Invisible Museums and Multiple Utopias

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Abstract

In Calvino's novel Invisible Cities, the traveller Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan tales of the various cities of his empire, which the Khan himself will never visit. In this paper we draw a model from Calvino's novel to explore those aspects of museum experience that are almost invisible to museum professionals. Drawing on empirical research, we argue that, as experienced by visitors, any one museum is not single but a multiplicity of deeply personal, and largely invisible, utopian spaces. At the end of Invisible Cities, Polo talks of the 'infernal city', the antithesis of utopia. Escaping this city is a matter of giving space to things that are not of the inferno, to invisible utopias, that they might endure. We argue that the museum is a place where these invisible utopias may be given space; and that the challenge for museum professionals is to guard these invisible museums that they—like the Khan—will never see.

Keywords: visitor experience, Calvino, museum governance

Introduction

This paper grew out of a conviction that museums are, for many of those who visit them, the authors of this present paper included, *already* utopian spaces; and yet attempts to articulate the precise nature of these utopian spaces can often founder, because they somehow miss what it is about these spaces that make them truly utopian. The notion of a utopian space is one that already contains a contradiction or even a paradox: the contradiction between u-topia as 'no place' and eu-topia as 'happy place'. It is our contention here that museum eu-topias, what one might call the 'happy places' of museum visitors, are often to a large extent also u-topias, 'no places', in that the individual pleasures and delights of museum visitors are often fleeting, personal, multiple, invisible and exceedingly difficult to track or to pin down.

Of the authors of this paper, one of us is a novelist and philosopher, the other a museum professional and researcher. Between us, we want to make what may perhaps be a rather strange and unruly proposal: to suggest that one way of glimpsing this multiplicity of fleeting, quicksilver, intimate and often very private utopias may be by drawing upon a conceptual framework that comes not from the world of sociological or museological research, but instead from a work of fiction. So in what follows, we are going to put to work the novel *Invisible Cities,* by the Italian writer Italo Calvino, as a means of helping us think differently about the museum as a utopian space; and we are going to see how this, in conjunction with empirical research, may point towards, even if it cannot fully describe or capture, the utopian

quality of museums. Finally, in the light of this, towards the end of the paper we intend to make some broader recommendations about museum governance and the importance of maintaining the museum as a utopian space.

This blend of empirical research, storytelling, philosophy and policy recommendations may, at the outset, seem like a curious kind of hybrid. And yet *Invisible Cities*, the novel we are using to help frame our questions, could itself be seen as a book about research methodologies. It is a book that suggests that, when it comes to advice for those involved in governance, sometimes more unorthodox methods of argumentation and exploration are necessary.

Utopian Museums

Museums *matter*. They matter to us, the authors of this paper; and it seems clear that they also matter to others. Yet when it comes to articulating the precise quality of this mattering, things become a little more difficult. Of course, museums engage in visitor research. Armies of friendly people with clipboards roam around asking if visitors have five minutes to spare to answer some questions. People fill in evaluations and comment cards, or join focus-groups. Museums, which were—the story goes—once bastions of aloofness, have now become shared, participatory spaces, places of community, arenas where it is possible for our voices to be heard. Nevertheless, it can sometimes seem that this mass of evaluation, this frenzied participation, fails to get to the heart of the mattering of museums. And one reason for this, perhaps, is that there are many things about museums and our relationship with these places that are too private—too intimate, too quirky, too personal, too strange and too quiet—to ever enter into these kinds of participatory arenas, or to register on any questionnaires. So what we want to try to do here is get a glimpse of those things that we *don't* say about our experiences of museums, perhaps even those things that we don't know how to say—even though these very things may, at the same time, make up a large part of the museum's mattering to us.

If, as we are suggesting, for many visitors museums are already utopian spaces, it is perhaps precisely in the sense of this paradoxical notion of utopia as that happy place which cannot be found on any known map, or for that matter on any known questionnaire. The utopian museum experiences that we are interested in exploring here are frequently deeply private, intimate, often fleeting, and inherently difficult to articulate within a broader narrative. In other words, if we were to say that being in a particular museum at a particular time mattered deeply to us, the precise quality of this mattering, the many intimacies out of which this mattering was built, might not be something we could fully describe or explain.

We could have a stab at it if pressed, no doubt; but much of this mattering would remain forever invisible, hidden beneath the surface.

