Open House at the Vintage Wireless Museum

A Stage for Exchange

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In the Vintage Wireless Museum in London, the private and the public sphere are closely connected. With this museum as an example, Fiona Candlin, teacher of Museum Studies at Birkbeck (University of London), examines the extent to which the autonomy and independent position of private museums makes it possible for them to have a different form of exchange than that of museums financed by the government.

Historian and theorist Tony Bennett has considered some of the different ways in which museums may or may not be considered public. He comments that they 'are public both in the sense of being outside the private sphere of the home and – usually – in the sense of their dependence (whether direct or indirect) on public funding', but he cautions against them being considered 'public spheres'. [1] As Bennett indicates, this concept derives from the work of Jürgen Habermas and refers to 'a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed'. [2]

Habermas maintained that the public sphere was specific to the eighteenth century and developed when bourgeois men began to subscribe to critical journals, to follow news and comment, and to meet in coffee houses and clubs to discuss matters of mutual concern. Other scholars have conceived it in more generic terms; political theorist Nancy Fraser, for example, suggested that it designates 'a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk' and points to instances where women and working-class groups have met to articulate and advance their common interests. [3] Hannah Arendt, whose account predates that of Habermas, envisaged the public sphere as a space of political freedom that comes into being whenever citizens speak and act in dialogue. For her, the public sphere enables individuals and groups to make their diverse experiences known and to examine issues from multiple, competing perspectives; it resists closure and consensus. [4]

Despite these varying formulations, Bennett argues that museums cannot be defined in such terms. His key point is that public spheres are situated outside of state control and potentially provide a platform for contesting vested power, whereas museums are generally reliant on government funds and, since the mid-nineteenth century at least, have sought to shape the behaviour and identity of the populace. Rather than being a forum for the free exchange of views, public-sector museums have operated as intermediaries of the state.

Yet, while Bennett's analysis is well-founded in regards to national, municipal, and local authority institutions, it does not necessarily apply to small independent museums, many of which are embedded within the private sphere of the home. Rather than being

dependent upon the state, they are typically ineligible for funding and, operating outside of the public sector, they are unconcerned with national policy or directives. My question, then, is: Can such museums be construed as public and, if so, in what sense? To what degree are these private houses open to the public? What impact does the domestic setting have on the experience of visiting? Financially autonomous and removed from the demands of the state, could they be construed as public spheres, albeit on a diminutive scale? In order to pursue these topics further, this chapter concentrates on the Vintage Wireless Museum in West Dulwich, London.

When I arrived at The Vintage Wireless Museum a tall man wearing heavy square glasses and a white lab coat opened the front door, introduced himself as Gerry Wells and invited me into the kitchen for tea. The square, rather old-fashioned room has a large wooden dresser stocked with pretty blue and white china, a plain solid wood dining table. A kettle, a tea-caddy, sugar bowl and other regularly-used items are placed on the surface of the 1960s kitchen units. There is a faint smell of gas cookers and coal-tar soap. Doors lead out to the hallway, a sitting room, the back garden, and a downstairs bathroom: the kitchen is clearly the hub of the house.

Now in his mid-eighties and recovering from a recent stroke, Gerry is slightly shaky as he brews a pot of tea and undoes a packet of petite madeleines. As we sit down, there is a knock at the back door and Frank, a friend of Gerry's and a supporter of the museum enters, followed by Gerry's cat which purrs round our ankles. They ask me what I do, where I live, and where I come from and, because I grew up near Wigan in Lancashire, this leads to a conversation about the merits and demerits of meat-pies and tripe, foods that are associated with the area. More tea is poured and the two men move on to the topic of digital broadcasting. Frank mentions that Nick Clegg, the deputy prime-minister, is revoking the decision to switch off AM and FM stations once 90 per cent of homes can receive a digital radio signal. They consider analogue broadcasting to be far superior and are glad that the new coalition government has 'finally seen some sense'.

When they are ready, they take me on a tour. Every available space is covered: shelves filled with Phillips radios run down the sides of the hallway and Victorian instruments for testing early telephones are lined up on the window ledge. As we ascend the stairs Gerry explains that this was his family home and, indicating the wallpaper, that he had chosen to keep the decoration in the style of the 1930s. Pink roses on a cream background cover the walls of the landing while those of the small front bedroom, where Gerry was born, are relatively plain. This latter room now contains masses of portable radios organized by type and arrayed on shelves that reach from waist height to ceiling. Standing beneath them on the floor are massive radiograms and two glass cabinets, one housing a collection of gramophone needles, the other bits and pieces of Bakelite. These objects were collected and arranged by a woman who originally started as a Saturday helper and later became a fixture, eventually managing the museum. They are affectionately referred to as 'Eileen's cupboards'.

