

Seeking Utopia: An Odyssey into Museum Worlds Past, Present and Future

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I've watched C-beams glitter in the darkness at the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain.
Roy Batty, *Blade Runner*, dir. Ridley Scott, 1982

Like Thomas More's imaginary island of 1516, the word 'Utopia' may conjure for us a radiant vision of future society, of peace and harmony, technological progress, and economic prosperity. From the Greek *eu*, 'good', and *topos*, 'place', Utopia also conveys a sense of optimism, dreaming and imagination without limits; in short, a brave new world in which anything is possible. However, Utopia has another, darker side, and is more commonly translated as 'no-place'. From here emerges not only the impossibility, but the failure of Utopia: the *dystopia*, or the Utopia of the few at the expense of the many, and the abandoned, ruined or forgotten Utopia. All this must lead us to ask: what is Utopia, and to whom does it belong? And what is to become of the ruins of Utopia?

Museum Utopias: Navigating the Imaginary, Ideal and Possible Museum was an attempt to harness the concept of Utopia as a central theme and lens with which to navigate some of the most pressing questions and issues in museums today. Organised by the PhD community at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, this postgraduate conference was hosted by the School on 27 - 28 March 2012, and was funded by a generous sponsorship package from Hanwell Instruments Ltd (part of the IMC Group Ltd), and by the Researcher Development Fund at the Graduate School, University of Leicester. We are extremely grateful to both for making our idea a reality.

The contemporary museum is a construct whose ideals have changed greatly over its long history, and which has often attempted to embrace Utopian ambitions in its conception, planning and purpose. However, the conceptual landscape of the museum is ever-changing, and in this age of austerity we face the challenge of how to deliver more with less, and the tensions this creates between ideal and reality. Utopia compels us to reimagine, and at times remodel, the nature and purpose of the museum, and it therefore provides an appropriate critical lens with which to explore the latest developments within the sector, in theory as well as in practice. Through the forum of this interdisciplinary and international conference, we sought to chart the key topographical features of this strange new terrain; a landscape which makes it possible to engage

deeply with the idea of the museum – with what museums are, what they have been, and what they have the potential to become.

Building on the success of previous symposia, including 2011's *Curiouser and Curiouser: Challenging Conventions and Celebrating the Unusual*, our goal was to create a conference with a topical, innovative theme which would be broad enough to attract a wide range of participants, but strong enough to help facilitate a sustained and coherent discussion. Our vision was to provide an open, supportive and democratic environment in which postgraduate students and scholars from various disciplines as well as museum professionals could come together to share their research, knowledge and expertise from a variety of perspectives.

Our Call for Papers was extremely well-received and attracted a diverse array of abstracts on a great variety of themes; some familiar, and others entirely unexpected. What emerged from the two days of the conference was a fascinating dialogue between a group of emerging and established scholars, academics and professionals which transported us from a lost museum of Rhineland history conceived in 1920s Cologne to communicating the Ice Age to child visitors in present-day Croatia, to challenging and developing our preconceptions of the ultimate nature and purpose of the future museum in a group-led workshop. Papers approached subjects as diverse as architecture, mental health, digital media, art, linguistics, urban regeneration, audience participation, human rights, religion, literature and the human imagination.

While unfortunately our external keynote speaker, Dr. Bernadette Lynch, was unable to attend on Day 2 due to ill health, we were indebted to Dr. Janet Marstine, Academic Director and Programme Director for Art Museum and Gallery Studies at the School of Museum Studies, for kindly stepping into the breach at the last minute and sharing some of her ongoing and extremely relevant research into museums and the concept of transparency.

Organising and participating in this conference taught us a number of valuable lessons. Foremost of these is that in the end, the Utopian museum (or conference!) is not about achieving perfection, but about challenging the status quo and refusing to accept that things cannot be better, or different. Utopia is a journey, not a final destination. I hope that you will enjoy the fruits of our shared odyssey into museal realms both known and unknown.

Stephanie Bowry

PhD Student and Principal Organiser of *Museum Utopias*

On behalf of the 2012 Conference Team