

The Mixing Room project at Te Papa: co-creating the museum with refugee background youth in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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ABSTRACT: The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) represents the diverse cultures of New Zealand through community exhibitions. *The Mixing Room: stories from young refugees in New Zealand* is the museum's sixth community exhibition and focuses on young people from refugee backgrounds and their stories of resettlement.

The exhibition tested traditional ideas of community by focusing on a community of situation – that of being a refugee. The exhibition also tested Te Papa's development of community exhibitions by embracing contemporary museological practice, which advocates for greater social responsiveness and engagement. Consequently, the project was created through a participatory model guided by the principles of participatory action research (PAR) and youth development practice.

The exhibition content was created by the young people themselves and presented digitally within the exhibition without editorial intervention. In this paper, we investigate the methodologies and aims behind *The Mixing Room* project, discuss its results, challenges and outcomes, and explore the implications of working in this way for other museums and exhibition teams considering a co-creation model for exhibition development.

KEYWORDS: Museum, New Zealand, Te Papa, community, exhibition, refugees, refugee background youth, participatory action research (PAR), co-creation, collaboration, youth development, engagement.

Introduction

The Mixing Room: stories from young refugees in New Zealand is an exhibition in the Community Gallery at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) (Figs 1–7).¹ It is the sixth community exhibition to be presented since Te Papa opened in 1998, and was preceded by exhibitions on the Chinese, Dutch, Indian, Italian and Scots communities in New Zealand. Such exhibitions help Te Papa fulfil one of its key mandates: 'To have regard to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the people of New Zealand, and the contributions they have made and continue to make to New Zealand's

cultural life and the fabric of New Zealand society ... and [to provide] the means for every such culture to contribute effectively to the Museum' (New Zealand Government 1992: ss. 8(a), 8(b)).

The Community Gallery space is integrated into the main visitor experience on level four of the museum. The footprint remains the same for each exhibition, but the design, look and feel of each one is different. Until *The Mixing Room*, Te Papa's community exhibitions focused on shared ethnicity and culture, with stories from first arrival to contemporary life. These exhibitions were object-rich, with personal stories recorded and edited by Te Papa staff. They



Fig. 1 Poster for *The Mixing Room: stories from young refugees in New Zealand* (2010–13) (file EP-EX-011-04-01#e01 (ref. 690604), Te Papa).

were developed in consultation with community advisory groups, but with final authority and decision-making resting with Te Papa.²

The Mixing Room differed radically from previous community exhibitions because it:

- focused on a different idea of community – one of situation;
- was created through a participatory model with refugee background youth (defined for this project as being between 12 to 29 years old);³
- involved working with many different ethnic and cultural communities;
- focused on contemporary stories of resettlement;
- did not include material culture; and
- was both a project *and* an exhibition, where the processes were as important as the outcomes.

These changes in focus and process enabled the exhibition team to test the physical space of the Community Gallery and how Te Papa normally presents community stories; to

go beyond previously held notions of community; to engage fully with, and accept the creative work by, participants without editorial intervention; and, most significantly, to act as an agent of positive change and capacity-building both within the museum and within former refugee communities, and among the participants themselves.

The Mixing Room was a collaborative project and an exhibition with co-created content. In collaborative projects, communities are invited to assist the museum on projects that originate with, and are ultimately controlled by, the museum. Co-creation requires community members and staff members to work together from the beginning to define the project's goals and generate the content and programming (Simon 2010: 187). Co-creation shifts relationships towards equality and brings about more meaningful results for all involved.

Contemporary museological practice advocates for such social responsiveness and participatory engagement in order for museums to remain relevant and vital, and to be able to present diverse cultures and heritage meaningfully (e.g. Bennett 2006; Sandell 2007; Watson 2007; Govier 2010; Simon 2010). Te Papa staff aimed to meet this challenge through *The Mixing Room*. Throughout the project, staff and community advisers took a strengths-based orientation to working with communities and young people, building on their knowledge, skills, abilities and insights (Ministry of Youth Development 2007). Participatory action research (PAR) was used as a vehicle to achieve this orientation (Kindon *et al.* 2007).

This paper investigates the development, production and reception of *The Mixing Room* project, thereby contributing a case study to the growing scholarship on inclusive and participatory ways for museums to work with communities (e.g. Morse *et al.* 2013).⁴

Refugees – a community of situation

The Mixing Room exhibition presents a community of situation: people who come to New Zealand not by choice but as refugees. As defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1951, a refugee is a person who, 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that



Fig. 2 Entrance to *The Mixing Room* exhibition, with title sentinels welcoming visitors in the participants' own words. On the left, the young people from the youth forum welcome visitors and explain what a refugee is and how many come to New Zealand each year. On the right, a young man (Patrick John from the youth reference group) also welcomes visitors and explains that the exhibition was made by refugee background youth (photo: Kate Whitley, Te Papa MA_I.302074).



Fig. 3 The walls inside the exhibition featured backlit photographs of some of the journeys that refugees take to come to New Zealand, with evocative quotes alongside (photo: Kate Whitley, Te Papa MA_I.302078).



Fig. 4 Chronological timeline charting the first years of arrival of the many refugee communities that have come to New Zealand since 1870 (photo: Kate Whitley, Te Papa MA_I.302077).

country' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2011: 14). Being a refugee is an identity based on time, place and situation. Once resettled in New Zealand, such a person is no longer a refugee under the UNHCR definition.

