Introduction

Running a successful museum is all about balance. Curators and managers are adept at managing the balance between preservation and access, between the needs of contemporary audiences and future ones, and between the needs of the collection and the economic realities which surround it.

In these times of great social change, technological development, and global economic challenge it is harder than ever for us to maintain this balance to ensure that our material and digital culture can continue to be collected, preserved, interpreted, and shared.

At the same time, in a world that is marked by conflict and economic competition, it has never been so important that we continue to be able to reflect society back on itself, to help foster dialogue and understanding between nations and peoples.

For these two reasons, it is vital that the cultural heritage profession as a whole makes the most effective and strategic use of the resources at its disposal in order to develop services which meet the needs of the modern world. It is in this context that the principle of strategic Collections Development is beginning to emerge in professional communities worldwide.

Strategic Collections Development

The function of the museum is to collect, preserve, interpret and make accessible our material and digital cultural heritage. These aims are sometimes in alignment, as in the way that conservation processes can open up new knowledge about the collection. They are sometimes contradictory, as in the impact of exhibiting an object on its long-term physical stability.

Strategic Collections Development is a way of balancing these different sets of priorities to achieve the long-term aims of the museum.
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marks a significant shift away from universal standards, and towards a more strategic approach to management in which the individual museum defines the approach that is best suited to its circumstances, its resources, its collections and the needs of its audiences.

In 2009, the UK-based Collections Trust worked with the British Standards Institute (BSI) to create a new UK standard called *A Code of Practice for Collections Management*. This standard, the first of its type to combine the management of physical and digital material and their associated metadata into a common framework, was produced jointly between the UK museum, archive, and library communities.
The Code of Practice for Collections Management ushered in two important innovations. The first was the idea that Collections Development is not a series of projects, but rather a permanent and ongoing behaviour across the institution which should be reviewed and developed on an ongoing basis. The second was the principle of a coherent and integrated framework for Collections Management attuned to a clearly-defined strategic purpose - essentially that every decision the museum makes about its collections should be made in the context not only of the cultural significance of the material but also of the wider strategic and financial aims of the organisation.

In so doing, the Code of Practice for Collections Management represented an important effort to reconcile the priorities of the curator with those of the manager, and to ensure that both are looking outward, to the needs of their users rather than inward, to the immediate needs of the collection. The diagram on the previous page shows the main elements of the Code of Practice.

As the diagram illustrates, museums are rarely in a position to make decisions solely on the basis of the needs of their users or their collections. We must often reconcile these with the needs of politicians (national and local) and the providers of funding, whether these are grant-making foundations or individual paying visitors.

The critical factor is to ensure that the museum has a sense of its strategic aims, normally in the form of a Mission statement. It is remarkable how many modern museums there are that either do not have such a statement, or have not looked at it since the beginning of the last century.

In the absence of this statement, every other decision about the collections becomes significantly more difficult for example, the decision of whether to digitise and in what priority, or the decision about disposals. A clear mission provides a broader frame of reference without which such decisions are often ad hoc or inconsistent.

The second main element of strategic Collections Development is to think of the processes of developing, using, caring for and creating knowledge about collections not as separate activities, but as closely connected parts of the same process. Hence, sharing a collection with audiences will generate new knowledge, which will inform future acquisitions, which will help prioritise investment in conservation.

In the past, many of these functions of the museum have been separated off from one another (particularly in larger museums), and this new approach aims to make much more effective use of the museum’s resources by ensuring that knowledge and material can flow freely across the whole institution.

**Physical and Digital**

The past two decades have seen the rise of a new form of immaterial culture that is either born-digital or the product of a process of digitisation. With this increase came a generation of standards which sought to define best practice in managing digital collections alongside their physical counterparts.

As the global museum sector has moved towards maturity in addressing this challenge, however, it has become increasingly apparent that both physical and digital material are best developed through the application of the
same common standards of curatorship, interpretation and strategic investment.

The generation of emergent standards and practices, therefore, deals less with the differences between different formats (physical or digital) and more with their similarities in terms of curatorship, preservation, interpretation and accessibility.

This emergence of a hybrid approach to physical and digital material is a defining feature of strategic Collections Development. The museums sector as a whole is coming out of a period of 'digitisation for its own sake' and towards a period where we make sophisticated use of analogue and digital technologies in ways that optimise value and impact for our users. In combining the audience reach and simplicity of digital technology with the depth and meaning of physical collections, we are defining a new kind of transmedia cultural service which can flow much more effectively between different consumer contexts, both on-line and off-line.