The next room is decorated in a paper suitable for the bedroom it once was – cornflowers on cream – and contains more radiograms and a number of gramophones while a third room holds loudspeakers, trumpets, horns, the fittings from a shop once run by Mr McMichael, a radio pioneer, and the first gramophone ever made. They tell me that John Paul Getty Jr bought it at an auction and dispatched it to Gerry to be repaired. Later, Getty came to visit the museum, liked it and sent a Christmas food parcel from Harrods, subsequently paying the rates when Gerry was ill, donated his father's 1937 television set and finally gave the precious gramophone. Gerry winds it up and 'I Passed By Your Window' recorded in 1917 by Walter Glynne crackles out of the horn. I am surprised that it plays as well as it does and, in response, Gerry starts up a number of machines, all in full working order. A 1938 cabinet radio that has automatic tuning locates the nearest station

and immediately begins broadcasting a Bollywood sound-track. 'Take-away music,' he remarks.

Each of these rooms has a name. The Getty Room is for his sponsor, the Rickard Taylor 2 AF room refers to an early wireless enthusiast who coincidentally lived in the house from 1908 to 1914, AF being his call sign, while the Newton room is called after the town in Lancashire, which is a significant place for Gerry. To explain, he tells me that aged 13 he started stealing electrical components and, after he was caught for a second time, was sent to Liverpool Farm School, in Newton-Le-Willows, West Lancashire, now known as Red-Bank secure unit. He says that this was the saving of him because Ted Hackett, the deputy headmaster, recognized his skills and encouraged him to learn by repairing radios. The attic is named in honour of him and his wife. Photographs of them and of Red-Bank are placed on a bureau with a handwritten dedication thanking the couple for 47 years of care and support.

This room is mainly used on Fridays. Once the supporters' group have dusted and cleaned the house and collections, they gather upstairs to talk about radios, eat fish and chips, and drink red wine. Gerry also hides up here when there are too many visitors or when Americans, whom he generally dislikes, arrive. Long benches run along the walls to accommodate the enthusiasts, there is an arm chair which Frank occupies, and leaning against a wall is a mattress awaiting the return of Ben, a former chief engineer at Digital Hire who now lives in Italy but sleeps here whenever he returns to England.

By this time Gerry is tired and we go back downstairs to the living room. It has high ceilings, cornices, plasterwork and a bow window looking out over a small front garden. A dining table with six straight-back chairs is placed in the bay. The dark wood of the furniture, of numerous television and radio sets, and of the polished floor give the room a sense of warmth that is heightened by a large dark-red Persian carpet. All the available surfaces are covered with paraphernalia relating to broadcasting and, to a lesser extent, with photographs of family and friends.

Gerry and Frank retire to a pair of large armchairs placed either side of the fireplace, which is surmounted by an elaborate chimney-piece laden with carriage clocks. The grate is blocked by the television that belonged to Getty's father. The friends show me how it works and comment that it will cease to function when the analogue television signal is withdrawn from the UK in April 2012. For a while we all watch *Tricia* anachronistically flickering on the ancient television set until, tiring of the chat-show, Gerry and Frank opt to play a record at immense volume on a vast gramophone designed for garden parties. While they listen to the music, I go and make a pot of tea, do the washing up, and bring out more cakes. Popping upstairs to the bathroom I realize that there are more rooms that I have not been shown. These are named for David Adams, who spent his retirement cataloguing the whole collection, and for the brothers Fred and Bill Watts, who donated their collection to the museum. Bill died ten years ago, but Fred still comes in every Friday.

After tea, I am invited to see the public address system that operates out of the old morning room. Here, net curtains and long pale pink damask drapes hang over the original French windows; there are more clocks, two framed prints of Victorian hunting scenes and a beautiful pale green replica of an art deco radio made by Gerry is positioned on the mantelpiece. We ignore a single bed and some of Gerry's personal possessions to concentrate on a large desk with a double turntable and microphone. With this equipment it is possible to broadcast to each room in the house.

The loudspeaker system extends into the workshops at the bottom of the garden where Gerry once worked, but they now provide more display space for the collections and are as packed as the rooms inside the house. As Gerry demonstrates the fine-tuning of an amplifier, Frank remarks: 'He made that, he's a real expert, you know.' They wander around

inspecting and commenting on different sets until a young woman arrives. She is introduced as his granddaughter and has come to cook dinner for Gerry. Everyone returns to the kitchen, and then shortly afterwards I take my leave.

