

2022-03-28

Understanding the library as a commemorative exhibition space

Theresa Ryan Dr

Technological University Dublin, theresa.ryan@tudublin.ie

Bernadette Quinn Dr

Technological University Dublin, bernadette.quinn@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tfschhmtcon>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Theresa Ryan & Bernadette Quinn (2022) Understanding the Library as a Commemorative Exhibition Space, *Public Library Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1080/01616846.2022.2060690

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Other resources by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie, gerard.connolly@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#)

Funder: This research was undertaken as part of the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) funded project, Festspace: Festivals, events and inclusive urban public spaces in Europe

Title: Understanding the library as a commemorative exhibition space

Authors: Dr. Theresa Ryan and Dr. Bernadette Quinn

Affiliation: College of Arts & Tourism, Technological University Dublin, Grangegorman, Dublin 7, Ireland

Corresponding Author E-Mail: theresa.ryan@tudublin.ie

Abstract

This research responds to calls to further our understanding of exhibitions in the library context (Rogatchevskaia, 2018; Fouracre, 2015) by exploring the significance of a commemorative exhibition staged in a public library. Employing a qualitative methodology, it centres on the 'Goodbye Dublin: The War of Independence in the City' commemorative exhibition, staged by Dublin City Pearse Street Library, between August 14th and October 31st, 2019. The findings show that the commemorative nature of the exhibition appealed to a variety of new, lapsed and frequent library users, connecting with Irish and non-Irish residents, as well as tourists visiting the city. In this regard, the exhibition was effective in its objective of appealing to a new and wide-ranging audience, however, the findings underline the need for more diverse and varied marketing, if this aim is to be entirely successful. The staging of the exhibition as an active authoring and articulation of the past by the library is highlighted, and the use of multimedia is seen to transform the library into an emotionally charged, dynamic and multisensory space. This facilitates an immersive encounter, involving interplays between the exhibition narratives and visitors' personal memories and interests. This offers different ways for visitors to engage with the library, inspiring them to find new meanings, explore issues of personal, collective and national identities, and to reassess contemporary events. Overall, the research makes an important contribution by highlighting the complexity and importance of commemorative exhibitions in the context of public libraries.

Key words: Public library; commemorative exhibition; multisensory; encounters; Dublin

1. Introduction: Public libraries and commemorative exhibitions

Public libraries have long been recognised as holding 'an intangible value for society' (Tokić & Tokić, 2018: 444), providing 'access to information that helps people improve their individual, family, and

community lives' (Scott, 2011: 191). They are publicly owned and as such are open to anyone who desires to use them (Harris, 1999). While commonly thought of as 'quiet places where books are the highest priority' (Manoff, 2001: 375), in reality public libraries have over time become 'a hybrid of different specializations and services' (Mickiewicz, 2016: 239), working to broaden their community's cultural understanding and awareness of the world through programming, displays, and discussions (Scott, 2011). In recent years these public institutions have become the centre of contemporary debates questioning their relevancy in an age of online information (Scott, 2011; Smith, 2019), with some predicting their ultimate demise (Bodnick, 2012; Worstall, 2014). However, while public libraries 'tend to be taken for granted' (Moore, 2004: 27), are frequently overlooked (Ireland, 2013) and understood only in the context of lending books (Bodnick, 2012), their effect on society can be far-reaching (Ireland, 2013). They are, according to Wood (2021), among the few remaining shared spaces commonly referred to as 'third places', where one can spend time separate from home, work, or school (Oldenburg, 1989: 14). They are trusted spaces (Jaeger & Fleischmann, 2007), that have a key mission to inform, educate and entertain, (Moore, 2004: 52) and are, Baker (2017) claims, unique places where people can be inspired. Amidst significant disruptive technological change (Baker, 2017) and changes in the behaviour of library users (Troll, 2002), they have transformed to become more active, diverse and multifaceted spaces (Heseltine, 2020; Leorke, et. al., 2018; Jochumsen, et. al. 2017), offering an array of services, holding multiple meanings in terms of their use and the context through which they engage, or are engaged with.

Despite assuming a host of ever-changing social and symbolic functions (Mattern, 2014) providing access to their collections however, remains the library's central tenet (Robinson, 2012). In this regard, exhibitions, including commemorative exhibitions, are one means through which library collections are made accessible. As early as 1995, Cleeve noted how exhibition and display work had begun to penetrate library services (Brown & Power, 2006). As a 'communication tool' (Brown & Power, 2006: 16), exhibitions help fulfil libraries' role as communicators of knowledge, and, while more traditionally associated with museums, they have progressively become part of the function of libraries. In academic libraries for example, Chen et. al. (2015: 63) note that 'creating exhibitions, previously considered an interpretive activity beyond the scope of ... librarians ... is now an accepted part of the work'. This shift in attitude is largely a result of the realization that they provide libraries with a substantial opportunity to open and enhance their collections, giving access 'to a wider audience through interpretation, translation, illustration and other techniques' (Brown & Power, 2006: 11). This is of particular significance amidst questions surrounding the future of public libraries and in particular arguments concerning the need for them to attract and engage users (Mainka et al., 2013;