Invisible Museums

In Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (Calvino, 1974), the ruler of all China, Kublai Khan, presses the Venetian traveller Marco Polo to tell him about the cities of his empire, cities the Khan himself may never visit. The Khan, like all rulers (that is to say, like politicians, like museum directors, like managers of all kinds), is in the paradoxical situation of having jurisdiction over something that he can never know in its entirety. He has many people at his disposal: advisors, census-takers, armies of assistants with clip-boards, spies, officials, clerks. He has endless quantities of data, population statistics, news of famine and abundance. All these things are no doubt vital for a politician or an Emperor, or even a museum director. They are not trivial. He could not do without them. But the question that Calvino asks in his novel, with considerable acuity, is this: does this mass of data, taken together, really add up to knowledge of the empire? Is there not something that is missing from this data, something that is always going to be missing precisely because it is, by its very nature, invisible? As the Khan finds himself wondering, whilst talking to the traveller Polo, was there not perhaps, for every event or piece of news, a 'space that remained around it, a void not filled with words' (Calvino 1974: 38)?

It is precisely for this reason that he employs the Venetian, the unreliable storyteller who spins tales about cities that are strange, impractical or impossible, cities with improbable names, cities in which the Khan does not fully believe, even though he listens to the traveller 'with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his' (Ibid.: 5).

Calvino's book, in other words, is about epistemology. It is about how we can know an empire or, for that matter, how we can know anything at all: a country, a city, a university, a museum. What constitutes adequate knowledge of these places?

There are, in fact, two kinds of knowing at play in the novel: the knowledge the Khan possesses, and the knowledge possessed by Marco Polo. For his part, the Khan thinks in terms of norms and principles. 'I have constructed in my mind,' he says, 'a model city from which all possible cities can be deduced… It contains everything corresponding to the norm. Since the cities that exist diverge in varying degree from the norm, I need only foresee the exceptions to the norm and calculate the most probable combinations' (Op. Cit.: 69). Marco, however, has a very different approach to knowing, as he then goes on to explain to the Khan.

> I have also thought of a model city from which I deduce all the others… It is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions. So I only have to subtract exceptions from my model, and in whatever direction I proceed, I will arrive at one of the cities which, always as an exception, exist (Op. Cit.: 69).

This pataphysical ‘city of exceptions’ is not, unlike the cities imagined by the Khan, a city that is constructed ‘top-down’, by conjuring an ideal city, and then tweaking this ideal until it fits with a real existent city; it is instead a city that is built up of a mass of particular and unique experiences.

Having set out this idea of knowledge as an accumulation of exceptions, and knowledge as a system of principles, Calvino’s book navigates repeatedly between the two. As the book proceeds, what the Khan eventually has the wisdom to recognise is this: that the knowledge proper to running his empire lies *neither* in principles *nor* in exceptions, but instead in the ability to move between one and the other.

What we want to suggest here is that, to help guard the many often invisible but nonetheless utopian spaces of the museum, at least one role museum researchers can play is that of Marco Polo to the Kublai Khans of instrumental policy. Every museum is an institution, a set of procedures and structures, a physical thing in the world; but it is also the site of innumerable invisible museums, countless secret pathways and many hidden personal utopias. Museum researchers, then, may have a valuable role in reminding those who are in power of the existence of these innumerable invisible museums that the Khans themselves will never visit or even be able to find on the maps of their empires. They may be able to point towards the existence of these many invisible museums, this accumulation of exceptions, even if these invisible museums cannot, by their nature, ever be fully articulated or described. In other words, whilst it is not possible to map the complete territory of all these invisible museums, nevertheless through empirical research it is possible to gain multiple glimpses of the many utopias that make up the space of the museum—as the research undertaken by Elee Kirk in the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, and described by her in the next section suggests.

Collecting stories

In 2011, I spent several weeks carrying out research in the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, talking to four- and five-year-old children about their experiences of the museum. In an attempt to trace the children's pathways through the museum and to gain an insight into their experiences, I recruited suitable families as they came in, and asked the children to use my digital camera to photograph things they found interesting. I then met up with the children once they'd finished, so that we could look at the pictures together and use them as a way of talking about their visit.

In all, I spoke with 32 children, who between them took around 1,600 photographs. What was most astonishing was the range, depth, and individuality of the children's experiences, as revealed through both their photographs and our discussions about them. Young children often find it particularly hard to remember and articulate past experiences, but in the case of this research, the photographs helped both to remind the children of their experience whilst also providing a second source of data in addition to the children's own words—a visual language with which they were able to express themselves. Although some significant general patterns and principles have emerged from this mass of data, at the same time I continue to be struck by the differences between the *textures* of the children's unfolding experiences of the museum. A researcher, as we have said, must be both Kublai Khan and Marco Polo; and so here I want to leave the more general patterns, interesting as they are, to one side and instead play the part of Polo, to focus more on this question of the multiplicity of museum experience. To do so, I will introduce you to three of these children, as a way of sketching out how this one museum, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History can also be seen as a layering of multiple 'invisible' museums: that is to say, a layering of a multiplicity of experiences that are hard to co-ordinate into a single, overall 'map' of the empire that is the museum.

