

## Museum of London - a City Museum in Transition

Michael Hebbert

Bartlett School of Planning, University College London, UK

[m.hebbert@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:m.hebbert@ucl.ac.uk)

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**\*\* author can supply latest version of this work-in-progress \*\***

**Abstract:** The Museum of London (MoL) is one of the world's largest and best-curated collections. It was formed fifty years ago from the merger of two rivals: the archaeologically oriented Guildhall Museum, representing the antiquarian harvest from intensification of the central business district, which coincides with London's ancient core municipality; and the London Museum, metropolitan in scope, eclectic in its collections, oriented towards the scale and diversity of the modern city. From its formation MoL has sought to combine and reconcile these strands, making it - as IUAV expert Prof Donatella Calabi notes - a seminal example of a modern city museum. MoL's purpose-built home in the architecturally famous Barbican complex suffers from a fatal defect. Its entrance on an elevated deck is inaccessible, limiting visitor numbers. After several unsuccessful attempts to open up ground-level access, the museum has decided to relocate. MoL seized the opportunity to acquire two halls formerly belonging to the wholesale meat market at Smithfield, in a prime visitor location close to the massively enlarged railway station at Farringdon, meeting point of London's north-south and east-west Crossrail routes. The new premises combine spacious ground levels under high domed roofs with deep cellars intended for cold storage of meat. Plans for the transition are well advanced with MoL scheduled to reopen its doors in 2023. The paper discusses the challenge of relocating the Museum from a purpose-built modernist structure on an elevated deck, to buildings that are larger and older, with street access from all sides; and the consequent choices for organisation and presentation of the collections. We see how those basic questions of urban museology which fuelled the rivalry between Guildhall and London collections a hundred years ago continue to exercise the MoL's curators today.

**Keywords:** city museums, London, urban history



## *Introduction*

The UNESCO-funded International Council on Museums, ICOM, has a special sub-network of museums that are in and about cities, called CAMOC – the International Committee for the Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities. CAMOC publishes an online review three times a year and its annual workshops, hosted by member institutions around the world, have taken place in Moscow (2005), Boston (2006), Vienna (2007), Seoul (2008), Istanbul (2009), Shanghai (2010), Berlin (2011), Vancouver (2012), Rio de Janeiro (2013), Göteborg (2014), Moscow again (2015), Milan (2016), Mexico City (2017), Frankfurt (2018) and most recently Lisbon (3-4 May 2019), courtesy of the Museu de Lisboa. Though city museums are no more than a minute subset of the vast category of museums that are located in cities and sometimes named after them, they are often highly visible as bearers of a city's collective memory and contributors to its contemporary brand image. My paper discusses one of the oldest and largest city museums, the Museum of London. Though London hasn't so far hosted a gathering of fellow-institutions, it provides an important reference point for them, all the more so as the museum is in the process of relocating from its present purpose-built premises to a new and much larger home in a pair of former market buildings, with all that implies for a shake-up of the displays, the collections, and the entire scope and purpose of the museum.

In a comparative perspective, city museums can be said to have sprung from two distinct starting-points. On the one hand, they originate in early modern 'cabinets of curiosities', miscellaneous collections of items received, inherited or churned up out of the ground through the ceaseless process of urban development. Local patriotism has a strong antiquarian dimension. The demand to display and explain a city's memorabilia lies at the origin of many important collections. But interestingly for us, the other stimulus has come from the rise of municipalism and town planning movement, with its belief that cities are collective personalities who should actively shape their futures, and its corollary that citizens need to understand and appreciate

their civic past. Early twentieth century pioneers such as Patrick Geddes in Edinburgh and Marcel Poëte in Paris attached great importance to museums as promoters of collective awareness. In this sense, a city museum was to the municipalist movement as the great national capital collections were to the rise of the nation-state: a shrine to territorial identity.

