whose story is it?

Step 3:

Write project aims, keeping the focus clear to help you clearly communicate to your colleagues and your collaborators what it is you want to achieve.

Step 4:

Identify the collection outputs in consultation with any collaborators. What will you collect, how will you collect it and what will you do with it?

Step 5:

Deliver your collecting project, reviewing the outputs as you go along in case changes in direction are needed to meet your project aims.

Step 6:

Acquire the material and keep good documentation so that copyright, ownership, contributor information etc. is clearly captured.

Step 7:

Consider the project's legacy and how collecting and community partnerships may be able to continue, if applicable and beneficial to all involved.

Challenges and considerations of undertaking contemporary collecting

- There are a number of things that need to be taken into account when you embark on a contemporary collecting initiative. These shouldn't put you off collecting, but it's important to keep them in mind before you begin

- How do you assess what will be historically important and culturally relevant in the future, now? Assessing the value for your wider collection without the benefit of hindsight is difficult. Is this object relevant to a moment now, or to a wider cultural trend that will be historically important?

- How do you decide where the focus of your collecting should lie? The abundance of material available is overwhelming so it's important to be selective and have focus. Do your best to make sound decisions on why you are collecting, not based on bias and assumptions

- How do you decide who to collect with and from? Establishing genuinely mutually beneficial and sustainable relationships with source communities and specialist networks takes time, resource and skills. Make sure you and your staff are ready to embark on this journey of engagement before you start

- What resource can you put towards contemporary collecting? Do you have a budget? It is difficult for museums to find the time and money to devote staff and other resources towards contemporary collecting so consider how this can be made a priority, or how external funding could support you

- How do you conserve contemporary materials, particularly when they have been made with the intention of being thrown away? Many objects are made of impermanent materials or plastics which can deteriorate at a very fast rate so conservation needs should be considered at the point of planning your collecting project

- Are you collecting born digital material i.e. content that was made digitally such as digital photographs, oral history recordings or film? Consider the storage implications of this, and what format you are collecting in, to make sure the material can be easily accessed and preserved. Seek some advice from peers who have experience of collecting digital material

- Who owns the copyright and intellectual property rights to what you are looking to collect? Make sure you document this clearly when you acquire the material so that future colleagues understand how they can use the material

"While we should be wary of making decisions future generations may come to regret, we inevitably will – just as we regret some of our predecessors' decisions today. We are the future generations of the past and decisions must always be made in the present. Deciding not to collect is as much a decision as deciding not to dispose, so deciding not to decide is not an option."

Profusion in Museums report, 2018

"We have a responsibility to tell current stories and engage with current issues."

Toolkit survey respondent, 2019

CASE STUDIES

Case study 1

Punks at Museum of London

Jen Kavanagh

The Museum of London was committed to collecting new objects and stories from people who experienced punk first-hand.

| In 2016, a city-wide programme called Punk. London was launched, with the aim of celebrating the 40th anniversary of the explosion of punk in the capital. Led by the Greater London Authority, the Museum of London were one of the cultural partners alongside the BFI, British Library, Roundhouse and others. The Museum of London was committed to collecting new objects and stories from people who experienced punk first-hand. A contemporary collecting project was launched, with the ambition of collecting content through direct collaboration with people across London. A focus was placed on oral history, ensuring the personal stories of the project participants was authentically captured.

SEE MORE:

Punks - part 1

Punks - part 2

Project aims

- To document the ‘everyday’ experience of people who encountered punk in London
- To focus on the period of 1976-1980 to have a clear narrative in terms of time
- To work in collaboration with members of the public, collecting personal objects with a particular focus on handmade/DIY items
- To build on the Museum’s fashion collection related to contemporary subcultures
- To document the stories associated with the objects through oral history interviews
- To collect 10 new objects and 10 new oral histories

Approach to collecting

The ambition to collect the ‘everyday’ experience of punks, rather than the well-documented, industry-led story, meant that research had to be conducted to best identify individuals who had both relevant memories to share and objects from their punk days. Initial searches revealed that reminiscing was already taking place on Facebook groups, so targeted outreach to these communities was conducted.