Fred

Fred was five years old and he was visiting the museum with his mother who taught children his age, but at a different school to Fred. They were visiting the museum together to see if her class would like to go there on a school trip. What was immediately striking about Fred when I spoke with him was that, although clearly aware that the animals were not 'alive', he nevertheless talked about the museum as a place that was filled with intentions, purposes and dramas. He told me that the white rabbit in an Alice in Wonderland themed display case 'stole

the watch', that the skeleton monkey 'looks like it's going to fight' the monkey with skin, and that one dinosaur was 'chasing another dinosaur'. He said that the snake 'looks nice' because it was 'holding its eggs… to keep them safe', and that he liked the bird because 'it looks like it's a woodpecker pecking the tree'. Even his more explicit knowledge of the animals he talked about was bound up with a concern for their intentions. For example, he told me that the deer was hiding and that he knew it was camouflaged because he had seen a television programme about it. His knowledge of notions such as 'camouflage' was expressed in terms of what the animals in question were up to. Instead of seeing the museum as a collection of 'specimens' or 'objects', the museum that Fred navigated was one of multiple dramas and interactions.

Figure 1. Two photographs of monkeys by Fred: 'it looks like it's going to fight that one'. Copyright E. S. Kirk.

Amy

The museum as Amy experienced it was a very different kind of place. Amy was just four years old, and was an enthusiastic photographer, taking 67 pictures during her hour-long visit. She took most of her pictures in the central court of the museum. While some of the pictures were of dinosaurs, dodos and a stuffed pony, a surprising number were of total strangers. It is not unusual for other visitors to be caught accidentally in the children's photographs, but, in Amy's case this seemed to be more deliberate. A total of 46 of her 67 photographs included people in them, and whilst in most children's photographs the people were in the background, in Amy's photographs the people were the subjects and the museum was merely the setting. When I spoke to Amy, it was clear that she was strongly aware of the museum as a place in which the most fascinating exhibits were often the other visitors. She told me she had photographed 'another child with… a daddy… because I thought they were very interesting'.

This enthusiasm for documentary photography included taking pictures both of members of her own family and complete strangers, for example, the series of 7 photographs that she took of an unknown couple looking at a display case and the large number of

photographs she took of her brother, mother and grandmother. This interest in other people even extended beyond other visitors, as somewhat unusually, Amy also took a number of photographs of portrait paintings that were exhibited in the museum, pictures that she was also keen to discuss in the interview.

Figure 2. Four photographs of strangers by Amy (note, faces have been blurred to protect the subjects' identities). Copyright E. S. Kirk.

Greg

Our final glimpse of an invisible museum comes from Greg. Greg was four years old, and a regular visitor to the museum, who seemed particularly drawn to those things that he, his family or people more broadly might find scary. Greg, like many of the children, was fascinated by sharp teeth. He photographed a plesiosaur which he described as having 'lots and lots of teeth' and a tyrannosaurus with 'very sharp teeth'. However, unlike some children in the museum, his interest in teeth seemed to have the character of a serious investigation of something that he clearly found unsettling. So, although he got very close to the teeth of the tyrannosaurus, he didn't quite pluck up the courage to touch them, as many other children tend to do, choosing instead to take a photograph.

Greg's visit to the museum also seemed to allow him to explore other personal fears. One of the photographs he wanted to talk to me about was of some rocks that glowed under ultraviolet light in a dark booth. He couldn't tell me much about the photograph, other than that the rock was glowing, but he seemed to find satisfaction in looking at it. His mother then told me that, although they had been to the museum many times before, this was the first time

that he'd been brave enough to go into the dark booth. Until recently, his mother said euphemistically, he had been 'unhappy in the dark'. Greg stressed that it had been *very* dark in the booth.

The last thing Greg told me, before running away to continue playing with his brother and friend, was that he had been to see the live tarantula. The particular appeal of this creature seemed to be that his mother was scared of spiders, so that her own phobia added to its fascination.

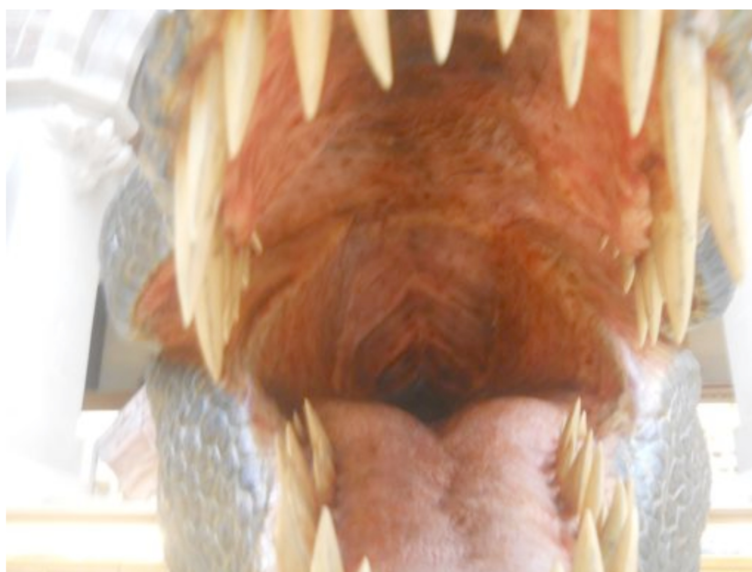

Figure 3. Tyrannosaurus teeth by Greg: 'it's got very sharp teeth'. Copyright E. S. Kirk.