Refugees have resettled in New Zealand since the late nineteenth century (Beaglehole 2009). In 1987, the New Zealand government began accepting an annual quota of refugees for resettlement. New Zealand is one of a small group of countries to receive refugees in this way. The quota is selected from those recognised as refugees under the UNHCR's mandate. The annual quota for New Zealand is 750 places. New Zealand also accepts a small number of refugees who arrive in the country as asylum seekers, and accepts many migrants who enter under family reunification policies (Duke *et al.* 2011: 3).

Over the last two decades an enormous amount of research about former refugees in New Zealand has

been published by government departments and non-governmental organisations (e.g. Higgins 2008). Te Papa curatorial staff (including history curators, a concept developer and an interpreter) met with many of these organisations and researchers in preparation for the project.⁵ Much of the literature and conversations made for sober reflection. The refugee experience is extremely complicated and fraught with difficulties. Resettlement in a third country such as New Zealand is the final option considered by the UNHCR, and can have mixed results for individuals. While it may provide physical safety, it may not provide psychological and emotional safety. Trauma and the stress of resettlement can mar lives for many years, and mental health can be vulnerable in even the seemingly most resilient. It was the responsibility of Te Papa staff to know and understand these issues, and to seek guidance from the relevant professionals and community leaders.

Representation and museums

Since the late twentieth century, former refugee communities in New Zealand have become increasingly empowered and engaged with government and society on their own terms (ChangeMakers Refugee Forum 2008; Gruner & Searle 2011). They are now seen as 'agents of change, representing themselves rather than being spoken for by others' (Gruner & Searle 2011: v). This is due to increased experience of non-governmental organisations; improvements in how government agencies work with refugees; inter-agency collaboration and awareness; and the establishment of inter-ethnic refugee coalitions, including the New Zealand National Refugee Network. All these sectors aim to build the capacity of former refugee communities and provide opportunities for leadership, particularly amongst younger members (Gruner & Searle 2011: 37).

In the museum world, these shifts are paralleled by 'more inclusive processes of exhibition-making and the portrayal of diverse communities in more respectful and equitable ways' (Sandell & Dodd 2010: 3). Richard Sandell observes that museums 'might be uniquely positioned to act as catalysts for community involvement and as agents for capacity building' (2007: 99). Museums can be a less threatening, less formal and more creative forum through which communities can gain skills and confidence in taking control of their identity, representation and future (Sandell 2007: 99). Ideally, such community involvement works the other way as well – whereby museums and staff are enriched



Fig. 5 Interactive touch tables, in which the content created by the young participants was embedded (photo: Kate Whitley, Te Papa MA_I.182887).



Fig. 6 Exploring the stories and artwork on a touch-screen table (photo: Kate Whitley, Te Papa MA_I.201818).

by such experiences, and all visitors find the museum more relevant to their lives (Govier 2010: 19, 26).

However, museums can also be sites of privilege, constructing and representing identity, community and culture. Museums on the scale of Te Papa are complex, having many diverse staff members and stakeholders with divergent views and ways of working (Hooper-Greenhill 2007: 90). It is almost impossible for such a large museum to relinquish power to its communities (Watson 2007: 15). However, through the open hearts and minds of exhibition development staff, and their willingness to promote participatory processes to Te Papa's senior management, *The Mixing Room* project enabled a transition from consultation to participation to take place.

The Mixing Room project goals

The Mixing Room project was guided by the following goals (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2010a: 4):

- Target and maintain under-represented audiences
- Build capacity within the refugee youth communities

- Ensure experiences and interpretation are aligned with the values, needs and interests of the refugee background community
- Deal with the dreams of the people with the utmost generosity that is within your power to manage
- Promote user generated content – telling their stories their way
- Develop touring manual and document the project⁶

The primary communication goals of the exhibition were that visitors may:

- Consider what it means to be a refugee
- Appreciate the strengths and optimism of refugee background youth as they settle into New Zealand society
- Be challenged to consider their own views on refugee resettlement

The secondary communication goal of *The Mixing Room* was that visitors may:

- Understand that exhibition is a collaborative and participatory project where refugee background youth have generated much of the concept and content themselves.

In addition to these formal goals, the steering group for the exhibition (comprising members of senior management)



Fig. 7 Accessing the images within the large digital mosaic dominating the far wall of the exhibition (photo: Kate Whitley, Te Papa MA_I.182893).

challenged the exhibition team to ‘shake up’ the Community Gallery space and try new approaches. The results were an exhibition with no segmental or thematic breakdowns; no objects on display; text delivered mainly in the first-person voice; and minimal editorial intervention in the content created by the young people. Most of the content was delivered digitally or two-dimensionally (Figs 2–7).

The participatory approach

The Te Papa exhibition team was guided primarily by ChangeMakers Refugee Forum (a non-governmental agency in Wellington), particularly its ‘Standards for engagement’ (2008); and by youth development practice, particularly the ‘Youth development strategy Aotearoa’ (Ministry of Youth Development 2007). Both of these embed the participatory principles of PAR (e.g. Kindon *et al.* 2007).

The key principles of ‘Standards for engagement’ include the centrality of human rights, the strengths of former refugees, trust and reciprocity, sharing and working together, open and honest communication, meaningful participation, and inclusive and fair engagement in all stages of involvement (ChangeMakers Refugee Forum 2008). Similarly, one of the key principles of youth development is full participation with the goal of ‘creating opportunities for young people to actively participate and engage’ (Ministry of Youth Development 2007: 8). The ‘Youth development strategy Aotearoa’ envisions ‘a country where young people are vibrant and optimistic through being supported and encouraged to take up challenges’ (Ministry of Youth Development 2007: 7). According to the document, all sectors of society, including museums, have a role to play in implementing this vision (Ministry of Youth Development 2007: 44).

