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Report: Using one of the establishments visited how easy is it to gain a sense of what constitutes Welsh culture?

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This report will focus on Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth, and explore its role as a conveyor of Welsh culture. A brief examination of the museum's concept, the building and space itself, including the cafe and giftshop, will be used as a beginning point. This will be followed by a more in-depth discussion of the exhibitions, presentation, and finally the objects within the museum. The role of objects as conveyors of culture will be explored in depth, with reference to Keene (2005), Pearce (1995), and Latour's (2005) Actor-network theory. Ultimately, the extent to which a sense of what constitutes Welsh culture can be gained from Ceredigion Museum will be assessed. The concluding paragraph will be a summation of arguments made within the body of this report.

Ceredigion Museum in Aberystwyth opened within the space of the defunct Coliseum theatre building in 1982 (Jenkins, 1990). Its aim is to reflect the history and heritage of the county from which it takes its name. The space, formerly a theatre, later a cinema, as well as a place for political meetings and conferences (ibid), is an unusual one in which to house a museum. This transformation has taken little conversion, utilising the ground floor and upper galleries for exhibitions and displays. By making the most of this building and playing on its past, the museum creates a sense of local history from the moment a visitor enters the main foyer. A recent regeneration has seen the museum highlighting the buildings former life as a theatre and cinema, with a new display dedicated to the theme.

Visitors enter the museum through the street-level giftshop, which offers a range of educational and old fashioned style toys, Welsh souvenirs, and books concerned with local legends and Welsh culture. Ascending the stairs or travelling upwards in the lift, visitors are greeted by the cafe, which is decorated with obscure references to local events and urban legends, such as a picture of Emmeline Pankhurst, who partook in a political meeting at the Coliseum. The obscurity of these

local references urges visitors to ask questions of the museum staff, encouraging the curious to seek out knowledge about local history and Welsh culture.

Visitors first enter the large main foyer of the museum, the centre of which is dedicated to a seating area. Around the outside of the space are the first displays; the newly-added chronicle of the building's history as a theatre and cinema to one side, an exploration of the agriculture that typifies the county, including farm machinery and a model dairy, on the other. Next to this is an example of a traditional Welsh cottage interior, including a typical Welsh dresser and small bed upon which sits a quilt. The main focal point of the space, as was always the case for the building, is the stage. This serves as a constant reminder of the building's heritage. The museum's displays intend to reflect life in Ceredigion, including examples of facets of Welsh life from agriculture to tourism.

This link to tourism within the area, and within wider Wales itself, is an important one. Indeed, the museum has long been linked to the Tourist Centre, allowing each to take advantage from the exposure of the other. As Jenkins (1990) states; “it is tourism, more than anything else, that has fuelled the new heritage movement”. Museums within Wales must therefore ensure that they are projecting a sense of Welsh culture that will draw the tourist in. Focus is on the more typical aspects of Welsh history, such as in the display *It's About Time* by Seren Morgan Jones that was in the temporary exhibition room at the time of the class visit. This exhibition focused on traditional 'Welsh lady' costume, with just enough edge to appeal to both locals and tourists, and included a 'dress up' station with full-length mirrors. This interactive element allows for tourists to 'try on' Welsh culture, temporarily allowing them to adopt a part of Welsh identity.

The choice to install displays in the upper galleries has served to create a particular path for visitors, allowing the museum to guide the public around the exhibitions in the order best suiting them and

the narrative, without visitors being aware of their being guided. On the architecture of the museum and its use as a mode of disciplining the public, Bennett (1995) notes that museums, like department stores, “frequently contained galleries affording a superior vantage point from which the layout of the whole and the activities of other visitors could also be observed” (p69). There is certainly an element of this at play in Ceredigion museum, as each gallery on each level of the building overlooks the main foyer of the theatre. Bennett (1995) asserts that such a layout serves as a variation on the panopticon, allowing the visitors to see and be seen at all times, the result being a public that regulates its own behaviour. It could also be argued that in this specific example, a contrast is created between the Wales of the past, and the current Wales, with visitors able to examine both the exhibitions and fellow patrons.

From the main stage space, visitors are led towards the temporary exhibition room. This room gives the museum the opportunity to explore more recent facets of Welsh culture, holding small art displays for short amounts of time. This also provides the museum with a much-needed update to their collections. From here, due to the nature of the building, visitors are guided upstairs, via a grouping of landscapes of various Aberystwyth vistas. The grouping of displays within Ceredigion museum makes apparent the theme of display without need for copious amounts of explanation. This allows the visitor a modicum of self-determination.

At the top of the stairs, to the left, is the Bowen gallery, hosting a display of pre-historic and early history Ceredigion, including geology, archaeology, and towards the pre-medieval. To the right is the second floor gallery, immediately concerned with domestic Welsh life. Displays include mundane objects; chairs, dressers full of china, clothes wranglers. Small rooms to the sides, formerly where lifts would be, hold small collections; on this floor it is music players. Thus far, it can be argued, the choice of collections on display reflect little of what is typical of Welsh culture.