Cooke, 2018). While the staging of exhibitions in academic libraries is relatively well established, a growing number of public libraries also stage exhibitions as part of their cultural programs (Hye & Yeon, 2020). Despite this, it remains a largely under researched topic (Williams 2011). In fact, research on library exhibitions has been scarce, with Rogatchevskaia (2018: 175), describing them as an 'underexplored beast' that need to 'be given much more attention' (2018: 177). Fouracre similarly argues that 'as libraries become increasingly involved in exhibitions, more ... theoretical investigation into them is needed' (2015, p. 378). She notes that while research into exhibition practice is well established in the museum world, 'there has ... been no coherent overview or attempt to understand the bigger picture of library exhibitions to date' (Fouracre, 2015: 378). What literature does exist tends to be biased towards academic libraries; with limited examples of exhibitions from other libraries including public libraries (Williams, 2011). This is a significant gap, and one which this paper seeks to address by stimulating discussion on exhibitions as a practice in public libraries. Drawing attention to commemorative exhibitions as one distinct type of exhibition staged in public libraries, the paper seeks to explore the meanings and significance of such exhibitions for the library and the visitor. Commemorative exhibitions, with their emphasis on remembering, are quite distinct from other types of exhibitions (Laing & Frost, 2013) and are significant in that their meanings are strongly linked to the construction of both individual, personal identities and collective, national identities (Drozdowski, Waterton and Sumartojo, 2019). These meanings can, of course, differ from person to person, and accordingly are frequently contested (Laing & Frost, 2019). Furthermore, the act of commemoration and remembrance transforms spaces into places of meaning and agency (Cutcher et. al. 2016). To date, however, little has been done to further our understanding of these meanings in the context of public libraries. Exploring the 'Goodbye Dublin: War of Independence in the City', temporary commemorative exhibition staged in Dublin City's Pearse Street Library, Ireland, between August 14th and October 31st 2019, the paper addresses a number of key questions including: what significance does the staging of the commemorative exhibition have in terms of attracting and engaging library visitors? Does it play a role in transforming the library visit and if so, how? Additionally, it asks what meanings the exhibition holds for the visitor. The paper proceeds by reviewing the general literature on exhibitions and commemoration, much of which relates to the museum context, to provide insights that may have relevance in the context of libraries.

2. Understanding exhibitions: their purpose & meaning

Exhibitions are, as Haines (2013) explains, creatively inspired, intellectually and historically engaged mediums, that provide dynamic interpretations of collections that combine both leisure and learning

to attract new users (Robinson, 2012). It is, as Fouracre notes, difficult to discuss exhibitions without reference to museums as a sector that has 'developed a substantial body of research and practice on numerous aspects of staging exhibitions' (2015: 377). Museums dedicate enormous resources to developing both permanent and temporary exhibitions, primarily as a means of making their collections and knowledge accessible to broad public audiences (Blunden, 2017) and educating their visitors (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Exhibitions enable the contextualization of historical objects (Chen et. al. 2015), the display of 'rarities' (Brown & Power, 2006: 6), all of which serves to attract and engage visitors (Sandifer, 2003) and render the museum's collections more meaningful. A key strength of exhibitions lies in their ability to bring together objects to tell new stories and provide new contexts that are accessible and relevant to their viewers (Cline, 2012: 84). In doing so, they infer meanings on objects beyond any significance these objects may already possess (Vergo, 1989), demonstrating associations which render them more significant to the viewer (Dean, 1996). By implication, exhibitions enable a form of renewal, or rethinking of objects, offering new ways of seeing and understanding to the viewer. As a form of narrative, they employ a variety of techniques and strategies that enable them to 'touch and connect with their audiences' (Cline, 2012: 46). Mandelli (2015), for example, reveals how the use of moving images function as a means of contextualization, explanation or visitor engagement, as multisensory exhibition experiences offer many entry points, facilitating a range of learning experiences (Gurian, 1991).

All of this suggests an implicit power in exhibitions to not only attract visitors, but also to impart meanings to these visitors. However, significant here is Blunden's (2017) assertion that it is the interaction between the visitor and the display that forms the core experience of exhibitions. Therefore, while exhibitions and their displays fundamentally draw on 'the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make' them (Lavine & Karp, 1991: 1), they are also places of free choice, where the visitor has ultimate control in deciding how, and to what extent, they view and engage with the exhibition (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Gurian, 1991). Visitors do not, Gurian (1991) explains, arrive as blank slates, but rather bring to the encounter their cumulative experiences, knowledge and values (Haines, 2013). Williams, for example, notes that visitors to memorial museums come 'with a sense of history often loaded with familial significance', resulting in 'personal conscience' becoming 'a reference point for an (often internal) dialogue' with what they encounter (2007: 6). Consequently, 'the meanings made by museum visitors from the visual cultures of display are a product of both individual and social interpretive processes and are complex and unpredictable' (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000: 124). Exhibitions therefore can be viewed as performative spaces, where visitors as participants, interpret and reflect on the meanings and significance that the exhibition holds for them. Where the

'principles of curiosity, challenge, narrative and participation' can create 'experiences that provide visitors with the opportunity to reflect, to discuss, and to actively participate' in contemporary topics (Lord & Piacente, 2014: 11-12). All of this serves to underline the complexity of exhibition encounters, emphasising the need to question the meaning of such encounters in the context of library exhibitions. This becomes even more significant when exhibitions are based around the theme of commemoration, which regularly involve narratives of war and conflict, and which carry with them very particular meanings.

3. Commemorative exhibitions and the representation of war and conflict

Commemorative exhibitions depicting war and conflict are frequently referred to as 'dark exhibitions' (Laing & Frost, 2019; Stone, 2010) as they typically involve displaying objects '... which revolve around death, suffering or the macabre with an often commemorative, educational and reflective message' (Stone, 2010: 55). Their purpose is generally to affirm and reinforce memories that provide a sense of heritage and identity (Laing & Frost, 2019), helping to connect individuals to particular versions of the nation, to the past and to each other (Sumartojo, 2016). They play an important role in both remembering, and in encouraging reflection on past events in the context of their relationship to the present, with the intention of providing lessons for the future (Frost and Laing, 2013; Ashworth, 2002). These 'are important sites through which to explore issues of collective memory and identity' (Cooke, 2018: 447), provoking considerations of who we are, and where we have come from. They can act as 'points of memory', (Crooke, 2016: 89), and may evoke empathy by appealing directly to the feelings and imagination of visitors (Frost & Laing, 2019) or, depending on the circumstances, may 'prick and wound and grab and puncture' (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2006: 358). They can be sites of contestation and opposition, and are frequently criticised for failures in their interpretation and representation of the past (Reeves & Heath-Kelly, 2020; Frost & Laing, 2013; Frost, Wheeler & Harvey, 2008; Whitmarsh, 2001). As such, they are socially constructed, powerful mediums of communication, that carry an aura of authority, garnered through the curatorial process of selection and interpretation (Bennett, 1996), displaying objects of 'contemplation, remembrance or glorification' (Crooke, 2016: 87) as well as debate and contestation.