One of the key aims of PAR is for people who would normally be subjects of research to become producers of knowledge and be part of positive social change (Askins & Pain 2011: 806). PAR involves a genuine desire for involvement at all stages of a project, and is oriented towards practical change and capacity-building for all involved. It requires that museum staff trust in participants’ abilities, treat them as competent and capable agents, and accept their actions and contributions (Simon 2010: 183). Ideally, projects are useful to participants, based in their contexts, and integrative of their values and beliefs (Kindon *et al.* 2007: 14).

The participatory approach values relationships based on mutual respect and dignity, shifting ‘normal’ research relationships to include friendship and personal transformation (Pain *et al.* 2007: 30). It often requires researchers (in this case museum staff) to act from their hearts and minds, and to let go of preconceived ideas about the outcomes of a project, so that the project can go in the direction of the greatest value to the participants (Pain *et al.* 2007: 29).

This process requires time, patience, optimism, collaboration, flexibility and sociability. Those involved must accommodate ‘chaos, uncertainty and messiness’, and accept that not all issues will be fully addressed or resolved (Kindon *et al.* 2007: 14). They also need to remain open to the reality that the chaos may ‘produce something we could never have imagined ... bringing us new, deeply engaged audiences at the same time’ (Govier 2010: 38).

Positively, this approach can release everyone from focusing on the end product. However, it can produce

challenges for museums, which need to ensure that the outcomes of participatory projects are ultimately intelligible and appealing to all visitors, not just the participants (Cieri & McCauley 2007: 143; Govier 2010: 38; Simon 2010: 302). At the very least, museums need to have project management and leadership in place to realise a project's goals and to fulfil their financial and legal responsibilities (Govier 2010: 35).

Levels and types of participation can vary significantly, and can ebb and flow over the life of a project. This is particularly the case when bringing full-time paid adult staff in a large institution together with voluntary young people from diverse backgrounds who are juggling the demands of family, peers, school and employment – all within the context of two cultures. They may simply have more pressing concerns than working with a museum. Participants may not wish for full participation in all parts of the project, and so 'care needs to be taken to work with people on their own terms' (Kindon *et al.* 2007: 16).

The capacity of the museum to engage in participatory projects must be thought through carefully and embedded deeply into the institution's philosophies and practices (Simon 2010: 323). As identified on previous community projects at Te Papa, the different levels of engagement within the museum can create areas of weakness (Gibson 2003; Wood 2005; Gibson & Mallon 2010). Museums are not homogeneous monoliths, but variegated organisms, where different professionals within the organisation will decide (either overtly or subconsciously) on their level of engagement. However, collaborative and co-creative projects must be wanted by the whole museum organisation, not just pockets of committed staff (Govier 2010: 35; Simon 2010: 334). The museum needs to know *why* it is co-creating (beyond the rhetoric of its mandate): whether the impulse is genuine and extends from top to bottom of the organisation; whether it is imposed by individuals or funders; or whether it is simply seen as 'on trend' to do so (Govier 2010: 35; Simon 2010: 323).

Adequate time is required to develop relationships and trust fully in order to work successfully in a participatory manner. Good relationships can take years to develop, and often go beyond the walls of the museum and the life of the project at hand (Cameron 2007: 213). It must also be acknowledged that such relationships are actually between individuals – not between museums and communities, but between particular staff members and individuals from within communities (Watson 2007: 18). That said, these

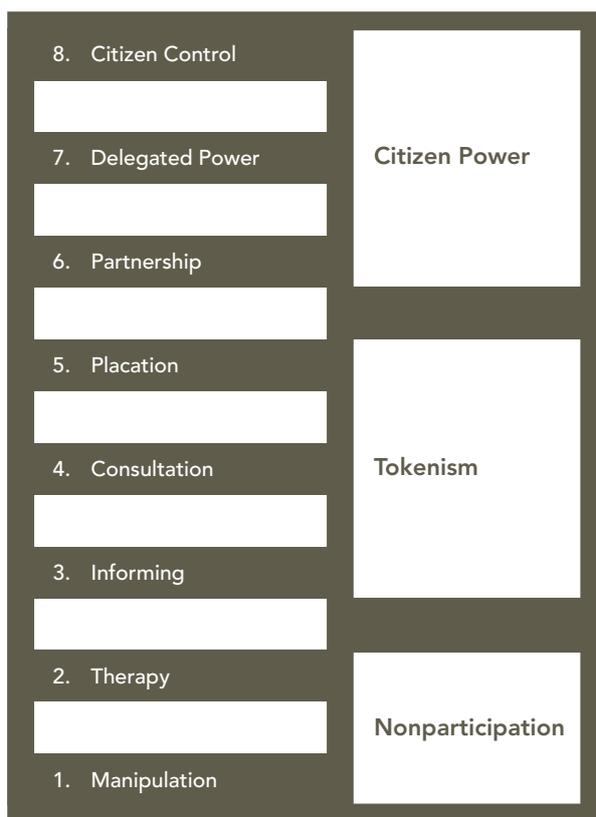


Fig. 8 Sherry Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein 1969).

relationships can occur and flourish only with formal institutional mandate.

Obverse to previous community exhibitions at Te Papa, where the underlying belief was that staff knew best, *The Mixing Room* philosophy was that the participants knew best. This led to the exhibition team adopting the philosophy that 'nothing about us is without us' for the project.⁷ Participants were conceived of differently from previous exhibitions – they were active agents in the development of the concept and they actually *made the content*. This is something that had not occurred before.