Conclusion

Research such as this can allow us to glimpse—but perhaps no more than glimpse—the idiosyncratic, multiple and often rather private threads out of which the texture of the museum visit is woven. In a very real sense, Fred, Amy and Greg did not so much experience a single Oxford University Museum of Natural History as they each experienced a different invisible museum.

And so, whilst the use of the camera in this research can be seen to provide, both literally and figuratively, 'snapshots' of experience, and whilst the interviews allow us to draw out some of the significance of these fleeting snapshots, it would be a mistake, we believe, to claim that we have somehow in this fashion captured the 'visitor experience' in its entirety. Here it is important to stress that although we have managed to throw some light on the very different museum experiences of each of these young visitors (and there is no reason to believe that this diversity of experience does not hold for all museum visitors, whatever

their age), nevertheless, much of this experience will *always* remain invisible. It is not simply a matter of there being a multiplicity of museum experiences that could, in principle, be resolved into some kind of typology; it is also a matter of the way that experience itself tends to escape our attempts at capturing it and pinning it down in any definitive form. It slips through the nets of our categories. The reasons for this are several. Often, the questions we ask of visitors will, by their very nature, always elicit a relatively narrow range of responses and will only map onto actual experience in the most sketchy fashion. Frequently, due to the privacy and intimacy of experience, visitors may not be willing to talk about this experience to complete strangers. Sometimes, perhaps more often than not, experience does not easily translate into language, or is even obscure to experiencers themselves. And then there is the question of the very real difference between experience itself and the reports that we might give of this experience after the fact. Finally, there is the inevitable question of the volume of information with which we are capable of dealing with: we neither can nor should we canvas every single visitor about the intimate depths of their museum experience.

Visitor studies matter. They matter in the same way that the many envoys of the Khan matter for him to be able to run his empire at all. We *do* need to know, as far as possible, what is going on. We need more information, and we need better information, if we care about our museums and about those who visit them. But, recalling the dialogues between the Khan and Marco Polo, the emperor and the storyteller, perhaps we also need to recognise the existence of those voids not filled with words, those spaces that we will never be able to fully map. Visitor studies can only ever capture *some* of the interactions and experiences of museum visitors. And it may turn out to be precisely in this vast realm of things that are frequently invisible to researchers that there is to be found much of the mattering of museums.

What, then, are the implications of this for those involved in museum governance? Here, at the end, we return to Calvino's book. *Invisible Cities* ends with an extraordinary passage in which the Khan asks Marco Polo about the infernal city, 'the last landing place', 'the inferno of the living where we live every day.' How, he asks, can we free ourselves from this, the antithesis of utopia? To this question, Polo answers as follows:

> There are two ways to escape... The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. (Op. Cit.: 164.)

It can indeed often seem that present-day museums exist in a world that is far from utopian, that they are caught up in an inferno of funding cuts, political demands and narrowly instrumental policy-making; and certainly it is true that, like the Khan, those involved in museum governance need to have a good dose of *realpolitik*. The pressure to relent and become a part of this inferno, the rush to instrumentalise everything, to pin everything down with principles and procedures and mission statements and objectives and five year plans can be almost overwhelming. But there is, Polo reminds us, another possibility, one that we risk overlooking entirely once we have become part of this particular inferno.

This possibility is one that seeks to resist the inferno not by fighting against it so much as by refusing to argue on the terms that it demands. If we are right in what we are suggesting, and if there is a genuine epistemological problem when it comes to knowing many of those 'no places' and 'happy places' that constitute already existing museum utopias, and if the mattering of museums is largely invisible and exceptions, in many cases, *are* the rule, then what is demanded is a different kind of vigilance. It is a vigilance born out of the astonishing idea that museums may manage to nourish, excite, provoke, compel and enrich those who make use of them in ways that are so diverse and hidden that they will never enter into such instrumentalised accounting. It is a vigilance that can take heart from the intelligence brought by researcher-storytellers such as Marco Polo, intelligence that may testify to or hint at the existence of countless invisible utopias, and then has the courage to act in such a way that these utopias, maddeningly unmeasurable and unmappable as they may be, might be given space.

This, then, is the challenge; but what this might actually mean for museum policy and practice—how it might be possible to protect and nurture these utopian spaces when they may necessarily always remain invisible—is a question that extends beyond the scope of this present paper.

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