



CULTURE SHOCK

Mike Cook, projects director at international museum and cultural project consultancy Cultural Innovations, argues that the 'content' of a construction project is just as important as the 'container' in the delivery of desired outcomes.



SOMETIMES it goes unrecognised that what appears 'just a construction project' has an explicit purpose well beyond normal business and budgetary objectives. For example, in a project such as a museum or visitor centre, the creative and communication 'content' is the key priority, rather than the construction of the 'container'. Museum projects are all too often perceived as predominantly 'pure' capital construction works involving the building or refurbishment of galleries, and subsequently their equipping with display cases, graphics, multimedia and the like. At the heart of a museum project, above the capital works objectives, lies the institution's mission to communicate.

Museum developments generally use established models such as the RIBA Plan of Work for managing their architectural projects: this is clearly sensible and avoids 'reinventing the wheel'. However, when those applying such models

are unaware of the special considerations of managing a communication project, opportunity for error emerges. For the construction elements of such a project, it is undoubtedly preferable to appoint a major project management consultancy with demonstrable construction experience, but having made this lead appointment it is often assumed that all aspects of the project's management can reside within this company's remit. In addition, the degree of complexity and challenge do not simply reflect the financial size of each project element. The project's complexity can often be much greater in those areas with a smaller proportion of the capital budget allocation, which are typically the communication elements.

This can lead to serious problems, particularly where significant elements go under-prioritised. For example, we have worked with an institution which realised late in the day that the exhibition fit-out had

not been treated with the same degree of rigour as a top priority capital project: it had been managed merely as an adjunct to the higher value build project, which was actually being carried out to facilitate and deliver the communication objectives.

To forestall such problems it is vital to recognise the whole undertaking as a programme of work, where construction and fit-out have very separate priorities which need to be reconciled within the overarching objectives. These can each be better managed by having their own team – provided that the overall objectives and priorities are recognised to be central to each part. This is a difficult process to finesse, and in practice most likely to succeed if the project is set up on the above premise from the outset so that interaction, communication, co-ordination and mutual respect are maintained.

Experience

Lack of relevant experience or poor briefing create pitfalls of misunderstanding such as architectural designs that deliver inappropriately high light levels for fragile organic materials to be displayed, or galleries where environmental control is impossible to achieve. Another instance we encountered was where a client required high volumes of showcased artefacts in galleries which had been visualised and cost-planned as virtually empty art gallery spaces – with consequent budget and space allocation challenges once the true objectives had been recognised. In such situations the involvement of project management with the experience and understanding to be able to articulate clearly the difference between construction and fit-out for a museum, art gallery or historic palace, would have been far more likely to have avoided these pitfalls.

A key partner in any gallery or exhibition project is the designer. In contrast with largely architectural projects, we are generally not searching for a sole creative vision but a

collaborator who can work with others to support the narrative through delivery of the creative vision. We do not just look for an interior designer, but instead an 'interpretive designer' who can respond to a brief with a multi-faceted and multi-layered solution. This selection process requires the skills of a project manager with experience.

Care must be taken to avoid a purely management-driven approach which may stifle the interpretive role by choosing an interpretive designer to design the exhibition furniture – in effect using a racehorse as a cart-horse!

Likewise, care must be taken to incorporate the intellectual element. Within a museum the curator is the principal intellectual decision-maker

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deciding the direction in which the storyline is taken. Their selection of objects for display to support the storyline is the primary driver for the 3D design. Curators may only have one or two opportunities

for major gallery development during the course of their careers, and for them a new gallery is a new experience that challenges their previous experience.

Many of the staff of cultural institutions are therefore generally more attuned to their own specialist business-as-usual activities. Few of them naturally focus on management goals, often feeling these may detract from or obstruct their academic endeavours. There is a crucial role for the project manager to keep communication clear, so as to bridge the gap in understanding and to define priorities between people whose orientation is intellectual and creative and those whose focus is managerial and commercial. Indeed we are sometimes required to mediate and reconcile conflicts of interest between curatorial and business or operational objectives – which we try to resolve by taking the different internal stakeholders through a rigorous definition of the project's formal assessment of objectives. To succeed in this requires the respect of all sides, borne out of a demonstration of understanding of their particular concerns and

appreciation of experience.

Our training tells us that a project begins with definition and we seldom have difficulty finding the budgets and timeframes clearly documented. However, the project objectives – the motivation behind any project – are all too often poorly described. Frequently they exist only as the client organisation's verbally expressed desires and are consequently often interpreted and articulated differently by various project team members.

In summary, cultural communication projects tend to embody the kinds of hidden complexities which necessitate an effective combination of project management expertise and sector experience. A hands-on specialist project management approach facilitates a balance between the 'content' and 'container' of the project and results in a smoother project life-cycle and a rewarding and stimulating project for all involved – not least the visitors who are the primary audience.

■ Mike Cook is project director at Cultural Innovations – an international consultancy that specialises in the development and delivery of cultural projects.

ATTRACTION: The V&A's exhibition 'Maharajah: The Splendours of India's Royal Courts', which was project-managed by CI.