This vital aspect of *The Mixing Room* project would translate into 'delegated power' according to Sherry Arnstein's 'ladder of citizen participation' (Fig. 8). Most of Te Papa's practice when working with communities ranges from 'consultation' to 'partnership'. Consultation allows communities to be heard, but their views may not be heeded by the institution. Partnership enables more community negotiating power and decision-making clout. Delegated power gives the majority of decision-making to participants (Arnstein 1969).

Focus on young people

Te Papa's commitment to enabling a delegated power model was evident in the focus on, and engagement with, refugee background young people throughout the process. Adolescence is a rich time for experiences, particularly for those who are growing up in two different cultures. Young people dominate refugee statistics and are often looked to by older members of refugee families for support in negotiating their new lives in New Zealand, and as potentially being more agile in integrating with the host society (Quazi 2009: 9).

Refugee background youth negotiate complex lives within and between two cultures. They can be vulnerable, but they can also be incredibly optimistic and resilient, with intercultural skills and a hunger to contribute to society. Projects such as *The Mixing Room* provide ideal opportunities to grow young people's capacity to contribute to society (Ministry of Youth Development 2007: 23).

The Mixing Room project involved about 100 young people from a diverse range of refugee backgrounds: Assyrian, Iraqi, Iranian, Afghani, Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Congolese, Rwandan, Burundian, Tamil, Burmese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Bhutanese, Kosovar-Albanian and Colombian. They had 'situational' bonds in common as having been former refugees, but their diversity also saw them representing many different communities. By taking a participatory approach, the project could accommodate these complexities by allowing everyone to bring their full identities to the table.

To 'hear and honour young people's voices in research it makes sense to engage with them on as many levels as possible' (Higgins *et al.* 2007: 105). Ideally, this meant involving the young people in every aspect of the exhibition's development. However, *The Mixing Room* project was not able to engage them in all aspects of production because not all members of the Te Papa exhibition team were able to engage fully in the participatory process due to complex internal processes, technological issues and different levels of engagement in the project.

The Te Papa exhibition team was also mindful of power imbalances between staff and the young people, and the huge gulf between their lives and experiences because of age, background and socio-cultural distance (Higgins *et al.* 2007: 105). There were four key remedies. First, a diverse group of young people from Wellington were involved in the creation of conceptual themes for the exhibition during a weekend-long youth forum, and these themes were maintained and

respected throughout the production process. Second, a youth reference group was established in Wellington, made up of volunteers from the initial youth forum and their peers who joined in as the project developed.⁸ This group met with the exhibition team every fortnight until the exhibition opened. Membership and attendance were fluid and ever-changing as the young people sometimes had more pressing needs to attend to, such as school, homework, jobs and family commitments.

Third, an adult reference group of community leaders and experts was established at the invitation of Te Papa, and met every two to three months to review and assess progress and to provide advice on any issues that arose.⁹ Both groups of advisers continue to be consulted and updated during the life of the exhibition by Te Papa's community relations manager.

Fourth, youth coordinators from refugee backgrounds were appointed and trained by Te Papa to coordinate young people for creative workshops held in each city centre to create the content for the exhibition. These young people were put forward by refugee communities and agencies as promising leaders of the future. This approach was hugely successful in recruiting young people for the creative workshops, while assuring community leaders and families that the workshops would be safe environments for their young people. It was also a practical example of capacity-building – not only was Te Papa able to upskill the coordinators, it was also able to pay them for this particular role. We now discuss aspects of the process involving the young people in more detail.

Creation of exhibition themes

At the beginning of *The Mixing Room* project, ChangeMakers' youth development coordinator, Tessa Johnstone, and Sara Kinson, a human geographer at Victoria University of Wellington working in partnership with ChangeMakers, ran a weekend youth forum, with Te Papa staff as observers. It was attended by a wide cross section of young people from refugee backgrounds in Wellington (Fig. 9).¹⁰ The goal of the weekend was to develop themes for a community exhibition around one idea – settlement of refugee background youth in New Zealand. This essential idea was decided by Te Papa staff (curators, interpreter and concept developer) as it fitted the brief of the Community Gallery, but also because they felt that it was inappropriate to focus on refugee journeys to New Zealand and risk reawakening



Fig. 9 Refugee background youth who attended the initial youth forum held in Wellington, 21–22 February 2009. Standing, left to right: Lydia Bules, Farah Omar, Terefe Ejigu, Rahwa Hagos, Niusha Rezaie, Za Lian Hlawn Leu, Mayami Naser, Yasin Hassan, Sandra Bules, Daniel Philip. Front row, left to right: Patrick John, Estabraq Naser (photo: Kate Whitley, file EP-EX-011-04-01#e01 (ref. 712242), Te Papa).

associated trauma. Museum professionals are not trained specialists in mental health, and might not have been able to provide adequate emotional and psychological safety in the telling of such stories. Te Papa staff undertook no other conceptual work until after the youth forum so that the exhibition would develop directly from the young people's ideas.

Participatory methods were used during the weekend, focusing on dialogue, storytelling and collective action. The young people expressed themselves through arts- and media-based techniques (painting, collage, sculpture and photography), and through diagramming and mapping, where

they created charts, pictures and maps to explore issues and relationships (Figs 10–12) (Kindon *et al.* 2007: 16; Askins & Pain 2011). These hands-on and collaborative methods worked well with the young people, particularly as they were from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, were of different ages and genders, and spoke English as a second language. Visual and creative techniques allowed them to share ideas and knowledge through symbols and abstract forms (Kindon *et al.* 2007: 16).