Commemorative exhibitions provide a sense of what Williams refers to as 'sitedness', spaces that create 'opportunities for people to gather in public with the intention of reflecting on the past' (2007: 181-2). Discussions concerning their meaning have to-date focused primarily in the museum context, resulting largely from the fact that museums are seen to play 'a stronger role than libraries in providing

context via interpretation' (Lester, 2001: 187). As such, museums are credited with responsibility for providing a framework of context and interpretation for users to navigate (Robinson, 2012; Lester, 2001; Besser, 1987), while the library's role is seen more as a cherished repository (Demers et al., 2014), providing access to a vast amount of material for users to make their own connections (Hjorland, 2000; Besser, 1987). Libraries, like museums, are commonly thought of as 'memory institutions', retainers of collective memory (Stainforth, 2016; Robinson, 2012; Manžuch, 2009), they are, however, seen to differ in that libraries proceed along the path of memory simply through their cataloguing and descriptive methodologies (Lester, 2001). It is only museums that are thought to undertake the additional steps of 'actively and self-consciously' authoring '... narratives through their objects' (Robinson, 2012: 423). Emerging literature however, suggests otherwise, recognising the more authoritative and influential role that libraries are playing in the interpretation and curation of objects through the staging of exhibitions (Rogatchevskaia, 2018; Taylor, 2018; Fouracre, 2015). However, the meanings of library exhibitions, particularly commemorative exhibitions, in the public library remain largely unexplored.

4. Study site and methodology

The focus of the research was the 'Goodbye Dublin: The War of Independence in the City', exhibition which was held in Dublin City's Pearse Street Library & Archive, between the 14th of August and the 31st of October 2019, as part of the annual Dublin Festival of History. The library is publicly funded and the exhibition was free to all visitors, it used a mix of original photographs, images, sounds & artefacts, to tell the story of the role that Dublin city played in the Irish War of Independence (1912-1921), a guerrilla conflict between the British state's forces in Ireland and the Irish republican guerrillas in the Irish Volunteers or Irish Republican Army (Dorney 2012). The war is heralded by many as marking the foundation of the Irish state, and was one of a number of significant events commemorated in Ireland, as part of Ireland's Decade of Centenaries (2012-2023). The exhibition charted the many atrocities, ambushes, raids and loss of lives that occurred in Dublin during the period 1919-1921, enabling visitors to connect with a traumatic but important time in the city's past (Carmody 2019).

Adopting a qualitative approach, the research investigated the implications of staging a commemorative exhibition for both the library and the visitor. In particular, it sought to understand the significance of the exhibition in terms of attracting and engaging visitors, and to explore its meaning for the visitor. The research received ethical approval from the ethics committee of TU Dublin and involved two stages. The first stage involved two researchers undertaking 30 semi-structured field

interviews with visitors to the exhibition at various times of the day and week, over the period of the exhibition. Permission was provided by the exhibition organisers for the research to take place, and a sign explaining what it involved was placed on display at the exhibition entrance/exit, in an area that was visible to visitors. Standing in an area close to the entrance/exit, the researchers approached exhibition visitors to request their involvement in the research after they had spent time at the exhibition and just prior to their leaving. On approach, the researchers explained the research, assured the participants of anonymity and confidentiality, and asked for their written consent to be interviewed, at no point were they offered any incentive for their involvement. In keeping with ethical considerations, participants were also assured that they could stop the interview at any point should they wish to do so. Interviewees included both Irish (20 interviews) and International (10 interviews) participants, ranging in age from 18 to 74, however, the majority (19), were middle aged or older. Four of the interviews were undertaken with couples, and in two instances, the questions were answered by both members of the couple, in terms of gender there was an almost equal number of both male and female respondents (17 male and 15 female).

The use of semi-structured interviews was deemed appropriate as they are, as Adams suggests, 'superbly suited' for situations where the questions being asked require follow-up queries and probing (2010: 367). They facilitated a conversational style of questioning (Roulston & Choi 2018), allowing the researchers to 'meander' through questions, facilitating access to respondents' thoughts and feelings (Adams 2010: 367). Participants were prompted to offer accounts of their visit to the exhibition and the meanings it held for them. This involved asking questions such as why they had come to the exhibition, and what they had expected, what had resonated with them and why, as well as being asked about their engagement with the library and if/how this might change as a result of their visit to the exhibition. The second stage of the research involved interviewing two of the exhibition organisers to gain an understanding of their aims and ambitions for the exhibition.

The research took an inductive approach to analysis, allowing themes to emerge from the data, this approach is well recognised as both a convenient and efficient way of analysing qualitative data (Thomas 2003). The process involved both researchers, studying the transcripts, noting possible meanings, then discussing and developing the key themes emerging. Inductive coding began with numerous close readings of the interview transcriptions, consideration of the multiple meanings that were inherent in the data, and the creation of key themes, by one researcher. Appropriate quotes that convey the essence of each theme were then selected. To ensure trustworthiness and to prevent biases, the themes were cross-checked by the second researcher at each stage of the process, this back and forth process continued as the findings, interpretations, and conclusions emerged. This

process of triangulation is acknowledged as an effective means of ensuring trustworthiness (Hill et. al 2005, Johnson 1997).