A ‘show and tell’ event was organised for a Saturday at the Museum, details of which were shared with the relevant online groups, along with the Museum’s existing network and contacts. People were invited to come to the Museum with their punk memorabilia and speak to staff about their punk experiences. No commitment was made by the Museum to collect anything on the day, but instead contact details of the owners and information about the objects were documented. Over 100 people attended, and from these 15 matched the criteria of the project’s aims and were willing to participate in the collecting programme. Three additional people later joined the project, as friends and contacts of the original 15 participants.

Handmade badges by David Smith
© Museum of London

Punks at Museum of London
Jen Kavanagh

Case study 1

Oral history interviews were arranged and conducted with all participants. Volunteers from Central Saint Martins arts and design college were trained in interview best practice and supported the oral history collecting. Experiences related to places in London were used as the inspiration for three short films, shot on location with some of the interviewees by Chocolate Films. Archive images were inserted to give a sense of place to venues or shops which no longer exist 40 years later.

Objects were shared and photographed, and then proposed to the Museum's Collections Committee. Once approved, the acquisition process took place and the objects were stored within their relevant collections. Items included clothing, scrapbooks, cassette tapes and pin badges, all with a personal story attached.

Project outcomes

- A total of 19 individuals participated in the project, contributing stories and objects
- 18 full-length oral history interviews were conducted and collected
- 28 new objects were added to the Museum's collection
- 3 films, exploring the venues and locations across the city related to the participants' experiences of punk, were produced and collected
- A temporary exhibition of the newly acquired material, along with loans from project participants, ran from October 2016 to January 2017
- A public programme of events, including a debate on the future of punk in London, was hosted by the Museum of London

Three benefits

- Public outreach resulted in more varied and interesting objects than anticipated
- Having a clear focus on the project's aims was important as it helped to justify both the proposed acquisitions but also to decline offers of objects that weren't relevant
- An exhibition was a positive addition to the project as it helped to add value to the experience of the participants and enabled the Museum to reach new audiences

Three lessons learned

- Managing relationships with 19 individuals was time-consuming but worth the effort and resource
- Some people were unwilling to donate to the Museum, but were happy to loan for the exhibition, limiting the variety of objects collected
- The Punk.London programme received some negative backlash from people who felt it was commercialising the punk scene so careful communication was therefore required

Handmade tape covers by Luke Blair
© Museum of London

Scrapbooks made by Zoe Neale
© Museum of London

Case study 2

Refugee lifejacket at Manchester Museum

Bryan Sitch

The Museum wished to collect a lifejacket as an evocative symbol of the mass movement of people to support its work on migration.

| Bryan Sitch, Curator of Archaeology, travelled to the Greek island of Lesvos in December 2016 to take receipt of a refugee's lifejacket for Manchester Museum's collection. This was just one of hundreds of thousands of lifejackets abandoned on the island's beaches during 2015-16 when the war in Syria was at its height. The Museum wished to collect a lifejacket as an evocative symbol of the mass movement of people to support its work on migration, one of the themes of its contemporary collecting project. A number of interviews were filmed to record the context of the acquisition.

Abandoned lifejackets in Lesvos, Greece
© Nikolas Georgiou

Official handover of the lifejacket
by Mr Marios Andriotis,
Senior Advisor to the Mayor of Mytilene

Project aims

- To revitalise contemporary collecting at Manchester Museum
- To take forward the Museum's work on the topic of migration as part of its thematic contemporary collecting project
- To enable the Museum to engage with refugee and diaspora communities in Manchester as part of its outreach work
- To film interviews with professionals and volunteers working with refugees who could help provide a context for the lifejacket that would help future curators to understand better the circumstances of collecting
- To contribute to the contemporary debate about migration to the UK

Approach to collecting

The rationale for collecting was discussed in a number of papers by former Director of Manchester Museum, Nick Merriman. In a review of disposals by UK museums, Merriman was surprised by how little was being collected and how much of what was being collected tended to be acquired passively rather than intentionally and in fulfilment of a forward-looking acquisitions plan.

In order to revitalise collecting at Manchester Museum the themes of water and migration were selected, both being very topical and of interest to visitors. They also supported the Museum's mission 'to build better understanding between cultures and to work towards a sustainable world'. Migration was an important factor during the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union debate about Brexit, the election of Donald Trump in the United States, as well as more recent elections in Europe. The Museum felt it was important to collect an object that would symbolise these debates and enable the institution to stimulate discussion with its own visitors.