The challenge of reconciling these different rationales continues to absorb curators and directors today, and is the topic of much museological discussion in CAMOC gatherings and publications: what priority should be given to display of archaeological collections ? Should material be chronologically ordered or grouped thematically ? How can the multi-ethnic diversity of modern cities be reflected and hegemony of dead white men avoided ? The museologist Rainey Tisdale, who describes herself as an ‘independent curator and think tank of one’, suggests that museums are finding it difficult to adjust to twenty-first century expectations and mores: many ‘seem to be operating under an outdated 20<sup>th</sup>-century model and are having trouble articulating and demonstrating their public value. The public doesn't necessarily want to learn what history museums want to teach them, and they don't necessarily want to learn in the ways that history museums are offering.’ Her diagnosis points towards a more people-centred approach, mirroring the diversity of contemporary urban residents (Tisdale 2013).

For an alternative perspective we need look no further than IUAV where for the past decade a distinguished Venetian, the historian and activist Prof Donatella Calabi (fig.1) has led an important comparative study of the role of city museums in Europe. Her prolific writings include major contributions to the history of the Venetian Republic, the cities, ports, shops, markets and streets of Europe, the historiography of cities and city planning, and the seminal work of Marcel Poëte. In her work we find an emphasis on the importance of the museum within the urban public realm, which is the topic of Track 15 of AESOP's 2019 Venice conference, Like Hannah Arendt, she sees the public realm both in terms of materiality of buildings and urbanism, and as a

dimension of human thought. Physically, she wants a museum to hold up a mirror not just to the historic core beloved of archaeology but to the larger reality of the contemporary metropolis in its entirety. Her focus on the built fabric leads naturally into the realm of maps, designs, drawings and images, and from there into the digital universe of virtual urban realities – a different but no less challenging path for museological practice (Calabi 2012).



fig.1: Prof Donatella Calabi, IUAV

## 2. *Origins of the Museum of London*

The history of MoL is engagingly narrated in Francis Sheppard ‘s book *The Treasury of London’s Past* (1991). Today’s institution originates in two very different collections. These echo the archetypal origin narratives of museum history, but with

an additional difference caused by the great peculiarity of London's local government history, in which the original mediaeval city corporation has resisted enlargement, retaining its territorial limits and its charters of autonomy while modern London has grown up around it. So when we speak about 'the City', or the Square Mile, we refer to a territory that corresponds more or less with the two-thousand-year-old Roman settlement of Londinium, and its thousand-year-old Corporation; whereas when we speak about 'London' we refer to the entirety of the metropolitan area inside its encircling green belt, with its subdivision into 33 boroughs since 1963, and its overall Mayor and Greater London Assembly since 2000 (Davies 1988, Hebbert 1997, Travers 2002).

Like many city museums, London's has its earliest origins in the collection of ancient objects acquired through the centuries by the historic municipality. As well as a port and a centre of commerce, the Square Mile began in the eighteenth century to develop a specialist vocation as an international financial capital. The continuous churn of redevelopment as homes and workshops were displaced by offices and trading floors brought to light a stream of archaeological findings. Shepherd describes the initial reluctance of the commercially-minded City authorities to engage with archaeology and accept stewardship of historic findings. From 1826 the library of the Corporation of London's mediaeval Guildhall did provide space for a fast-growing collection of 'antiquities and curiosities', but had no curatorial policy. For example, the City of London showed no interest in the astonishing Roman findings collected by the local antiquarian Charles Roach Smith (fig.2) which went instead to the British Museum in 1856. Not until the later nineteenth century was there a change of attitude in the City towards conservation of Roman and mediaeval remains, and acquisition of artefacts. In 1890s the library collection was organised for public display and opened as the Guildhall Museum, publishing its first catalogue in 1903.