The strongest themes to emerge from the youth forum were ideas around freedom and opportunity; love and family (including growing up in two cultures); and the value of



Left: Fig. 10 Za Lian Hlawn Leu, Terefe Ejigu and Patrick John writing a performance piece at the youth forum, 2009 (photo: Kate Whitley, file EP-EX-011-04-01#e01 (ref. 712243), Te Papa).



Right: Fig. 11 Rahwa Hagos creating sculpture at the youth forum, 2009 (photo: Kate Whitley, file EP-EX-011-04-01#e01 (ref. 712245), Te Papa).

culture and connecting between cultures (including with the host community). The overarching approach was of optimism in a new land.

These themes and ideas were then taken around the country by the Te Papa curators and presented to community leaders and refugee agencies for their consideration. The curators visited the main centres of refugee settlement: Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington, Nelson and Christchurch. Feedback was generally positive and supportive. The most consistent advice was threefold:

- that participation by young people in all parts of the project was critical to its success and the project should build young people's capabilities and not be extractive;
- that the history and context around being a refugee to New Zealand should be told in order to support the young people's work so that it did not float in a vacuum; and
- that as the mental health of refugee background youth can be vulnerable and fragile, Te Papa staff needed to be sensitive and approach young people through their parents and/or community leaders.

As *The Mixing Room* project progressed, a gulf grew between the sobering findings of the literature on one hand, and the positive experience of developing the exhibition on the other.

This was perhaps to have been expected when considering the political and policy-making agendas informing the literature, as opposed to the celebratory impulses when developing community exhibitions.¹¹ Te Papa has found that most people wish to celebrate and promote their cultures, identities and histories, particularly when it is their community's first contact with a heritage institution (e.g. Gibson 2003: 70).

Furthermore, it takes a significant amount of time and relationship-building to gain the trust of communities and individuals to reveal more difficult stories. However, even if *The Mixing Room* project had had a longer development period, it is unlikely that many of the participants would have admitted to negative and sadder realities when asked to present themselves on a public stage, particularly when that stage is the national museum of the country that has provided refuge.

Creation of exhibition content

There is generally a dearth of material culture within resettled refugee communities, as refugees generally arrive in their new host societies with very little. Furthermore, the few items they do have may be so deeply significant



Fig. 12 Brainstorming ideas at the youth forum, 2009 (photo: Yasin Hassan, file EP-EX-011-03-06-03-01 #e01 (ref. 693687), Te Papa).

that it may be too much to ask to borrow them for inclusion in a long-term exhibition. When there is very little tangible material to draw upon, memories, stories, songs, cultural traditions and creative acts can embody an individual's or community's past and future instead (Hooper-Greenhill 2007: 81). This recognition, in light of the conceptual themes identified by the Wellington youth forum, helped shape the creation of content for the exhibition.

Content was created in a series of 12 creative workshops funded by Te Papa and held in Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington, Nelson and Christchurch. Young people from refugee backgrounds were encouraged to attend the workshops by the youth coordinators.

A community arts-based model was used for the workshops, whereby arts tutors from each city developed classes to teach and encourage the young participants to

create content for the exhibition based on the three themes of the project, which had been refined to freedom, challenge and connection (Figs 13–16). Te Papa contracted experienced artists, writers, film-makers and performance tutors (depending on which speciality was being taught in which location), as the exhibition team believed it was important for the young people to work with professionals in terms of learning new skills, and in order to produce work for an exhibition in a formal gallery space. As described by Divya Tolia-Kelly in her work with South Asian women in London, collaboration with professionals 'enabled rigour in producing visual materials that are socially and culturally recognized as "Art", and provided essential advice and skills necessary to avoid the risk of participants viewing the ... process as naïve, "experimental", unethical or patronising' (Tolia-Kelly 2007: 133).



Left: Fig. 13 Creative writing and performance workshop held in Christchurch, 2009 (file EP-EX-011-03-06-03-01 #e01 (ref. 693703), Te Papa).



Right: Fig. 14 Glass-casting workshop held in Auckland, 2009 (file EP-EX-011-03-06-03-01 #e01 (ref. 693706), Te Papa).

Outcomes of the workshops

In total, 70 young people from at least 20 different former refugee communities attended the workshops as voluntary participants, creating work based on digital storytelling, poetry, creative writing, performance, music, photography and art (including casting glass and screen-printing). Each piece of work was digitally delivered within the exhibition on three interactive tables (Figs 5 and 6).

The exhibition team determined which workshops would be held in which location based on budget constraints and reasonable geographical and community coverage. Gender was not a deciding factor. In hindsight, however, separate workshops would have encouraged greater participation of young women as some parents and community leaders were hesitant to let their young people mix together.

That said, most of the workshops provided 'spaces of interaction' that could enable 'meaningful encounters' between different groups, while providing opportunities for the young people to express themselves (Askins & Pain 2011: 803). The physical experiences of making art and using creative materials, and the resulting 'messiness of interaction', can 'enable new social relations' (Askins & Pain 2011: 817). In one of the poetry workshops, the tutor noted that the young people's poems proved 'the ways in which poetry can cross borders and remove barriers to communicating' (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2009b).

For many participants, the workshops were the first time they had experienced working with certain media. For example, a glass-casting workshop 'provided the participants the chance to experiment with new ways of conveying their experience of coming here as refugees' (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2009b) (Figs 14 and 15). Another poetry tutor noted that 'for most of those attending it was the first time they had ever written poetry and the comments from them indicate that the experience was revelatory' (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2009c).

Issues around timeframes and quality did arise from some of the workshops. One of the art tutors noted that she faced 'a group of people who wanted to create but had little basic skills; a childhood spent in a refugee camp does not, on the whole, include provision for developing creative ability' (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2009d).