Three key themes emerged including: the role of the exhibition in providing access to collections and engaging a broader audience; the creation of a multisensory, immersive environment and the collective and personal meanings of the exhibition for visitors. The following sections discuss the key findings of the research, and direct quotes generated through the interviews are used to illustrate the voice of the respondent

5. The library exhibition: providing access to collections and engaging a broader audience

Exhibitions are frequently staged with a clear objective of providing access to collections and to attracting new users, and an interview with the organisers of this exhibition indicated that it had similar aims. For the organisers, making their collections accessible was core, they explained how they regularly staged exhibitions as a means of providing 'information and educational opportunities', an important way of providing 'a nice compactable readable ... narrative'. It was also an important way of 'promoting ... and highlighting' the library's collections, a way of encouraging people to 'come in and have a look ...' and know that 'this is all taken for the most part, from our collections'. Focusing on the 'Dublin story' and emphasising the story of 'the experience of those living in the city', enabled the library to highlight their 'niche', and distinguish their voice, from the larger national cultural institutions which provide a more national perspective. 'Our history' one of the organisers explained 'is dominated by the big story' and this local story, telling 'the history of a place... but also of a people' was, they explained, an important one to tell. This was also significant in terms of appealing to 'different group[s] of people' including non-library users, some of whom, the organisers explained, are not comfortable visiting a library, as they 'think that a library is not for them', and the exhibition, with its emphasis on telling a local story, was a way, they hoped, to help remove barriers and engage these cohorts.

Findings from the interviews with exhibition visitors disclosed that the exhibition was effective in attracting visitors to the library, as most respondents were not frequent library users. The majority of respondents visited only to attend the exhibition, with some explaining that they were not 'a member of any' library and did not use any library services. These included both Irish and international visitors, some of whom had come to the library having seen the exhibition advertised on social media. A number of these respondents had not visited a library for many years, and the exhibition provided a reason to reconnect, helping them, as one respondent explained, to become 'familiar ... comfortable

... and happy ... using' libraries again. Significantly, attending the exhibition enabled them to remember past times spent at the library, this was a place they knew 'from [when] they were a child', somewhere they trusted and had felt connected to, or 'part of', as one respondent explained, a space that was 'part of you ... part of what you own yourself'. For the international visitors, and recent immigrants to the city, it was an opportunity to learn about the history and culture of the country, a chance to 'feel' and get to 'know the country' better. An important finding was the way in which the exhibition not only provided a reason for many respondents to visit the library, but also had implications in terms of changing their perception of libraries and as a consequence, their likelihood of visiting again. For these visitors the visit reminded them of how 'tranquil', the library space could be, and how they enjoyed being able to 'just sit', and reflect. It made them see the library as more of a 'social setting', a place 'that had a lot of things going on' rather than a space, as they had thought, where people were just 'segregated ... reading books'.

Fundamentally, in the context of attracting and making collections accessible to a broad audience, a lack of access to information *about* the exhibition was a point of contention for some respondents. Some respondents explained how they had only 'happened' on the exhibition as they passed on the street, others had been informed by family members or close friends. Others had seen the 'signs outside', but felt that the exhibition needed to be promoted more, requesting that the library 'please do more to communicate it'. Some noted that the theme of the exhibition and its depiction of the impact of the war on different areas of the city would be of particular interest to those living in these different localities. However, they felt that many of these, especially those who 'may not use the library' were unlikely to be aware of the exhibition as it wasn't advertised in places that they were likely to frequent such as 'the local shop'. A key point here was that many respondents felt that unless you were a library user, you were unlikely to know about the exhibition. However, promotion of the exhibition was also an issue for some library users, several of whom explained that they had come to the library for some other reason but had not known the exhibition was taking place. Those that arrived with the intention of visiting the exhibition had been made aware of it through their direct links with other library events, through links with history groups, or by attending other similar events. When asked about the marketing of the exhibition, organisers acknowledged that 'there wasn't the sort of buzz about it that [they] would have liked' explaining that they are 'not good enough at promotion and marketing' as they are 'librarians ... [who] haven't been trained in the dark arts of marketing'.

6. A multisensory, immersive environment

Interview data show that library typically represents an environment that is associated with activities such as reading, writing and computer use, a quiet space that lent itself to individual activities and engagement. The exhibition, however, offered something very different. This was a contextual, multisensory environment that captured respondents' imaginations, enabling them to understand the story, but also to experience it through the original texts, objects, sounds & images (figure 1). This was a conscious effort by the organisers to 'design an interesting and engaging' exhibition that would 'appeal to a broad section of people, ... people who are very literate, but also maybe people who are less literate, or maybe people ... who have a prior knowledge of the history, [or] who have very little knowledge of the history'. For them it was important that the exhibition should offer 'a mix of media to get the story across' to provide 'layers of access'. This mix of media created an environment where the visual representations and soundscapes of war immersed and connected respondents to the past in quite a visceral way, eliciting quite strong, emotive reactions. As one respondent explained, the sounds of 'gunshot and the ... horses' hooves on the cobbles' made the war seem 'much more real'. This was quite a different, and impactful encounter that engaged and drew the visitors into the narrative, providing, as one respondent explained, 'a different sense of the story'.



Figure1: Visitors surrounded by the sights and sounds of warfare

For many, these encounters were unexpected, they remarked, for example, on how they had anticipated 'all of the military stuff', but had not really considered 'the unforeseen consequences for civilians', the 'ordinary people and the mad things that they did as part of all this'. As one respondent explained:

'I think what ... seems to engage me ... is ... the impact it had on civilian life, especially with women and children. We all know about the main players, the soldiers, the revolutionaries but sometimes those ordinary people are left behind'.