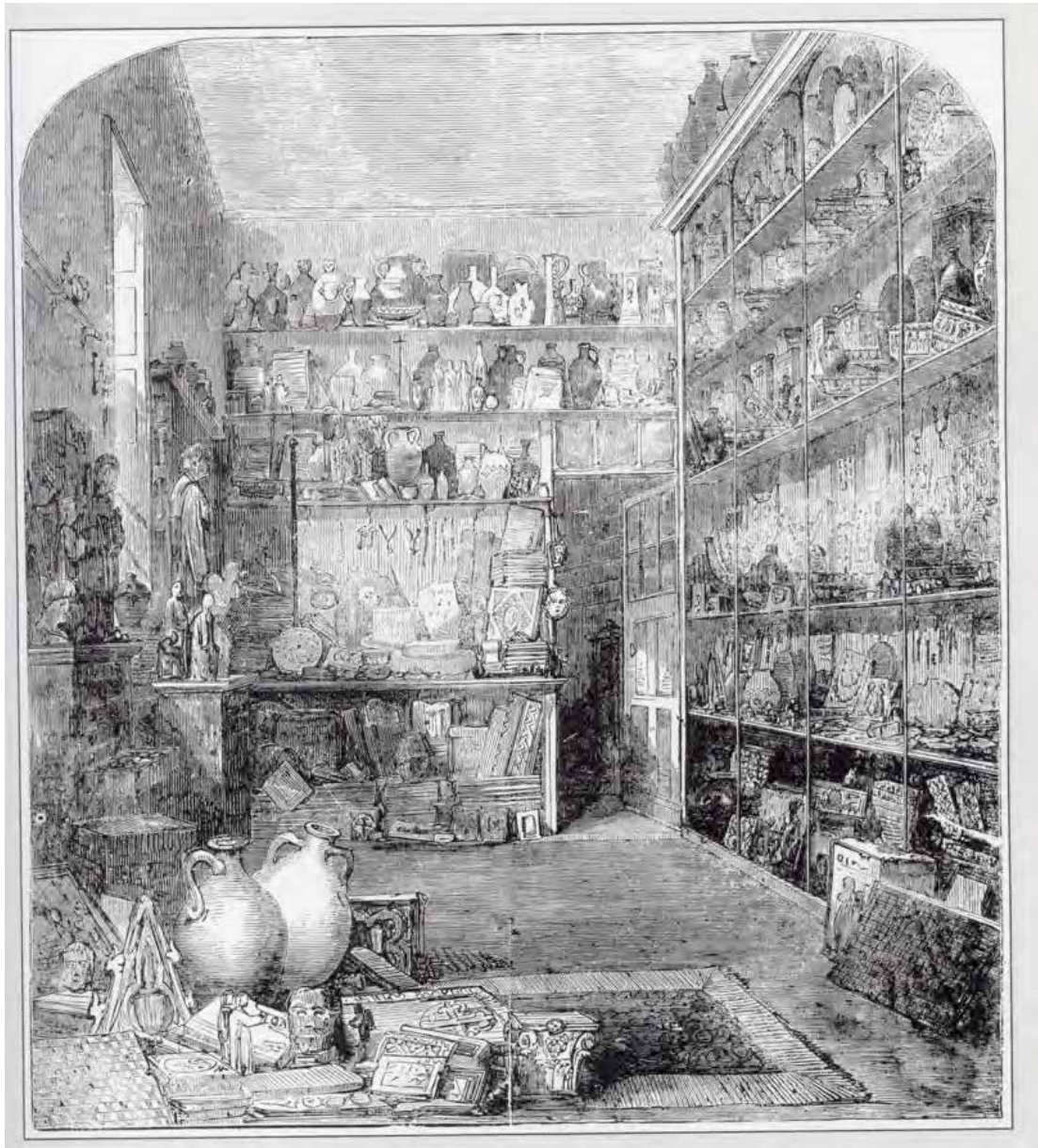


Fig.2 Antiquities of Roman London collected by Charles Roach Smith

London's second city museum was launched in 1910. The London Museum was the brainchild of two wealthy aristocrats, Lord Harcourt and Viscount Esher, who had visited Paris together in 1890 and contrasted the scope and vitality of the Musée Carnavalet with the Guildhall Museum's parochial interest in the antiquities of the Square Mile. They conceived a museum for the whole metropolis, past and present, containing

‘everything which could be collected of historic interest connected with London from the earliest times: pictures, china, costume, arms, engravings, miniatures, snuffboxes, manuscripts . . .’