Two of the photography tutors noted that 'not all of these photo-essays were completed to the satisfaction of the participants or the tutors; life has a habit of interfering with art and the difficulties of everyday life can be compounded when you are growing up with a foot in two cultures' (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2009d).

The key issue was the short timeframe for the workshops, which sometimes resulted in stress for the tutors and uneven levels of quality in the work produced by the young people. By the time the workshops were approved and funded by Te



Left: Fig. 15 Cast-glass sculpture made by Adan Jailane at the workshop held in Auckland, 2009 (photo: Kate Whitley, file EP-EX-011-04-01#e01 (ref. 712248), Te Papa).

Right: Fig. 16 Film-making workshop held in Nelson, 2009 (photo: Inspired Productions, file EP-EX-011-03-06-03-01 #e01 (ref. 693709), Te Papa).

Papa management, there was very little time for the actual running of them. The slowness of approval was partly due to the workshop idea being a first for Te Papa, and management needing more detailed assurances that the workshops would provide adequate content.¹² This resulted in the young people needing to learn new media and skills, develop their ideas and then produce finished material for the exhibition, all in a short space of time.

For example, a group of young people in Nelson (originally from Bhutan, Nepal, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam) created 12 short films about their lives in New Zealand with the guidance of experienced film-makers (Fig. 16). Te Papa's decision-making and contracting processes took so long to finalise that a crucial school holiday period was missed, and much of the teaching and production had to take place during term time, when the young people had many other commitments. The short timeframe also meant that the film-makers had to direct the young people and help with editing decisions more than they normally would in a fully participatory process. The film-makers felt that with more time they would have been able to develop their relationships with the young participants and build greater trust. This would have increased the chance for yielding deeper stories. More time would have enabled the young

people to improve their technological skills and gain more confidence in their work (Inspired Productions 2010).

The issue of varying production values in the young people's work was debated among exhibition team members, in that there was a risk that uneven content or stories that did not clearly fit the themes could potentially undermine the visitor experience of the exhibition. Accuracy and high quality of content and presentation are important goals of Te Papa's exhibitions. Louise Govier observes that unless co-creative projects aim to create 'high quality museum spaces which engage a wide range of people and create all sorts of different, interesting meanings', they may be limited in their impact, mediocre in their presentation and marginalised within the museum building (2010: 36). Such results may also impact on participants, who may not feel pride in their work or in how it is displayed, and may not have developed their skills to a confident level (2010: 36).

However, the challenge for museums is to balance excellence with access. *The Mixing Room* team resolved this challenge by deciding to accept all the young participants' work for the exhibition. Such a decision reflected the exhibition's guiding philosophy that it would 'deal with the dreams of the people with the utmost generosity that is within your power to manage' (Museum of New Zealand Te

Papa Tongarewa 2010a: 4). The principles of PAR recognise that each person ‘has a right to a voice and a valuable contribution to make’ (Manzo & Brightbill 2007: 38). This was reiterated by the exhibition steering group when it advised: ‘if a young person has only presented one piece, it must go in the exhibition regardless, as a moral obligation to the spirit of the project’ (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2009a).

Exhibition layout

Located on the fourth level of the museum in the Community Gallery, *The Mixing Room* welcomed visitors with two title ‘sentinels’ that introduced the exhibition in the words of the young participants (Fig. 2). The walls of the exhibition featured backlit photographs of some of the journeys that refugees take to come to New Zealand – from environments of war to refugee camps, to applying for resettlement, to arriving in New Zealand and reunification, to orientation at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, and to moving into new homes and being welcomed by New Zealanders (Fig. 3). Evocative first-person quotes sat alongside the images but were not directly connected to them.

A chronological timeline in glass steps on the floor charted the first years of arrival of the many refugee communities who have come to New Zealand since 1870. It ran almost the length of the exhibition (Fig. 4). Timelines are traditional museum devices, but the presence of this timeline in the floor enabled visitors to step through history literally, and it provided context for the young people’s work.

Three interactive digital tables were central to the gallery space (Figs 5 and 6). Each table was devoted to a theme of the exhibition – connection, freedom and challenge – and visitors could sit at them and explore the images, writing, artwork and videos created by the young people (Fig. 6). Visitors would reach their hand into a water-like digital effect and select an icon to view. By drawing the icon towards them, it opened up to reveal the work. Each piece of work included information on the participatory process behind it, a short biography of the young person who had created it and their artist’s statement.

The far wall was dominated by a large digital mosaic of faces of young people involved in the project. This mosaic changed constantly to create new faces, generated from a large database of images provided by young people from refugee backgrounds that could be added to through Flickr. The images could be explored in depth on two small

interactive screens in front of the mosaic (Fig. 7). As noted earlier, no material culture was included in the exhibition, which instead strove to represent the richness of young people’s stories in these innovative ways.

Impacts of the exhibition and its process

Although feedback about their participation in the exhibition process was not formally sought from the participants, Abdalla Gabriel, a key member and spokesperson of the youth reference group, indicated the impact of the project when he was interviewed by the *Dominion Post* newspaper after the exhibition opened: ‘Talk of his childhood in Africa still causes him pain. “It’s been very hard to handle that. I couldn’t talk about it,” he says. “The exhibition sort of got that out of me, so I feel released”’ (Robinson 2010: 4). At the same time, Gabriel shared privately with Te Papa staff that ‘all of you been a great team in my life’ (Gabriel 2010). Similar unrecorded comments to both of us from other members of the youth reference group echoed Abdalla’s sentiments.