Refugee lifejacket at Manchester Museum

Bryan Sitch

Case study 2

Contact was made with the Lesvos authorities to seek permission to collect a lifejacket and to film interviews with staff. Bryan Sitch spent several days on the island and acquired a lifejacket, filmed interviews and visited several camps for refugees. He purchased some bags that were made in a workshop in Mytilene using recycled materials from the lifejackets. Refugees worked in the workshop and the proceeds were used to help other refugees.

A range of people were interviewed on camera to record the circumstances of collecting, including the Mayor of Mytilene's Senior Advisor, the manageress of the Mosaik workshop where lifejackets were made into bags, a volunteer for the Mytilene branch of the Hellenic Red Cross, two volunteers at the Pikpa camp for vulnerable refugees, and a lecturer at the University of the Aegean.

Project outcomes

- Acquisition of a refugee's lifejacket representing the mass movement of people through the eastern Mediterranean into Europe in 2015-16
- Filmed interviews with representatives of agencies that work with refugees in order to capture a record of the circumstances of collecting
- Display of the lifejacket, bags made from recycled materials and excerpts from interviews in the entrance to Manchester Museum to encourage public debate about this issue
- Invitation to speak about the project at conferences and seminars and inclusion of the lifejacket as a case study in Sir David Cannadine's 'Why Collect?' report in 2018
- The project contributed to the growing appreciation of the Museum as a caring institution, which explores contemporary social and cultural issues

Three benefits

- It highlighted the continuing relevance of the Museum in exploring and capturing contemporary issues. The project raised the important topic of migration with visitors and showed that the work of the Museum is very relevant to the present even if the bulk of the collections were collected in the past
- It put the Museum 'on the map' in terms of doing interesting work in this area and helped the Museum to develop contacts with other organisations working on migration
- It helped to stimulate confidence, imagination and ambition in international working and contemporary collecting and showed what could be achieved with relatively modest resources

Three lessons learned

- There was an entirely understandable apprehension that this could have been harrowing for those involved in collecting. Had the visit been made to the island at the height of the humanitarian crisis it might well have been upsetting so thought was given to how best support those working in potentially traumatic locations and circumstances
- The Museum refrained from filming interviews with refugees themselves and only filmed volunteers and people who worked for agencies actively helping the refugees. The one interview they did film was with a refugee now settled in Manchester who wanted to tell his story about the crossing to Lesvos. The Museum believes this was the right and ethical thing to do
- The Museum would have liked to visit Lesvos earlier in the year but initially the authorities did not respond to formal approaches in writing. It was only when they made the approach through a contact on the island who was in touch with the secretary in the Mayor's office that they got a reply – and that in minutes. It shows that making use of networks and personal contacts can open doors that might otherwise have remained closed

Case study 3

Echoes of Holloway Prison at Islington Museum

Roz Currie

Many well-known prisoners have passed through the prison, but there are diverse voices which remain unknown and unrecorded.

Holloway Prison has been an important landmark in Islington for over 100 years. Until its closure in the summer of 2016 it was the largest women's prison in Britain. Many well-known prisoners have passed through the prison, but there are diverse voices which remain unknown and unrecorded. The project, run by Islington Museum, in collaboration with Holloway Prison Stories and Middlesex University, sought to capture stories of this highly significant place meaning that, even when it has gone, the voices and echoes of Holloway Prison will remain.

Project aims

- To collect the story of Holloway Prison, following its closure, through objects, oral histories and creative outputs
- To engage with multiple groups including ex-prisoners, prison officers, 'civilian' workers, charities, and local people to capture the story of the prison
- To interpret the history and promote learning about Holloway Prison through an exhibition, film, events programme, artist commission, online outputs and learning resource
- To build an active community of engaged volunteers to collaborate on the project
- To develop public understanding of women in prison and to challenge people's attitudes through human stories

Launch of the Echoes of Holloway Prison exhibition © Islington Museum

Echoes of Holloway Prison at Islington Museum

Roz Currie

Case study 3

Approach to collecting

This project was intended to find ‘hidden’ stories and uncovering these was a key part of the approach to collecting. Individuals with specific knowledge relating to the prison or lived experience of Holloway were crucial to directing the project and ensuring the process of collecting fully reflected the diversity and complexity of the place and people.