The multisensory nature of the exhibition offered a new and different framework for understanding the war, arousing empathy and prompting reflection. Here, on coming face to face with images of the victims of the war, respondents found themselves relating to the ordinariness of those involved, reflecting on their own lives, and comments on how 'it could have been' them were frequent. The many images of civilians, women and children caught up in a brutal war prompted thoughts of the impact of war on everyday life (figures 2 & 3), and how, as one respondent put it, the war 'really mess[ed] up people's lives ...'. In many cases this caused respondents to question the senselessness of not just this war, but wars more generally and the idea of such '...mindless death'.



Figure 2: Visitors were struck by the many images and descriptions of the impact of the war on civilians



Figure 3: The exhibition told of the many children killed or injured during the war

The exhibition, as is the case with commemorative events more generally, was not without its controversy, and while most respondents found it enjoyable and intellectually engaging, others felt it was too simplistic, didn't 'overly engage' or elaborate on what they considered to be the more 'significant' events of the war. These respondents were disappointed, and felt that the exhibition had only a limited appeal, suitable only for tourists or those who 'wouldn't know a great deal about' the war. The organisers were aware that such exhibitions may cause contention and for them this was all part of the encounter. More generally, however the interplay of visuals and sounds offered respondents a palpable insight into the war, helping respondents make sense of what many of them considered to be a very 'complex story'.

7. Taking on new meanings: the significance for visitors

At the exhibition, time took on a new meaning for respondents; here the past and present intertwined prompting respondents to consider the meanings of the war in the context of current events and contemporary meanings. One respondent, for example, spoke of how the exhibition 'struck a chord ... being quite contemporary and relevant with what's happening today with Brexit and everything else'. Others noted how it added meaning to the present while making the past seem 'real' and more relevant to their present lives. In many instances, it provoked respondents to think about Ireland as a nation, where it had come from, and the implications of the war in terms of Ireland's 'place in Europe and in the world' today. This was a space where for many respondents, collective identities were

reinstated and reinforced, a space where they could reflect on how the War of Independence had shaped 'who we are as a nation' and had 'collectively shaped our present and future'. It prompted many to reflect on the role the war had played in the formation of Irish society, and how, as one respondent noted: 'history plays a very, very important part in the whole development of society'. The exhibition, another explained, was important in helping us 'learn from history, learn about the lives of others and other societies hopefully so we're inspired to think differently about the past, present & future'.

In the midst of this collective consciousness, the exhibition also elicited many personal memories and reflections on individual identity. Some respondents had attended because they had ancestors that were 'half Irish' but many others had more recent and direct links such as grandfathers and uncles that had fought in the war. Respondents regularly spoke of the stories their fathers or grandfathers had told them about the war, or about characters involved in the war. For these respondents the exhibition had particular resonance, it made them feel proud, providing them with an opportunity to reminisce, on something that, as one explained, was 'a personal' link to their history and identity. This connection with their past was tremendously important, a way of remembering, as one respondent explained, 'who you are, where you came from, what you stand for, what your ancestors were all about'. The objects, photographs and video clips sparked memories that were personally meaningful, allowing respondents to reflect on more individual narratives. For many this was a way of strengthening their identity as one respondent explained, 'it kind of reinforces it ... this is my granddad ... a brigade commander of the IRA in the north' while another noted that '... you're kind of conscious of, ... [this is] my identity'. The importance of remembering was articulated clearly by one respondent who described the personal significance of the exhibition for them:

'I feel that they did it for us, and for our children and our grandchildren and I think that ... you've [got to have] the respect to know about it and to learn about what they did'.

While some respondents experienced very personal links with the war itself, others felt more of a connection with the maps and images of the city. These allowed them to orientate important locations and to connect with the city more generally, as one respondent explained, they provided, 'a sense of Dublin ... and we're part of Dublin, so that's a connection, it's a real strong connection'. From the organiser's perspective, this was an important goal of the exhibition, to help to build 'a sense of belonging to a place', which involves as they explained, 'knowing the history or getting involved in the history'. In this context it also had implications, for tourists, and recent immigrants to Ireland as it was

an important means of getting insight into Ireland and Irish people. Helping them, as one explained, to understand 'the behaviour, the culture, the values' of the country, and where these derived from. This provided a way of identifying with Irish culture and what it means to be Irish, making some as one explained, 'feel closer to Irish culture'. For others, the images provided an understanding of the historical relevance of places they had visited in the city, as one tourist explained 'I can't imagine it ... I was in O'Connell street today and ... it's a totally different life today, and I never imagined that it was ... destroyed like this ...'.

8. Concluding discussion

This findings of this paper point to a number of important conclusions regarding the significance of the staging of commemorative exhibitions in public libraries. Of particular importance, in light of the need for libraries to attract and engage users (Mainka et al., 2013; Cooke, 2018), the exhibition had a broad and varied appeal, connecting with Irish and non-Irish residents, as well as tourists visiting the city. It offered a means of enticing new visitors, as well as providing an opportunity to reconnect with those that had lapsed and not engaged with libraries for many years. In staging the exhibition, the library space assumes new and different meanings for the visitor, serving to challenge previous held perceptions and triggering visitors to reconsider libraries as more dynamic and interactive spaces. Here, transformed by the exhibition, the library becomes a multisensory space, where the visual richness of the photographs and images, combined with the original soundscape, offer an intimate, connected and profound encounter with the past. As a commemorative exhibition imbued with the sights and sounds of warfare, it presents a powerful narrative, transforming the library into an emotionally charged environment, where visitors, confronted with tangible evidence of the realities of war, experience feelings of shock, sorrow, and empathy (Laing & Frost, 2019). These many displays and visual & audio narratives offer, as Cline (2012) and Gurian (1991) suggest, different avenues and pathways for exploration, helping visitors to contextualise, clarify, reaffirm, contest, or complement previous understandings of the war. This is a powerful means of immersing visitors, linking key events, conveying information through both textual and visual narrative, absorbing the visitor, and affording alternative ways for them to interact with the library and its collections.