**SPECTRUM 4.0**

In May 2011, the Collections Trust will publish the 4th edition of *SPECTRUM*, the UK and international Collections Management standard. *SPECTRUM* is used by some 7,000 cultural institutions worldwide to define and improve their internal Collections Management practices and procedures.

*SPECTRUM 4.0* represents a radical evolution for the standard, but it is one that is driven explicitly by the principle of strategic Collections Development. In place of the 400+ pages of text, the new standard will have approximately 25-27 pages. Instead of text-driven processes, in their place each SPECTRUM Procedure will be shown as a simple flowchart.

The main innovation of *SPECTRUM 4.0* is not in the visualisation of the procedures, however, but in the way that those procedures have been modelled. Each one has been analysed to show the interactions between four elements:

- People
- Processes
- Systems
- Information

By presenting these elements, it is possible to see for the first time how information flows within and between systems, and how the
processes themselves require interactions with different people at different points. In so doing, SPECTRUM 4.0 has become a kind of "benchmark" for Collections Management which museums can use to review and, critically, simplify their own management processes.

The aim of SPECTRUM 4.0, therefore, is to move SPECTRUM on from being a tool for good practice to one which promotes efficient practice that is driven by the strategic aims and priorities of the museum. At the same time, the approach to modelling opens up the possibility of a next-generation of Collections Management Systems that part-automate the museum's workflow.

Better Environments

A museum's responsibility to future generations rests not just in preserving physical and digital collections, but also in making the most effective and least damaging use of non-renewable and natural resources in the process. Museums have a tremendous opportunity both to educate the public about the impact of climate change and to demonstrate the principle by adopting more energy-efficient and natural approaches to collections development.

For much of the past century, best practice in environmental management has focussed on controlling the internal microclimate of the building by controlling atmospheric factors such as heat, light, humidity and pollutants. Strictly-defined tolerances, established in the 60's and 70's, have required museums to employ heavy-duty technologies such as ventilation and variable temperature control, which have a significant cost both financially and in terms of resources.

Spurred on by increasing fuel costs, the current generation of museum practitioners are revisiting the science behind these tolerances, and investigating ways of working in harmony with nature to promote long-term sustainability with less intervention.

These new approaches range from passive control (making use of natural airflow and seasonal variations in temperature and humidity) to considering the human impact on heat and humidity as a positive part of maintaining a stable environment over longer periods. It involves thinking more specifically about the differing requirements for different types of material composition rather than treating everything in the same way.

Alongside this development is some interesting new thinking about the idea of an acceptable lifespan for objects. Museums cannot permanently hold back the natural process of decay, but very often we are unclear about the length of time we want to keep things for, and hence the investment we are willing to make over that period. If, for example, our aim is to continue to hold a particular item in 100 years time, this has a profound impact on our decisions about how it is treated (and how often it can be displayed) over that period.

Hence strategic Collections Development involves thinking about some challenging new ideas, including the principle of acceptable loss - that if an object is particularly useful as an illustration of a key cultural issue, and hence needs to be actively displayed on an ongoing basis, then this means that it will exist for a correspondingly shorter period of time.
A Look to the Future

Strategic Collections Development, then, is one part of a much broader evolution of the cultural sector worldwide. Traditionally, museums were seen as storehouses defined by permanence and objective authority. Decisions were made in relation to the material itself, rather than to the broader context of the institution, its economic realities and the needs and behaviours of users. One-size-fits-all standards were applied unilaterally across organisations of different scales and with different collections.

This approach is specifically strategic, in the sense that a more open, agile approach will allow practitioners to respond more readily to the ever-changing needs of their audiences without compromising the integrity of their collections.

The next generation of practice is defined much more explicitly by the idea of equipping skilled and professional staff with the tools they need to make informed decisions about the conservation and development of their collections. It treats physical and digital material (and the meta-information which connects them) as part of the same continuum of Collections Management, rather than as entirely different disciplines.

Critically, these new strategic approaches do not abandon the knowledge and expertise of previous generations. Instead they put this expertise into a broader strategic framework which makes decision-making and prioritisation around the collections much more consistent and better-tuned to the short, medium and long-term aims of the organisation. It also helps open these decisions up as part of a broader conversation with audiences that is empowered by the Web and social media - in the process helping to make museums more open and representative.