An aerial view of Holloway Prison in the 1980s © Islington Museum

New Acquisition: Prison Officer’s Belt © Islington Museum

Collecting followed several different threads:

- Accessing the prison to allow the collection of ephemera and photographs of the empty space. This involved negotiating access and then touring the prison with various former workers including prison officers, a governor and education staff
- Developing a network of contacts through local press and radio, a series of talks around the borough and connecting with different groups on the ground
- Many staff and former prisoners were shellshocked at the closure and had not had a space to express their feelings. The project represented a space distinct from prison politics, prison activists or the Ministry of Justice allowing us to connect with a wide range of different groups with multiple agendas
- This network allowed the collection of oral histories, photographs and objects directly from individuals
- As relationships developed through the oral histories and exhibition, more people could be added to the potential oral history interviewees. The slow process of building links, attending events, meeting people and embedding the project within these different worlds was crucial to ensuring the project was representative
- Serendipitous meetings were also crucial to the project. So many people had links to the prison; keeping an open mind as to where new stories could be uncovered was vital
- The oral histories illuminated mundane objects found in the prison. Without the additional knowledge of oral histories and conversations with many people connected to the prison, the relevance of everyday objects such as prison-issued toothpaste would have been lost
- Collecting objects at the closed prison with institutional permission to collect meant the objects were dislocated from their owners. For this reason, some objects were rejected as too personal without that person’s permission to acquire it and other objects were collected but left shorn of context that the rest of the project sought to add back

Echoes of Holloway Prison at Islington Museum

Roz Currie

Case study 3

Project outcomes

- Engaged over 5,000 members of the public and worked with 64 volunteers across the project including ex-prisoners, people who had worked at the prison, local people and the wider public
- 24 full-length oral history interviews were conducted and collected (with plans for another five to 10 to be added)
- Two films exploring the history of Holloway Prison, the impact of the closure and people's day-to-day experience of the prison were produced and collected
- A resident artist produced six songs related to the oral history, and a booklet of poetry, which were also collected
- A temporary exhibition of new objects, archival collections and loans ran from July to October 2018
- A public programme of events including talks, seminars, workshops and a concert ran across the borough during the whole project allowing multiple points of engagement
- A pop-up exhibition, booklet, website-based interpretation including audio and learning pack all provide a longer legacy of the project

Filming on the Echoes of Holloway Prison project © Islington Museum

Temporary exhibition © Islington Museum

Three benefits

- This project has captured a unique set of stories relating to Holloway Prison that otherwise would have been lost as staff, prisoners and people connected to the prison were dispersed following the closure
- Developing relationships with new people and allowing unheard voices to be at the forefront of the project development has led to a deeply engaged group of participants and a meaningful project
- A team of hugely engaged, dynamic and interested volunteers was crucial, bringing in a diverse range of perspectives and experiences to co-curate the exhibition and enrich participation throughout the project

Three lessons learned

- Empathy was important when accessing the difficult stories of Holloway Prison. Project activities prompted exploration of the lived experience of the prison, via collaborative oral histories, flashes of insight relating to photographs of the prison, and in-depth conversations with women held as prisoners
- Sharing stories is hugely personal and powerful and informed the project but it has to be given enough time to create a calm non-judgmental space for the participants to build trust. Oral histories on difficult subjects require protection for both interviewee and interviewer. Ensuring a staff member was present at all volunteer-led interviews and giving sufficient time for preparation and debriefing was vital to fulfilling duty of care to all involved
- Undertaking a contemporary collecting project with vulnerable groups and individuals is hugely rewarding and meaningful but also very demanding of resources. Within a small team of a busy service it was difficult to balance the needs of the project and core work. Ensuring that team members are not overworked or exploited in undertaking the very necessary steps to building relationships was a real challenge

Case study 4

Video games at Museum of London

Foteini Aravani

Video games represent a vast, diverse and rapidly evolving new genre that is crucial to the understanding of the London story.

In 2015, the Museum of London decided to create a new collecting area within the Museum's digital collections by acquiring video games. The project aimed to explore the role of Londoners in the video gaming world historically as well as the social impact they had, the current state of the video games industry in London, and the changing appetite amongst other museums and art galleries to collect video games. The Museum wanted to explore the documentation of the capital through video games that mostly sprung from the indie scene, without ignoring the corporate world, but shifting the balance to more alternative games and gamers that inspired the generations following them. Video games represent a vast, diverse and rapidly evolving new genre that is crucial to the understanding of the London story.

