

Museum Environmental Conditions in an Era of Energy Constraint

Nicholas Serota – Paper to the Bizot Group Meeting May 2008

Museums, art galleries and exhibitions have seen enormous growth in recent years and cultural institutions now form an essential part of urban life. In some cases they have become a mainstay of the economy. This visible success has brought a high profile and with it the responsibility to take a lead in wider issues of society.

We are all now aware of the excessive burning of fossil fuels that leads to increasing carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere and to the warming of the global environment. All of us are under increasing pressure to reduce energy costs and it is clear that in the cultural sector we will have to undertake a programme of reducing our environmental impact.

There are many areas where we can save energy but heating and air-conditioning are probably the most significant consumers of fossil fuels by galleries and museums. We need to devise imaginative new solutions to resolve the dichotomy between long-term collections care and expensive environmental conditions.

Existing standards for gallery environmental conditions governing relative humidity and temperature have a proven role in caring for collections. As a consequence, large sums of money have been invested in HVAC systems, which have proved effective in keeping gallery conditions stable.

Existing guidelines on relative humidity and temperature for exhibitions are expressed in a form that assumes the need for air conditioning. This language derives from a dialogue between museum clients and architects and engineers. The results of air-conditioning have been effective, but in depending on the one solution that could be implemented in the latter half of the twentieth century we have lost sight of the original debate. In the meantime that solution has become more expensive to implement and maintain and in future will become even more so.

Care of our art collections should therefore be expressed in a way that does not assume air-conditioning or any other current solutions. We need to establish a new dialogue between professionals and empower them to consider fresh options. Guidelines or standards will then underpin imaginative solutions for future new buildings and operations. This is particularly important for establishing the requirements for new buildings where the best opportunity exists for novel solutions.

In the meantime we have to consider the running costs of existing air-conditioning systems. With this in mind, colleagues at Tate are devising workable solutions involving broader annual parameters for relative humidity and temperature at all five sites. We recognise that we cannot adopt revised guidelines without a discussion with lenders and we are therefore seeking a debate with partner institutions. We would like to engage in a dialogue to reach agreement on international guidelines incorporating a broader range of conditions.

The intention is to establish discussions at 2 levels, the debate described above between the museum experts to devise recommendations, and a further debate at directorial level to validate the process and to renegotiate agreements, particularly on loans.

We intend to begin in the UK by setting up a network to devise new guidelines for museum environmental conditions. It will include representatives from major

institutions: exhibition curators, conservators, architects, engineers and facilities operators, and also selected international experts to ensure a wider perspective.

It is important to include all the stakeholders who collectively share responsibility for display and care of collections, as well as having a responsibility for the wider environment. New guidelines will be received positively only if they satisfy the important concerns of each party: these may be perceived as increased risk to the collection, display restrictions, architectural constraints and restrictions on gallery activities.

We expect this consultation and consensus building to take about six months from inception, involving three facilitated meetings in which the network will make judgements and risk analyses on proposals and define acceptable practice. The brief will demand that the guidelines are potentially universally acceptable. The outcome will be published and should form the basis for international guidelines.

The time is right for such a debate, I detect a willingness among colleagues to take responsible long-term decisions. We do so from our current position of strength, and not belatedly in response to events. As directors, I ask you to encourage your staff to take part in this debate at an international level and to support its outcome.