Harcourt brought plutocratic connections through his marriage to Pierpont Morgan’s niece, and Esher as a courtier brought royal patronage and the offer of accommodation in Kensington Palace, as well as loans of Queen Victoria’s collections of dolls, for whom she made the costumes, and sets of her ceremonial robes. Shepperd describes how the notions of a ‘royal treasure box’ and ‘London Carnavalet’ were fused under the inspired leadership of the Museum’s first Keeper, Sir Guy Laking, a fashionable playboy and collector of antique arms, whose father had been Queen Victoria’s physician and confidant (1991, 45). Laking robustly deflected complaints and legal threats from the City of London, who claimed a breach of the Corporation’s ancient chartered privileges. He had a flair for showmanship which quickly established the Museum in the public imagination. In 1912 when workers digging the foundations of the London County Council’s headquarters on the south bank of Thames opposite Westminster discovered the remains of a Roman boat, Laking supervised the excavation of the 22-ton keel and ribs and led them ceremonially back to his Museum at Kensington Palace (fig.3). From the Franco-British Expo at White City in 1908-9 he acquired some spectacular tableaux by the model-makers Thorp of London, including a display of the Great Fire of 1666 with electronic fire effects that remains popular to this day.



fig.3 Sir Guy Laking, First Keeper of the London Museum

The London Museum's positive policy towards collection was continued by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Keeper from 1926 to 1944, who combined an outstanding archaeological reputation with a commitment to gather 'all classes of material from every period'. He pioneered the Museum's fashion and costume collections, and had a foresight to acquire a hansom cab at a time when such vehicles were still plying the city's streets. Relocated to Lancaster House, Wheeler built up the museum both as a visitor attraction and a centre for urban research. He brought in London Society, *Survey of London* and the Royal Archaeological Institute as tenants, but his proposal

in 1927 for a merger with the Guildhall Museum fell on deaf ears. The two establishments continued to exist in rivalry, tempered by an understanding that the Guildhall would limit its acquisitions to the Square Mile, leaving the rest to the London Museum.

Both museums were bombed out during the Second World War. The London Museum reopened in 1951 in its former base at Kensington Palace, readmitted by Royal Warrant on the understanding that its lease was temporary. Guildhall Museum reopened in 1955 in the Royal Exchange beside the Bank of England, likewise on an interim basis. The fact that neither of London's city museums possessed a permanent home revived discussion of a potential merger. Negotiations began in earnest in 1959, with central government acting as broker, and by 1963 a board of governors was already meeting, with Viscount Harcourt in the chair and six members appointed by the government, the Corporation of London and the London County Council respectively, each party being committed to contribute an equal share of capital and running costs (*Antiquity* 1963). A site for the museum's new home had been identified in the vast area destroyed by wartime bombing north of St Paul's Cathedral, beside the roundabout that terminated 'Route 11', the London County Council's dual carriageway along London Wall, and immediately to the south of the City Corporation's ambitious comprehensive Barbican redevelopment (City of London 1959). Legislation followed in 1965, building started in 1971, the Queen Mother laid the foundation stone on March 29<sup>th</sup> 1973, and 'the largest urban-history museum in the world' (Lewis 2019) opened its doors on December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1976.

#### *The Museum of London since 1976*

The Barbican was designed by the young architectural partnership of Geoffrey Powell, Joe Chamberlain and Christoph Bon. Followers of Corbusier, they conceived the entire site as a megastructure with residential towers, educational, cultural and social facilities linked by a series of elevated decks and walkways, releasing the ground and

subterranean levels for vehicle circulation, parking and storage. In the Modernist boom of the Sixties the Barbican's upper-level pedestrian system triggered proposals to extend the typology of podium and tower development across the fabric of London. Though these plans were quickly abandoned elsewhere (Hebbert 1991) a vertical segregation concept continues to dictate patterns of movement around the Barbican today.