Onwards from this point, however, they become more centred on what is specific to the county, and then Wales as a whole; displays on lead mining and a nautical collection. Again, visitors are led towards another set of stairs. Here is a collection displaying the importance of religion within Welsh history. The history of Ceredigion as a mining community attracted Cornish miners to the area, who brought with them Wesleyan Methodism (Jenkins, 1990, p2). To this day, Wesleyan chapels can be spotted all over the county.

The third floor gallery begins with the mundane again; weights and measures, but runs on into a display of fashion. This includes underwear, dresses, shoes, and other accessories. On the wall are hung outfits for trying on, another interactive element. This sets the scene in order to run into a more specific examination of Welsh costume, with a display of typical Welsh hats. This is the beginning for a deeper immersion in what constitutes Welsh culture, as the next display is concerned with a more distinctly Welsh occupation, that of the Welsh blanket weaving. Displayed are examples of the woven fabric and a loom. Leading on from this, via transport (bicycles, trains) and past a mock dentist theatre, is another definitive display of Welsh culture, the Eisteddfod. This display arguably projects the strongest sense of what constitutes Welsh culture. The Eisteddfod is a showcase of what is valued highest in Welsh culture; a competition of song, poetry, and acting, that runs from the smallest primary school up towards a nationwide televised event. Mostly executed through the Welsh language, the Eisteddfod is a cornerstone of national pride. The grouping for this display includes the Eisteddfod UCW chair of 1924.

Objects such as this chair are significant in many ways. Keene (2005) states that objects “can provide a window into the lives and thoughts of past or different people”. This chair can therefore be said to be providing a window into Welsh life. Indeed, Keene (2005) goes on to state that people use objects to project a “sense of who they are” (Keene, 2005, p69). This can easily be seen in the objects that the museum has chosen for its exhibitions. A sense of Ceredigion can be taken from the

choice of objects on display, as these objects represent many of the things Ceredigion is renowned for; farm machinery for the agriculture that the county relies on, chests from the ships that were once an integral part of the Aberystwyth economy. These objects are tangible manifestations that, when taken and placed behind glass, come to represent the identity and past of the county and wider country. Identity and memory are indivisible, and Keene (2005) argues that objects are “significant in building and maintaining both” (Keene, 2005, p91). Similarly, Pearce (1995) asserts that “Collections are material autobiography” (p272).

The display before the exiting staircase features nature, reflecting the Welsh connection to the land of Wales, and finally, a display of military uniforms, framing Wales within the context of the United Kingdom and the world. The flow of the museum's display takes visitors on a narrative journey. Beginning at an almost micro level with the building's history, every display relates to a bigger picture; the town, the county, Wales, Britain, and the world. Exploring such topics as religion and domestic life, which can apply to visitors from any corner of the world, allows for a beginning point for visitors to consider what constitutes Welsh culture, through examination of Welsh industry, mining, costume, and the Eisteddfod. The layout of the building guides visitors in such a way that this narrative is controlled and can unfold at a pace that best reflects the museums intentions of displaying Welsh culture.

Information, where available, is limited to a few lines. This allows the objects, to a certain extent, to speak for themselves. This is allowing the objects agency. Latour's (2005) Actor-network theory views objects as an important factor in creating social situations. Material objects are argued to have active social roles, in the same way that humans do. This means that objects have agency, and are part of a wider network of social relations. In this view, everything in the social world, including humans and objects, exist in ever evolving networks of relationships. This consideration of the

relationship between the human and non human goes some way to explain the relationship between people and objects. In terms of the museum, this sees exhibitions as more than merely passive displays behind glass. These displays are part of a network of relationships including the objects and the visitors. Welsh culture is conveyed as objects are not only representative of culture, but are active agents within it. What is key is the network of curator, object, and visitor. The social situation here, the museum of Ceredigion, requires all social agents. The Eisteddfod chair, for example, is relevant not just as a representation of the festival, but has an active part within its network of participants. As these networks constantly change, so does the chair. Taking the chair from the festival does not remove its agency, it is only altered. The chair is not only a part of Welsh culture, it creates it.

To conclude, Ceredigion museum aims to convey, through displays of specific objects, a sense of the history and culture of the county. The choice of objects, as “material biography” (Pearce, 1995), reflects many facets of Welsh life, and the layout of the building highlights the ever-evolving nature of culture. Due to its links to tourism, a certain level of ease of understanding is necessary. By setting these displays within a context that reflects the wider country and world, and framing objects within the mundane, the museum creates a frame for visitors to relate to and reflect on their own culture in contrast to that of the Welsh. It is this framing that most helps to gain an understanding of what constitutes Welsh culture.

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