Project aims

- To collect video games that have historical value and social impact
- To collect games that are about London or developed by Londoners, and to capture the evolution of how London is represented in video games
- To ensure that non-commercial video games, mostly from the UK independent movement, are documented
- To collect games that didn't clash with other collections, for example not collecting online games as this is covered by the UK Web Archive

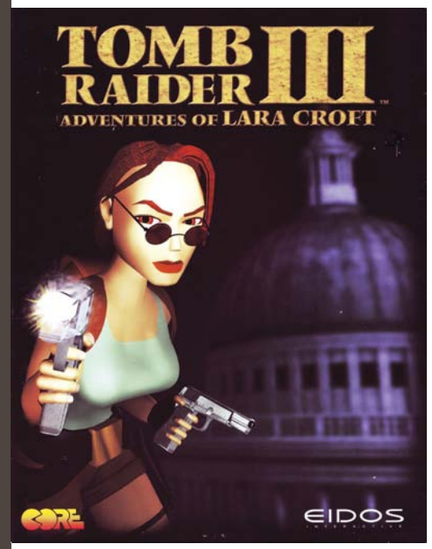
Approach to collecting

The Museum of London is currently engaged in a new, experimental collecting project which encompasses all digital media including film/video, sound, social media and the web. They have been developing new digital collecting activities and identifying opportunities for acquiring digital material to enhance and enrich the Museum's collections. Building upon the Museum's digital collections, they decided to start collecting video games as an alternative way to tell the story of London.

The Museum acquired 22 video games that represent or misrepresent the capital in their narrative or were developed by Londoners. This is a new collection that spans from 1982 to 2000 and highlights the depiction of the city as a place and as a concept as well as the contribution of Londoners' in the development of video games. The Museum of London's recent acquisitions explore and articulate the unique boundaries of video games as an art form and as an alternative path in the city's social history that documents the fluidity and the evolution of London as an ever-changing city in a very interactive and engaging way.

The inclusion of video games furthers the mission of the Museum around a new digital collecting area and ensures the ongoing preservation, social history study

Tomb Raider III:
Adventures of Lara Croft, 1998
© Eidos Interactive



Video games at Museum of London

Foteini Aravani

Case study 4

and interpretation of video games as part of the overall collection. By bringing these games into a public collection, the Museum has the opportunity to investigate the material science of video game components, the copyright and intellectual property challenges and develop best practices for the digital preservation of the source code for the games themselves.

Should video games live in museums? The Museum of London believes they should. Video games are all about interaction and a design approach was chosen for this new foray into this universe. The games were selected as examples of social history. The Museum's criteria, therefore, emphasise not only the visual quality and aesthetic experience of each game, but also the many other aspects—from the representations of the city in the games to the high social impact and how that changed the behaviour of the masses.

In order to develop a stronger curatorial stance, the Museum sought the advice of scholars, digital conservation and legal experts, historians, and critics, all of whom helped refine not only the criteria and the wish list, but also the issues of acquisition, display, and conservation of digital artefacts that are made even more complex by the games' interactive nature. The acquisitions will allow the Museum of London to study, preserve, and exhibit video games as part of its social history collections. Understanding social history through objects of design, art and architecture, and with this new collection, they are bringing that social commitment to bear on the contemporary world.

London in Video Games display
© Museum of London

Playing video games
© Museum of London

Project outcomes

- 22 video games were acquired
- One oral history interview was held with Ian Livingstone, contributor to the Lara Croft series
- The video games were digitised and also emulated to make them playable
- A display was produced called 'London in Video Games' at the Museum of London
- A series of 12 talks were delivered called 'City|Space|Videogames' around video games and different disciplines

Three benefits

- New audiences were attracted to the Museum of London through the new display and numerous talks on video games
- It offered the Museum chance to develop more experience and knowledge in an area they hadn't touched before
- The Museum created a unique collection of 22 playable video games

Three challenges

- Copyright issues are complicated around video games
- Digital preservation turned out to be as important as the collecting itself
- Authentic display of old video games is expensive and it is something to be considered from the beginning of the collecting

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MDNW is part of the Museum Development Network (MDN), a voluntary network of Museum Development providers that exist to support the development of a stronger and more resilient museum sector across the UK. MDN believes in creating a thriving museum sector – raising standards, driving excellence, enabling and supporting people working in museums.

www.museumdevelopmentnetwork.org

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Museum Development NORTH WEST

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