For members of the young participants’ communities, *The Mixing Room* was generally met with approval. There was one significant criticism, however, which was both conceptual and political, and did not surface until the exhibition had been open for 18 months. A member of the Vietnamese community felt that one of the original title sentinels cast contemporary Vietnam in a negative light, rather than acting as a personal introduction to a wider story (Fig. 17). Te Papa staff responded by working through the issues with key people in the complainant’s community, the young woman in the photograph and the youth and adult reference groups, and replaced the panel with a group image of the young people who had attended the initial youth forum held at Te Papa (Fig. 9).

A standard summative evaluation of the exhibition was conducted by Te Papa’s visitor and market research team after the exhibition had been open for 18 months (Allan 2011). Such an evaluation measures the core visitor-centric aspects of an exhibition’s objectives (as described earlier). Other evaluation frameworks were considered, including process evaluation (for example, the workshops and participatory approach), impact evaluation and remedial evaluation. However, the scope of these evaluations was considered very large and too time- and resource-intensive for Te Papa staff to manage effectively (Museum of New



Fig. 17 The original left-hand title sentinel, later replaced with the youth forum group image (Fig. 9) (photo: Kate Whitley, Te Papa MA_I.182891).

Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2010b). In addition, the exhibition team hoped to include refugee background youth as co-researchers in the summative evaluation process. However, it was decided that it was too much to ask more of the young people, particularly as several months had elapsed since their main involvement. There were also funding, contractual and training concerns.

The results of the summative evaluation indicated that most visitors to the exhibition considered what it meant to be a refugee, and appreciated the strengths and optimism of refugee background youth as they settled into New Zealand society (Allan 2011: 28). However, the evaluation revealed that most visitors did not understand that *The Mixing Room* was a collaborative and participatory project where refugee background youth generated much of the concept and content themselves (Allan 2011: 30).

The key target group for the exhibition was refugee background youth, their families and their communities. Museum hosts observed that *The Mixing Room* 'has been attractive' to these groups, particularly when the exhibition

first opened and people came to see friends, family and community members in the exhibition (Allan 2011: 19). However, when the evaluation was undertaken more than 18 months later, the researchers found 'no discernable difference between the ethnicity of visitors who visited and those who didn't' (Allan 2011: 7).

The dark brown walls and low lighting of the exhibition were designed to create a social space, but some visitors – particularly older members of the public – found it a challenging environment (Fig. 5). For example, the seats were originally covered in dark brown vinyl, which blended in with the brown walls and dark carpet. After some visitors tripped on the seats, they were re-covered in a light blue fabric for visibility and safety. However, the low lighting of the space and digital presentation of the content continued to attract younger visitors (half of visitors were aged 16–34 years), who found the space comfortable and relaxed (Allan 2011: 7, 16).

Overall, the summative evaluation found that *The Mixing Room* 'had a profound effect' on a large number of visitors

who spent time in the exhibition and was ‘responsible for a wide range [of] emotional reactions and changed perspectives’ (Allan 2011: 7). To gain a sense of how many people may have been affected in this way, between 360,000 and 450,000 people visited the exhibition between April 2010 and September 2011. This equates to one in five visitors to Te Papa during that period (Allan 2011: 7).

Equally important were the effects on museum staff involved in the project. The staff most closely involved found that working and co-curating with refugee background youth was not only effective in terms of delivering the project, but was personally and professionally rewarding. There were also ripple effects into Te Papa’s senior management and their processes as they increasingly supported the participatory approach during the development of the project. For example, even though it took some time for money to be released for the creative workshops and even though no one could safely say what the end results would be, it was released none the less.

Taking a wider view of impact, Te Papa received accolades from the New Zealand Race Relations Commissioner in 2010 and 2012 for its achievements and contributions to diversity in New Zealand through *The Mixing Room* project. There is ongoing national and international interest in the project, for example through conference presentations, postgraduate research projects and community blogs.¹³ Finally, one of the most rewarding examples of recognition came from a visit of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 2012 (António Guterres), who responded warmly to the exhibition.

Reflections and conclusion

The Mixing Room project was a radical departure from Te Papa’s normal consultative ways of working with communities and developing community exhibitions. Staff working on the project brought together contemporary museological theories of social inclusion with youth development practice and participatory action research. They were able to gain both intellectual and financial support from senior management for the content of the exhibition being made through participatory processes, partly because senior management wished for a ‘shake-up’ of the Community Gallery space, and partly because the research findings for participatory action were so compelling.

The curatorial team carefully laid the foundations for the project with research and outreach, which involved

seeking out expert advice and guidance, and then presenting ideas to refugee background communities and relevant agencies throughout New Zealand. Community and agency feedback guided the project: that Te Papa always approach young people through their families and/or community leaders; that the exhibition contextualise the young people’s work in terms of the refugee experience; and that the project build young people’s capacities. Young people drove the conceptual and thematic development of the exhibition, which subsequently informed the kinds of content produced through the creative workshops across the country.

The workshops, although hurried at times, were successful in delivering content for the exhibition. Engaging young people as coordinators was an astute decision, as they understood the strengths of their local youth communities and were able to bring together a wide range of young people from across the country to participate. Engaging experienced community-based arts tutors enabled capacity-building by focusing on the process of learning new skills as well as creating content for the exhibition. However, in hindsight more time was needed for the workshops to allow the young people’s skills to flourish as much as possible.

The distinctiveness of the content being made by the young people was not generally understood by visitors to the exhibition. But it was well understood and valued by the young people involved, by their families and communities, by the adult and youth reference groups, and by the expert advisers and the agencies conferred with throughout the project. This finding reinforces the fact that the processes are just as important as the outcomes, and perhaps even more so.