The Museum of London was the work of another young architectural team, Philip Powell (no relation) and Hidalgo Moya. The design incorporated the Barbican's elevated pedestrian deck, with the complication that their museum had to be wrapped around the retained livery hall (at street level) of the Ironmongers' Company. No less committed Modernists than the Barbican designers, their approach was less dramatic and more humanistic and people-centred (Saumarez-Smith 1995). They preferred white walls to Brutalist shuttered concrete, believing that design should aim above all to avoid stress through a simple circulation plan, easy ramps between levels, full-length picture windows opening onto gardens, and 'attractive but unassertive' settings for displays (Powell & Moya 1966). In their concern with internal user comfort the architects gave less thought to the external aspect of the Museum of London, relying on a large drum containing a sunken garden in the middle of the Route 11 roundabout to give visibility (Fig.4).



fig.4 Powell and Moya's scheme in 1966

Unlike Powell and Moya's subsequent work at Wolfson College Oxford, or Chamberlin Powell & Bon's adjacent Barbican project, the design was not well received. The lack of a formal entrance at ground level proved problematic from day one, when the H.M. the Queen arriving to inaugurate the Museum had to enter via the shuttered steel delivery bay on London Wall. The roundabout rotunda with its sunken garden soon became rat-infested and was externally perceived as 'an ungainly building like a pillbox ready to repel invaders' (Owen 1998). The upper-level walkway system continued to baffle visitors, despite repeated schemes to improve signposting and way-finding. Staff were frustrated by the constraints of an internal plan designed explicitly to prevent 'museum fatigue' by making all visitors follow a single route through the city's chronology, from prehistoric to modern times (fig.5).

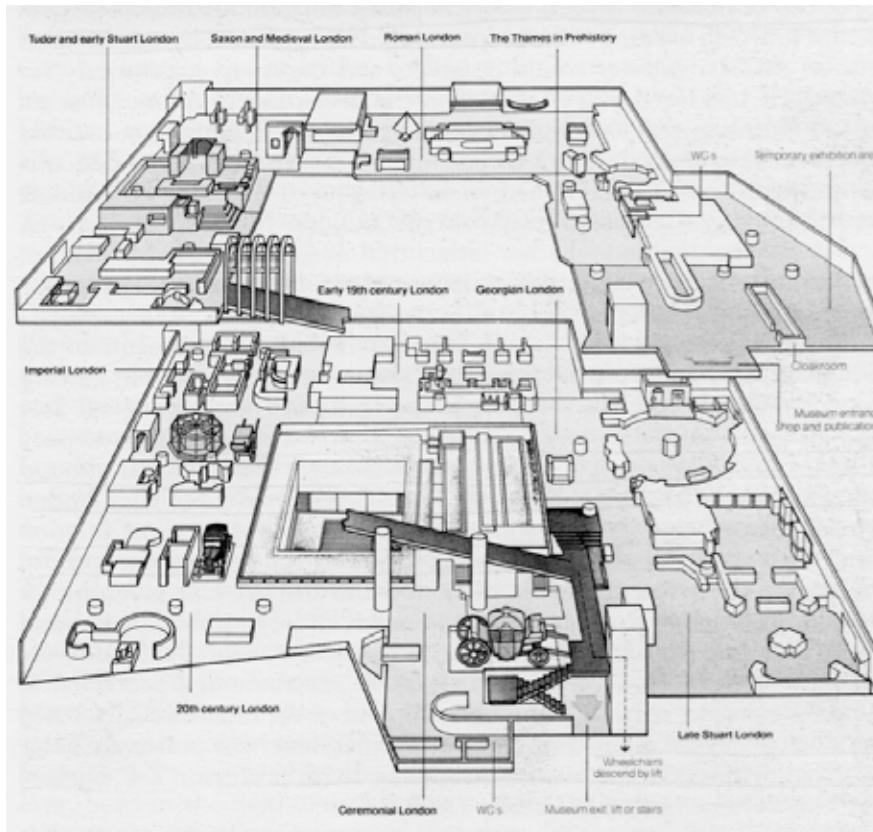


fig. 5 Powell & Moya's internal layout of the Museum of London

Since its opening in 1976 the Museum has had several refurbishments. The nineteenth century coverage was completely overhauled in 2001 under the directorship of the historian Simon Thurley (Werner 2001). His successor the architect and museum designer Jack Lohman initiated new galleries of Modern London, expanding the museum's display area by 25% (*Design Week* 2009). No sooner had they opened than a further phase of refurbishment and expansion was announced, involving building over the top of some surviving fragments of the city wall of Roman Londinium. The project was to be financed through the construction of a new office tower beside or over the main entrance on London Wall (*AJ* 2011). But in 2012 the arrival of a new director, Sharon Ament, brought a radical shift of strategy: instead of struggling to further expand the tight envelope of the Powell and Moya building, the Museum of London would find a new home.