Contrary to claims that the role of the library as 'memory institution' exists outside of the realm of 'actively and self-consciously' authoring '... narratives through their objects' (Robinson, 2012: 423), the staging of a commemorative exhibition indicates otherwise. This was a conscious and active authoring and articulation of the past, which, through the use of original photographs, images, sounds & artefacts, transformed the library into a more dynamic and interactive space. In staging the exhibition, the role and meaning of the library is extended far beyond the cherished repository

referred to by Demers et al., (2014). Here, visitors are offered an interactive and multisensory way to engage, giving them, not only access to the library collections, which as Robinson (2012) explains is the central tenet of the library, but also rendering these collections more meaningful. With its emphasis on telling the story of the War of Independence in the city, the exhibition helps to establish the library's voice, giving evidence to its role and relevance in representing and portraying a more local perspective. This not only helps distinguish the library and its exhibition from that of other institutions, but has real meaning in terms of appealing and adding meaning to the visit for both frequent and new library visitors as the commemorative nature of the exhibition with its focus on the role of the city in the War of Independence resonated with visitors.

As a space where, as Cline (2012) explains, objects are brought together to provide new contexts and stories, providing a reference point for personal and collective memory and meaning, the exhibition helps fulfil the role of the library as informant, educator and entertainer (Moore, 2004). It presents an alternative, dynamic and entertaining library environment, that offers both an engaging and revealing encounter for the visitor. It speaks to a range of voices with varying interests, engaging visitors through a range of media, offering new perspectives and associations that both attracts and engages new and existing library visitors. In the context of public policy that aims to increase library usage and make libraries more relevant to a broader audience (Enright, 2020), the staging of commemorative exhibitions in libraries holds clear and definite potential. A key point that must be taken on board if they are to be successful however, is the need for more varied and diverse marketing of the exhibition. In order to reach and appeal to new and broader audiences it is imperative that the exhibition is communicated in formats that are relevant and accessible to these audiences. This of course implies the need for both greater resources and the development of areas of expertise currently outside the scope of the library, but which is essential if the aims and potential of the exhibitions are to be achieved.

The exhibition is, as Cutcher et. al. (2012) contend, a space of agency and performativity. This is an environment where both the library and the visitor shape the narrative, a multifaceted and complex encounter, where meanings are actively interpreted and negotiated. In its curation of the exhibition, the library provides a conscious framing of the past to communicate a particular narrative, and while this narrative carries an aura of authority, visitors actively question, reflect, contest, and as suggested by Vergo (1989), infer their own interpretations and meaning. This has real meaning for the library visitor, as the exhibition prompts them to bring their own experiences to bear, to view the displays from their own subjective experiences, memories and interests, enabling them to create a personal journey of exploration and meaning. In doing so, it facilitates an active form of mean making,

constructing routes of access and involving visitors in acts of exchange with the library. These exchanges are not time bound, as for the visitors the exhibition prompts them to contemplate the meanings of these past events in the context of the present, causing them to reassess and consider contemporary issues and world events. This provides ways, as Lord & Piacante (2014) suggest, for visitors to find new levels of meaning and knowledge and for some, as MacLean (1999) contends, this is a revelatory journey, where personal memories and issues of collective, national identity are roused (Drozdowski, Waterton and Sumartojo, 2019). This provides as Falk & Dierking (2000) suggest, opportunities for reminiscing or finding comfort in these recollections, or in reflecting on a cityscape long since altered and changed. It also opens up avenues for contestation and dialogue (Laing & Frost, 2019), and presents opportunities for the acknowledgment and reaffirmation of a shared and connected past.

At the outset this research endeavoured to stimulate discussion on commemorative exhibitions as a practice in public libraries, and in doing so brings to light the complexity of commemorative exhibitions and their meanings and importance in the context of public libraries. In conclusion, it reasserts the call by Rogatchevskaia (2018) and Fouracre (2015) for more research into library exhibitions in general, but adds to this by emphasising the need for further research into commemorative exhibitions as a particular type of library exhibition.

References

Adams, W.C. (2010) Conducting Semi-structured Interviews, in: J.S. Wholey, H. P. Hatry & K.E. Newcomer (Eds.) *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, 3rd Edition, pp. 365-377, San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.

Baker, D. (2017) The End of Wisdom? The Future of Libraries in the Digital Age, in: D. Baker, & W. Evans, (Eds.) *The End of Wisdom? The Future of Libraries in the Digital Age*, pp 36-73 Cambridge, MA : Chandos Publishing an imprint of Elsevier.

Bennett, T. (1996) The Exhibitionary Complex, in: R. Greenberg, B.W. Ferguson & S. Nairne (Eds.) *Thinking about Exhibitions*, pp. 81–112 (London: Routledge).