Museums are ideal places for community involvement because of their public spaces and potential for attracting broad audiences. They are also ideal because of their potential for capacity-building, which can take place when staff members are committed to participatory ways of working and are supported by institutional mandates and resourcing. However, as noted in this paper, different levels of engagement amongst museum staff, inadequate time-frames, and concerns over resourcing and budgets affect the depth and breadth of participation. In the case of *The Mixing Room*, museum staff retained ultimate control over the presentation of the exhibition, but they exercised it in a benign and respectful way.

Participatory approaches to working with refugee background youth have given Te Papa staff effective tools for creating meaningful community projects and exhibitions in

the future. The challenge for Te Papa is to move co-creation beyond content only to full participation in all aspects of exhibition development when working with communities. This is possible within Te Papa's new vision for the future, which is 'to change hearts, change minds, and change lives' (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2012a). This vision includes the concept of manaakitanga (community responsibility), which is to 'welcome, include, inspire, respond to, and collaborate with our communities, championing the importance of culture, heritage, and natural history' (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2012b). The vision also includes the concept of mana taonga (sharing authority), whereby 'Te Papa will share decision-making with iwi (tribes), communities, and individuals with respect to managing and understanding their taonga (treasures)' (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2012c). In this case, taonga can include the tangible and intangible aspects of culture and identity within all communities that have made New Zealand their home.

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Notes

- 1 *The Mixing Room* opened on 10 April 2010 and will be on display until 2013 (closing date to be confirmed). It is accompanied by a blog (<http://sites.tepapa.govt.nz/refugees> blog).
- 2 See case studies on Te Papa's previous work with communities in developing exhibitions (Gibson 2003; Wood 2005; Fitzgerald 2009; Gibson & Mallon 2010).
- 3 At times, the term 'refugee' can have negative connotations in New Zealand, but 'refugee background youth' acknowledges the particular set of circumstances, experiences and needs of this group (Horner *et al.* 2006: ii). The Ministry of Youth Development defines young people as being between 12 to 24 years (2007: 7). However, in consultation with community advisers, it was agreed that 12 to 29 years of age captured different cultural notions of youth. The youngest person involved in *The Mixing Room* project was 14 and the oldest 29. Participants originated from, or

identified with, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Eritrea, Rwanda, Burundi, Afghanistan, Burma/Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Iraq, Iran, Sri Lanka, Kosovo, Columbia, Bhutan, Democratic Republic of Congo.

- 4 Te Papa is not unusual internationally for developing such a collaborative project. In 2006–07, for example, the Museum of London held an exhibition called *Belonging: voices of London's refugees* as part of the Refugee Communities History Project (Museum of London 2005). A project closer to the ethos of *The Mixing Room* was *A Different Life: finding our future in San Diego*, which was a collaborative exhibition project in 2008 between the San Diego History Center and Somali teenagers (Kendig-Lawrence 2010; San Diego History Center n.d.).
- 5 The non-governmental organisations consulted were: Refugee Services, National Refugee Network, Auckland Refugee Community Coalition, Waikato Refugee Forum, ChangeMakers Refugee Forum, Canterbury Refugee Council, Nelson Multi-Ethnic Council, Former Refugees Focus Group in Palmerston North, Wellington Somali Council and Wellington Refugees as Survivors Trust (now Refugee Trauma Recovery). The key government organisations were: Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Education, Office of Ethnic Affairs and Department of Labour (now Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment). Advisers were consulted within the Department of Internal Affairs, Regional Public Health and Victoria University of Wellington. Cultural organisations consulted were: Mixit in Auckland, Evolve in Wellington and Voice Arts Trust, and staff of the New Dowse (Lower Hutt, Wellington), Capital E (Wellington) and Waikato Art Museum (Hamilton) for their creative work with local refugee background communities.
- 6 A touring manual was not developed. However, this paper attempts to document the project and provide a useful case study.
- 7 This philosophy originated in disability activism as 'nothing about us, without us', a catch-cry that real progress is made when government works in partnership with disability organisations in any decision-making process (Disabled Persons Assembly (New Zealand) Inc. 2009: 5).
- 8 The youth reference group's primary members were: Patrick John, Farah Omar, Terefe Ejigu, Abdalla Gabriel, Yasmin Yusuf, Hajar Ali, Anita Azizi and Daniel Philip.
- 9 The adult reference group comprised Joris de Bres (Race Relations Commissioner), Sara Kindon (Victoria University), Annie Coates (Burmese community and ChangeMakers), Sarjon Warde (Assyrian community) and Fahima Haidari (Afghani community).
- 10 Tessa Johnstone recruited young people to attend the youth forum through meeting with community groups, parents and leaders of the 10 former refugee communities associated with ChangeMakers, presenting the exhibition project as an opportunity for their young people. She facilitated the signing of two permission forms by the attendees, with

parental signature required for those under 18 years of age. A registration form covered practical matters such as health and safety, dietary requirements, cultural or religious requirements, emergency contacts, etc., and a consent form covered photography and recording of the youth forum by Te Papa.

- 11 Research on former refugees in New Zealand is mainly led by the government and focuses on social, political and cultural well-being, and health and education issues.
- 12 Others in the exhibition team needed assurance as well. As a measure to ensure that the three themes (freedom, challenge and connection) would be adequately communicated by the exhibition, the curators worked on filming four stories for the tables that overtly addressed these themes.
- 13 For example, Sarah Morris, interpreter at Te Papa, was an international keynote speaker for the Libraries of Australia conference, My Language – Connecting, Collaborating, Creating, held in Brisbane, Australia, in 2012 (the title of her paper was ‘*The Mixing Room* project’).

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