The Vintage Wireless Museum is a registered trust and its name signals that it is open to the public, as does its website. Otherwise, from the outside, it appears to be an ordinary private house. As is common in Victorian suburbs, it is situated on a road lined with similar residences, is slightly set back from the pavement and accessed down a path. A walled garden lined with plants and shrubs separate it from neighbouring homes. Unlike a Georgian town house built on a communal square or a tenement block with shared stairwells, this villa was designed to be an enclosed domestic sphere.[5] In principle, Gerry could have downplayed the private, domestic aspects of the building by living in one part of the house and removing the remaining carpets and furnishings, but has instead opted to keep it unchanged. This arrangement has several effects.

From the outset it is clear that 23 Rossendale Road and the collections belong to someone. Gerry tells visitors that he inherited the house and provides details about his life, but even if he were unaccountably absent, the surroundings indicate that someone lives here and provide clues as to his identity and circumstances. The museum's Edwardian furniture, damask drapes and mahogany clocks denote a solid middle-class household. The workshops with their long repair benches and kit indicate a level of expertise, a time of full employment, and the cessation of that business, while the unchanged kitchen units and smell of gas heating suggest a certain level of privation – most people now have fitted kitchens and central heating. The unwashed crockery indicate that Gerry may require some assistance in running a large house. We can see that he is white, elderly, lives alone, has regular visitors, is fond of cats, sleeps in a downstairs room, likes jazz and dance bands, drinks tea and has a sweet tooth.

Some public-sector museums have recently begun to credit exhibitions to specific curators. This can operate as a branding exercise but it is also a way of acknowledging that displays are produced from a particular perspective.[6] In these instances visitors are given no more than a name, but at the Vintage Wireless Museum they find out a great deal about the person who has acquired and organized the collections. It is obvious that the display represents the preoccupations of a particular individual, the orbit of his working life and his perspective on a subject. The range and display of the collections are clearly supported and delimited by the owner's economic and social circumstances and by wider factors such as the decline of British manufacture and a culture that accepts obsolescence. Thus the museum and the collection are situated with respect to specific time, place, class and income.

Recognizing that an exhibition has an author and is not a neutral or objective representation of a subject can hide the number of people engaged in its production. The collective character of the Vintage Wireless Museum is, however, apparent in two different regards. Firstly, Gerry stresses that his knowledge of British radio and television technologies was principally acquired in remand school and acknowledges the tuition he received there. He also stresses input from the British Vintage Wireless Society and the accumulated experience of his friends and supporters. Frank and Gerry both comment on their training in technical colleges and in the workplace.

Secondly, the different forms of work involved in running the museum are in evidence. Public-sector museums rarely acknowledge exhibition designers or conservators, conceal the work undertaken by technicians, museum assistants, catering teams and cleaners, and never mention the parents, friends and partners who provide support for staff. In contrast, all of these contributions are in evidence at the Vintage Wireless Museum. The young cook is not sequestered away, there are constant references to the supporters who catalogue

and clean the collections and visitors who arrive on Fridays are likely to meet them. Moreover, because the house is virtually coterminous with the museum, there is no strict division between the various types of labour. Dusting, making tea, cleaning and washing up are domestic duties and they pertain to the museum. Curating the manifold exhibits is simultaneously understood to be an exercise in tidying up. This is a remarkably non-hierarchical way of conceiving of museum work.

Opening the museum in an unchanged home also affects the terms of admission. Although the launch of the museum makes the house publicly accessible, its architecture, Edwardian decor and furniture prompt visitors to behave in accordance with the protocols of a private residence, not a museum, while Gerry's demeanour is that of someone at home, not at work. He offers new arrivals somewhere to sit, a glass of water, and tea and cake. In accepting his hospitality, visitors are converted into guests and that role has certain social obligations including a duty to help.[7] Noticing their host's tiredness, visitor-guests may make tea or help in the kitchen. In doing so, they also contribute to the work of running the museum.

The length of each stay can depend upon how visitors acquit themselves – groups of Americans who speak too loudly for Gerry's tastes may find their visits curtailed whereas my south-west Lancashire accent served me in good stead because it reminded him of his days at Red-Bank. It also varies according to Gerry's health or time or with the availability of volunteers. As the museum is located in his home and since he is not answerable to the state, Gerry is not obliged to admit everyone on the same terms. This is not an equitable arrangement but it does mean that the visitors are not anonymous and that their background, interests and capacities are known to the museum staff and, in turn, this information enables Gerry to conduct tailor-made tours. Having ascertained that I am entirely ignorant about radios Gerry and Frank carefully elucidated the differences between valve and transistor sets, the variations in their sound, and outlined what an analogue system actually is. Likewise, aware that I am researching small independent museums, Gerry told me that he had reservations about Hunter Davies' book *Mad Museums*, which included a chapter on the Vintage Wireless Museum, although he did approve of a short film called *Valveman* and a BBC radio programme entitled *The Wireless World of Gerry Wells*. Frank later sent me a copy of this broadcast.