Besser, H. (1987) The Changing Museum, in Ching-chih Chen (ed), *Information: The Transformation of Society (Proceedings of the 50th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Information Science)*, Medford, NJ: Learned Information, Inc, pages 14-19 Available at: <https://www.miap.hosting.nyu.edu/program/04spring/chin-libraries.html> [Accessed 24th August 2021]

Blunden, J. (2017) Adding 'something more' to looking: the interaction of artefact, verbiage and visitor in museum exhibitions. *Visual Communications*, Volume: 19 issue: 1, pp's: 45-71

- Bodnick, M. 2012. Will public libraries become extinct? Forbes, Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2012/10/02/will-public-libraries-become-extinct/> [Accessed: 2nd May, 2021].
- Brown, E. and Power, C. (2006) Exhibits in Libraries: A Practical Guide. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.
- Bull, J., and Leyshon, M. (2010) Writing the moment: Landscape and memory-image. *Spatial Practices*, 10: 124–148.
- Carmody, D (2019) Goodbye Dublin: The War of Independence in the City. Available at: <http://www.newsfour.ie/2019/10/goodbye-dublin-the-war-of-independence-in-the-city/> [Accessed; 17th April 2021].
- Cleeve, M. (1995) Taking a stand: the market realities of exhibition and display work. *Librarian Career Development Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 31–35*
- Chen, A, Pickle, S. and Waldroup, H. (2015) “Changing and Expanding Libraries: Exhibitions, Institutional Repositories, and the Future of Academia.” In *The Process of Discovery: The CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program and the Future of the Academy*, edited by J. C. Maclachlan, J. C. Elizabeth, A. Waraksa, and C. Williford, 62–81. Washington DC: Council on Library and Information. Available at: <https://clir.wordpress.clir.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/pub167.pdf#page=88>. Search in Google Scholar [Accessed 12th August 2021]
- Cline, A. C. (2012) The Evolving Role of the Exhibition and its Impact on Art and Culture. Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2012. Trinity College Digital Repository, <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/267> [Accessed: 13th August 2020]
- Cooke, S. (2018) ‘A modern chamber of horrors’? Temporary Holocaust exhibitions as sites of memory: the 1961 Warsaw Ghetto commemoration exhibition, Melbourne, *Holocaust Studies, Volume 24, No. 4, pp. 445-465*.
- Crooke, E. (2016) Artefacts as Agents for Change: Commemoration and Exchange via Material Culture, *Irish Political Studies, Volume 31, No. 1, pp. 86-100*.
- Cutcher, L. Dale, K. Hancock, P., Tyler, M. (2016) Spaces and Places of Remembering and Commemoration. *Organization, Volume 23, No. 1, pp. 3–9*
- Demers, P, Beaudry, G., Bjornson, P., Carroll, M., Couture, C., Gray, C., Hare, J., Ingles, E., Ketelaar, E., McMaster, G., Roberts, K. (2014). Expert Panel Report on The Future Now: Canada’s Libraries, Archives, and Public Memory. *Royal Society of Canada, Ottawa, ON. ISBN: 978-1-928140-01-6*
- Dorney, J. (2012) The Irish War of Independence: A Brief Overview. Available at: https://www.theirishstory.com/2012/09/18/the-irish-war-of-independence-a-brief-overview/#.YHr_LGdKiUk [Accessed: 17th of April, 2021]

Drozdowski, D., Waterton, E., & Sumartojo, S. (2019). Cultural memory and identity in the context of war: Experiential, place-based and political concerns. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 101(910), 251-272. doi:10.1017/S1816383119000110.

Enright, T. (2018). *OUR PUBLIC LIBRARIES 2022: Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities* Published by the Department of Rural and Community Development, Dublin

Falk, J. H., & Dierking, L.D. (2000) *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* American Association for State and Local History Book Series. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, CA.

Fouracre, D. (2015) Making an Exhibition of Ourselves? Academic Libraries and Exhibitions Today. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vo. 41, pp. 377-385.

Frost, W., Wheeler, F., Harvey, M. (2008) *Commemorative events: Sacrifice, identity and dissonance*. In *International Perspectives of Festivals and Events*, 1st Edition. Edited by Ali Knight, J., Robertson, M. Fyall, A., Ladkin, A. Amsterdam : Elsevier, pp. 161-171.

Gurian, E. H. (1991) *Noodling Around with Exhibition Opportunities* in: 'Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display. Karp, I. & Lavine, S.D. eds. (1991). Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington & London

Haines, C. (2013) Exhibitions on Exhibitions. *Mousse Magazine*, Vol. 39. Available at: <http://moussemagazine.it/product/mousse-39/> [Accessed: 10th August 2020]

Heseltine, R. (2020) Toward a New Understanding of the Purpose and Practice of Public Libraries in the Twenty-First Century, *Public Library Quarterly*, 39:1, 2-16, DOI: 10.1080/01616846.2018.1532279

Harris, M. H. (1999) *History of Libraries in the Western World*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow

Hill, C. E., Knox, S., Thompson, B. J., Williams, E. N., Hess, S. A., & Ladany, N. (2005). *Consensual qualitative research: An update*. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 52, 196-205.

Hirsch, M., & Spitzer, J. (2006) Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission, *Poetics Today*, 27(2), pp. 353– 383.

Hjørland, B. (2000) Documents, memory institutions and information science. *Journal of Documentation* Vol. 56, no. 1: pp. 27-41.

Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2000) Changing Values in the Art Museum: rethinking communication and learning. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Volume 6, Issue 1, pp 9-31

Hye, J. S. & Yeon, L. J. (2020) "A Study on the Operation Method and User Perception of Public Libraries During Tour," *Journal of the Society for Information Management*. Korean Society for Information Management, 37(2), pp. 95–117. Available at: <https://www.koreascience.or.kr/article/JAKO202020264316488.pdf> [Accessed: 10th August 2020]

Jochumsen, H., Skot-Hansen, D., & Hvenegaard Rasmussen, C. (2017) Towards Culture 3.0 – performative space in the public library, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 23:4, 512-524, DOI: 10.1080/10286632.2015.1043291

Johnson, B. R. (1997). Examining the validity structure of qualitative research. *Education*, 118(3), 282-292.