### *The Move to Smithfield*

Sharon Ament was recruited from the Natural History Museum where as Director of Public Engagement she managed annual visitor flows of over four millions. An exponent of ‘stretch thinking’, she aimed to double the Museum of London’s visitor numbers from 900,000 to 2 million and expand the schools programme to reach every child in the city. In the tradition of Guy Laking and Mortimer Wheeler, she emphasized the need for contemporary as well as historical coverage, making her mark with acquisitions such as Thomas Hetherwick’s Olympic cauldron immediately after the London Olympic Games of 2012, and ‘fatberg’ of congealed grease and wet-wipes that was found to be blocking the sewers of Whitechapel in 2017. Every aspect of her agenda for the Museum of London underlined a need for more space.

Fortuitously, the City Corporation possess at Smithfield a former market hall, derelict for forty years, that enjoys protected status as a historic building, having been saved from insensitive commercial redevelopment by the intervention of the House of Lords. The General Market dates from 1876, has a handsome domed interior generously illuminated by a clerestory lantern and is lined externally with street-facing shops and market traders’ premises (fig.6). Its immediate neighbour, the Poultry Market, was destroyed by fire in 1958 and rebuilt in the 1960s with Europe’s largest clear-spanning roof of reinforced concrete: this virtuoso shallow dome was engineered by Ove Arup and is also listed (fig 7).



fig.6 Smithfield : the General Market

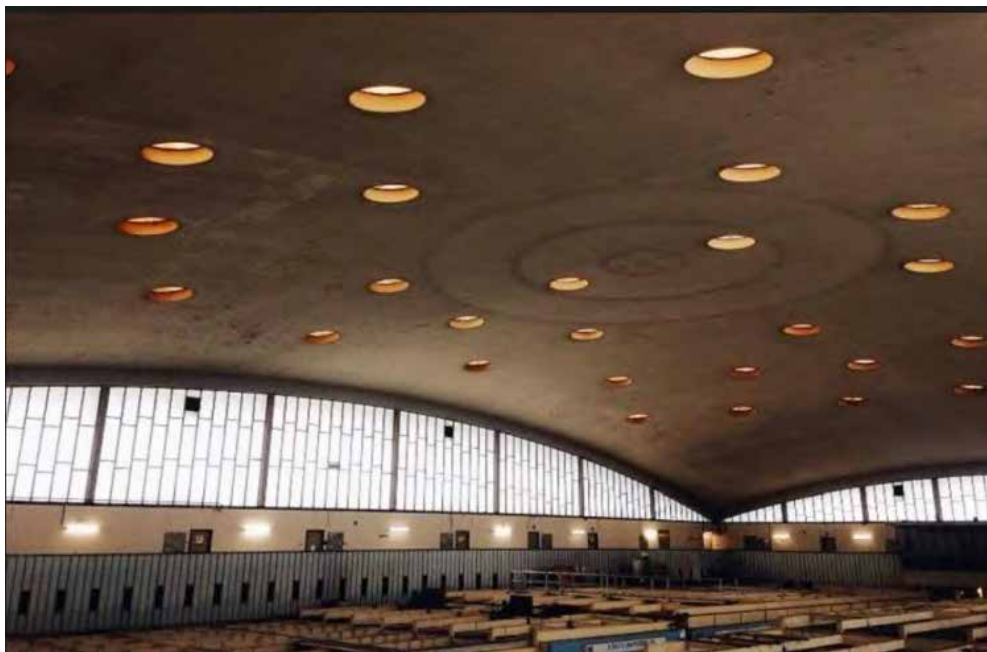


fig.7 Smithfield - the Poultry Market

The Poultry Market is about to be vacated by the relocation of the wholesale meat trading to new facilities in outer London. In terms of location, the two buildings could hardly be better, sitting nearby the mediaeval foundations of the Charterhouse and St