As in other private homes, visitors are not encouraged to wander at will and, indeed, little would be gained from doing so. Public-sector museums have labels, wall-texts, and catalogues that may be read or ignored as desired, but finding out about this collection is reliant on who is available to show visitors round and what they consider significant or pertinent. That assessment may also change depending upon recent events – such as Nick Clegg's intervention in the national conversion to digital radio or the theft of two valves from Gerry's 1928 double-turntable record player. There is no established patter or orthodox interpretation of the collections and, as Gerry and Frank remarked, had Eileen been working that day, she would have told some different stories. The staff members recognize that there are multiple tales to be told about the museum and that the collections can be discussed in relation to many different contexts or issues.

Opening a museum in one's own home and not being in receipt of public funding frees Gerry and, to a lesser extent, his supporters and friends, to say whatever they think. Some visitors may consider comments about 'take-away music', the supposed idiocy of Americans, or the right-minded qualities of the coalition government to be objectionable or misguided, but the situated, domestic character of the museum means that they are taken to be an individual's opinion and not an institutionally sanctioned position. In addition, if visitors are offended, they are at liberty to signal their disapproval, enter into conversation, argue, ask questions, or steer discussions onto other subjects in a way that would be impossible to do with staff in a mainstream museum. Here, visitors contribute to the

situation and shape their encounter.

At the Vintage Wireless Museum, the objects regularly serve as prompts for stories. The prototype gramophone motivates anecdotes of John Paul Getty arriving at the museum and being amazed that anyone would charge a billionaire a mere 60 pounds for work completed. The garden gramophone recalls Gerry to the numerous parties held outside and a poster of an Austin Seven delivery van to vehicles that he once owned. These tales relate to his personal experience but they often have a bearing on issues such as the lives of children who lived through the Blitz, the treatment of 'delinquent' teenagers, the acquisition of skills and knowledge, the demise of the British manufacturing industry, international trade, obsolescence, unemployment, racism and the lives of the elderly in contemporary society. In using objects and conversation to present his interests and life to others, Gerry often invokes a wider spectrum of affairs.

These narratives could be confined to the relatively private sphere of family and friends but the collection brings strangers into his orbit. Enthusiasts are enticed by the sheer quantity and range of audio-visual equipment, the merely curious are attracted by the array of charming objects while journalists, broadcasters and academics recognize a hook for an article or a programme that is in turn viewed or heard by others. The collection both generates narrative and a public for those stories.

If the Vintage Wireless Museum had adopted the forms and practices of a conventional public-sector museum, telling stories would be a predominantly one-way process. Wall-texts or audio recordings might make narratives public but visitors would only be able to respond in relatively limited ways and there would be little exchange of views. As it is, the protocols of the home require a degree of mutual attentiveness and respect and, regardless of any differences, visitor-guests must abide by the precepts of the house, listen to their host and reply with civility. Indeed they are expected to volunteer their own tales and to converse. Equally, hosts cannot (entirely) ignore their guests and everyone has the opportunity to consider the implications of what others say, see and hear.

Simultaneously open to the public ***and*** a domestic space, the Vintage Wireless Museum actively creates a space for the moderated exchange of views and for interaction between strangers who nonetheless may disagree on certain issues. Thus, the combination of the setting, hospitality and the collections creates a stage for exchange, a public realm in a private setting.

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Footnotes

1. Tony Bennett, 'Difference and the Logic of Culture', in: Ivan Karp (ed.), *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations* (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2006), 49. On claims that public-sector museums do constitute a public sphere see: Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
2. Jürgen Habermas, 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopaedia Article', *New German Critique*, 3 (1974), 49.
3. Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990), 57. See also: Craig J. Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 1992).
4. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago/Cambridge: Chicago University Press/Cambridge University Press, 1958).
5. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).
6. For instance the introductory wall text in the first room of *Romantics*, at Tate Britain (9 August 2010 – 9 April 2012) noted that the 'display has been devised by curator David Blayney Brown'. The names 'Nicolas Bourriaud' and 'Hans Ulrich Obrist' both serve to brand exhibitions.
7. Conrad Lashley and Alison J. Morrison, *In Search of Hospitality: Theoretical Perspectives and Debates* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000).

Tags

Critical Theory, Democracy, Public Domain

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