Laing, J. H., & Frost, W. (2013) *Commemorative Events Memory, Identities, Conflict*. London: Routledge

Laing, J. H., & Frost, W. (2019) Presenting narratives of empathy through dark commemorative exhibitions during the Centenary of World War One. *Tourism Management*, Vol. 74, pp. 190-199.

Lavine, S. Karp, I. (eds) *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Leorke, D. Wyatt, D. & McQuire, S. (2018) "More than just a library": Public libraries in the 'smart city'. *City, Culture and Society Vol. 15*, pp. 37-44

Lester, R. (2001) The Convergence of Museums and Libraries? *Alexandria*, 13(3), 183–191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/095574900101300306>

Lord, B., Piacente, M. (eds.) (2014) *Manuel of Museum Exhibitions 2nd Edition*. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Boulder, NY, Toronto, U.K.

Mainka, A., Hartmann, S., Orszulok, L., Peters, I., Stallmann, A., and Stock, W.G (2013). Public Libraries in the Knowledge Society: Core Services of Libraries in Informational World Cities. *Libri, Volume 63, No. 4*, pp. 295–319

Manoff, M. (2001) "The Symbolic Meaning of Libraries in a Digital Age." *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, vol. 1 no. 4, p. 371-381. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/pla.2001.0075.

Manžuch, Z., (2009) Archives, libraries and museums as communicators of memory in the European Union projects. *Information research*, Vol. 14, No. 2, paper 400. Available at: <http://informationr.net/ir/14-2/paper400.html> {Accessed 31st March 2021}

Mattern, S. (2014) Library as Infrastructure. *Places Journal* Available at: <https://placesjournal.org/article/library-as-infrastructure/> [Accessed; 24th April, 2021]

Mickiewicz, P. (2016). Access and its limits: The contemporary library as a public space. *Space and Culture*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 237–250.

Moore, N. (2004) Public library trends, *Cultural Trends*, 13:1, 27-57, DOI: 10.1080/0954896042000216437

Oldenburg, R. (1989) *The great good place: Cafés, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day*. New York: Paragon House.

Reeves, A. & Heath-Kelly, C. (2020) Curating conflict: political violence in museums, memorials, and exhibitions, *Critical Military Studies*, 6:3-4, pp. 243-253, DOI: 10.1080/23337486.2020.1797328

Robinson, H. (2012) Remembering things differently: museums, libraries and archives as memory institutions and the implications for convergence, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 27:4, 413-429

Rogatchevskaia, E. (2018) Revolution Collected and Curated Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths at the British Library. *Slavic & East European Information Resources*, Vol. 19, No. 3-4, pp. 175-200.

Roulston, K. & Choi, M. (2018) Qualitative Interviews, in U. Flick (ed.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*, pp. 233-249, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne: SAGE.

Sale, L.M. (2019), More than Memory: Commemorative Space and Ownership in Post-Conflict South Africa and Mozambique. PhD Thesis available at: <https://core.ac.uk/reader/289166543> [Accessed 22nd March 2021]

Sandifer, C. (2003) Technological Novelty and Open-Endedness: Two Characteristics of Interactive Exhibits that Contribute to the Holding of Visitor Attention in a Science Museum. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, Volume 40, No. 2, pp. 121-137. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/tea.10068>. [Accessed 6th September 2021]

Scott, R. (2011) The Role of Public Libraries in Community Building, *Public Library Quarterly*, 30:3, 191-227, DOI: 10.1080/01616846.2011.599283

Stainforth, E. (2016) From museum to memory institution: the politics of European culture online. *Museum & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 323-337.

Stone, P.R. (2010) Death, Dying and Dark Tourism in Contemporary Society: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis. (PhD Thesis, University of Central Lancashire. Available at: http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/1870/1/StonePPhD_thesis_final.pdf [Accessed 10th September 2021]

Sumartojo, S. (2016), Commemorative atmospheres: memorial sites, collective events and the experience of national identity. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 41, pp. 541-553. doi:10.1111/tran.12144

Taylor, M.L. (2018) Special Collections Exhibitions: How They Pay Dividends for Your Library. *RBM A Journal of Rare Books Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage*, Volume 19, No. 2, pp. 121-132.

Thomas, D. R. (2003) A general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis. Available at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.462.5445&rep=rep1&type=pdf> [Accessed 12th September 2021]

Tokić, k. & Tokić, I. (2018) Tourism potential of libraries. *Tourism Review* Vol. 66, No. 4, pp. 443 – 460.

Troll, D.S. (2002) How and Why Libraries Are Changing: What We Know and What We Need to Know *Libraries and the Academy*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 99–123.

Vergo, P. (1989) The Reticent Object. In. Vergo, P. (ed.) *The New Museology*, Reaktion Books, London. pp. 41-59.

harris

Whitmarsh, A. (2001) We will remember them: Memory and commemoration in war museums. *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, 7. Available at: from <https://www.jcms-journal.com/articles/10.5334/jcms.7013/>. [Accessed: 14th August 2020]

Williams, P. (2007) *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*. Oxford and New York: Berg.

Williams, L. (2011) 'Exhibitions in Libraries. The Role of the Information Professional' (MA thesis, University of Sheffield, 2011). Available at: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a6d1/a567271283ebca4c690411723326863d24cb.pdf?_ga=2.227653849.515927653.1597237664-1964565213.1594729912 [Accessed: 26th July 2020]

Wood, E. (2021) Libraries Full Circle: The Cross Section of Community, the Public Sphere, and Third Place, *Public Library Quarterly*, 40:2, 144-166, DOI: 10.1080/01616846.2020.1737491

Worstall, T. (2014). 'Close The Libraries And Buy Everyone An Amazon Kindle Unlimited Subscription'. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2014/07/18/close-the-libraries-and-buy-everyone-an-amazon-kindle-unlimited-subscription/> [Accessed: 18th August 2021]