Bartholomew's Hospital, and immediately beside (indeed partly over the top of) the Farringdon Station complex which is about to become a point of prime metropolitan centrality as the intersection between London's east-west Crossrail line and the north-south Thameslink (Hebbert 2014). Furthermore, the successful growth since 1990 of a rival financial office district to the east, at Canary Wharf, has encouraged the City Corporation to reconsider its priorities and emphasize other values besides the single-minded pursuit of commercial profit: there is a new emphasis on residential liveability, on quality of the public realm, and on the City's still remarkable concentrations of historic buildings, educational facilities and cultural performance spaces. Investment in the relocation of the Museum of London to Smithfield has become part of a larger rebranding programme known as Culture Mile. In a press release dated March 28<sup>th</sup> 2019 Catherine McGuinness (Policy Chair, City of London Corporation) is quoted as saying: 'Our ambition is to redefine the Square Mile - already established as a leading global financial centre - as a world class destination for culture, creativity and learning'. The press officer's Note to Editors adds: 'Culture Mile is a corner of London's working capital where creativity is fast becoming the most valuable currency' (City of London 2019). Symbolically, an art installation now marks the closure of one of the high level walkways which radiated from the Barbican (fig. 6).



fig.8 Korean house by Do Ho Suh on the Wormwood St walkway, April 2019

Work is now proceeding for the design of a new Museum of London scheduled to open in 2023. The principal architects are Stanton Williams, designers of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden and University of the Arts at Kings Cross, and since both markets are listed, the design team also includes the historic buildings specialist Julian Harrap whose projects include Nicholas Hawksmoor’s church of St Anne, Limehouse, the Neues Museum Berlin, and Sir John Soane’s Museum in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. The physical resource at their disposal is enormous, since each market building has a deep basement for refrigerated storage, besides a multiplicity of exterior street-facing units. The present intention is to divide the spaces into six time-zones, ‘imagined’, ‘temporary’, ‘deep’, ‘real’, ‘present’ and ‘past’ (fig.9): interpretation strategies for each zone are being mapped out even as I write.

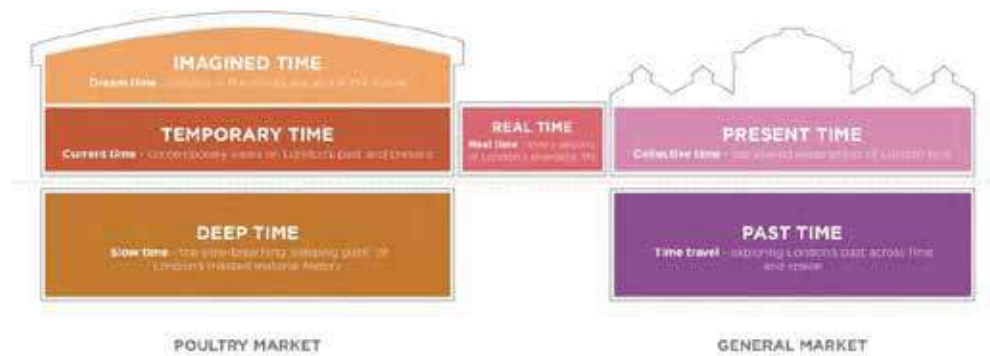


Figure 9 The Museum of London’s initial master-plan for Smithfield

Over the summer of 2017 the museum launched its proposals to the public with a festival that celebrated both the richness of its historic collections and its rapport with modern living Londoners. The market buildings were dressed with billboards featuring portraits by Vicki Grout, leading photographer of the London grime scene (fig.10). The captions elided the name of the establishment into ‘Museum of Londoners’.



Figure 10 : Smithfield General Market, Summer 2017

### *Conclusion*

The Track 15 Call for Papers encourages us to think about the importance of urban public space. As explained above, city museums have developed in part as conscious effort to enrich the public realm and enhance the collective memory of the spaces and the townscapes that we share (Hebbert 2005). Donatella Calabi's work addresses the many museological choices that have to be made in curating and displaying city collections, the balance between archaeology, history, living memory, contemporary reality and the future, between tourists and locals, young and old, digital and concrete, morphological and people-centric. The Museum of London's imminent transition from the Barbican to Smithfield involves all these choices and more. That's why this paper can be only a work in progress. Watch this space !

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