

## University Museums Group Member Projects

### Case Study Example

<b>Case study title</b>	<i>Disposal?</i>
<b>Institution name</b>	UCL Museums & Collections
<b>Summary</b> [100-150 words. What is this case study about? What was the problem, issue or challenge and how did you tackle it?]	<i>Disposal?</i> was an interactive exhibition designed to consult with our audience – UCL staff and students and the general public – about UCL Museums & Collections about what we should keep and what we should get rid of.
<b>Keywords</b> [please choose up to 5 keywords to describe your project which will help members to find your project within the website database.]	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Disposal</li> <li>2. Interactive exhibition</li> <li>3. Consultation</li> </ol>
<b>Background</b> [100 words. Give brief details of your Museum/Gallery and any relevant background to the project.]	<p>In 2007 we began a Collections Review whose purpose was to gather and present in one place as much information as possible about the collections. During this process we came across objects and scenarios which made us question the role of the collections. What should we collecting? What makes an object useful? Who decides what goes into a collection?</p> <p>We realized that by asking these questions and others like them, we were beginning to take a critical approach to the collections and the role they played in the university as a whole. We also realized that if we were asking such fundamental question, the only way we could get meaningful answers would be to ask the people we are here to serve.</p>
<b>Objectives</b> [100 words. Describe the objective(s) behind the project.]	<p>We decided that the best way to do this was to have an exhibition about thoughtful disposal. We wanted to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a discussion with our audience about how they saw the role of UCL Museums &amp; Collections and what they felt it was important for us to keep and also what they thought we should dispose of.</li> <li>• Learn what criteria people applied when making decisions about what should stay and what should go</li> <li>• Give the people for whom this material is held in trust a voice in how it is managed.</li> </ul>
<b>Project details</b> [400 words. What did you do? This might also include details of project partners, financial and staff implications etc.]	<p><i>Disposal?</i> opened on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009, in the structures lab in the Civil, Geomatic and Environmental Engineering Department at UCL.</p> <p>The space was divided into 9 sections, each asking a different question about the collections and their care. For example;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What should we be collecting? UCL Museums &amp; Collections primarily exist to facilitate teaching and research. Do we also have an obligation to archive those practices and collect material developed by the college?</li> <li>• Should we dispose of objects which are too big to store? Should we fight to keep objects even though we haven't got the space or money to do so? Or would they be better off in another collection?</li> <li>• Should we dispose of objects when we have lots of copies of the same thing? Or is there research value inherent in the minute differences between individual specimens or artefacts?</li> <li>• Should we dispose of things we know little or nothing about?</li> <li>• We also asked the question: who decides what goes into museum collections? Should it be the decision of a single person, as has often been the case in the past? What about living communities whose material culture exists across the world in museum collections?</li> </ul> <p>The audience could participate in the exhibition in the door a number of ways. They write their thoughts about objects and ideas on a notice board, or in an evaluation form which asked more detailed questions.</p>

	<p>We also set up an exercise to help us understand how people would make decisions about disposal. We asked people to imagine themselves as a museum curator with these five objects in their collection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A hippo skull</li> <li>• Multiple copies of photos taken by NASA</li> <li>• An old anaesthetic kit</li> <li>• Soil samples taken before the building of the Channel Tunnel, and</li> <li>• Agatha Christie’s picnic basket.</li> </ul> <p>And asked: if they had to dispose of one of these objects, which would they choose? We made it clear that disposal doesn’t just mean throwing something away and that museum objects can be transferred to other museums or public bodies such as schools, sold, or recycled.</p> <p>We asked people to vote on this question twice. The first time as they arrived at the exhibition and the second after they had taken the time to look around.</p> <p>Not only did we want to know how people made decisions, we also wanted to see if viewing the exhibition, talking to us and to each other and reading the notice board had made them change their mind.</p>
<p><b>Project outcomes and impact</b> [200 words. How did this project make a difference to your museum? ]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comments from the discussion board and ongoing discussions online will inform our acquisition and disposal policies, e.g. collections profiles and earmarking individual objects for disposal.</li> <li>• <i>Disposal?</i> made use of a dormant university space as a forum for public engagement. By doing this we have demonstrated the potential for such spaces to be used for other exhibitions and interactions, and we hope that this is a precedent for future work, not just a one-off event.</li> <li>• The format of <i>Disposal?</i> depended on audience participation to be successful. Of the 942 people who visited the exhibition, 710 took part in the voting exercise. We have consulted and will continue to consult with the public in order to inform UCL’s acquisition and disposal policies in general and on individual objects in particular.</li> <li>• We also hope the problems we experienced will be impetus for the organization to change and develop an appropriate infrastructure to make holding internally managed cross-collections exhibitions and events like this easier to run in the future</li> <li>• <i>Disposal?</i> (and the forthcoming associated website) pioneered a consultative exhibition methodology and depended on public interaction for success.</li> <li>• We plan to work as consultants to other museums – including university museums – to develop similar exhibitions of their own. We will publish articles on the exhibition and its evaluation to share our own experiences with our colleagues in the museum sector.</li> </ul>

<p><b>What went well?</b> [200 words – what were the most successful outcomes or learning points of the project? ]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Exhibition attendants</b> – Manning the exhibition with informed and friendly staff had a significant impact on visitor participation. Without the exhibition staff, this level of participation would never have been achieved, nor could we have gathered such a volume of data.</li> <li>• <b>The voting system</b> – By encouraging visitors to vote we were able to engage them at a more meaningful level than in a conventional museum exhibition. The data captured by this system is easy to interpret at will help us to answer a wide range of questions about our audience and their views on disposal.</li> <li>• <b>Working space</b> – Holding the exhibition in a working space created a good vibe and established a relationship in a department which had little previous interaction with UCL Museums &amp; Collections. The central location combined with the <i>Object Retrieval</i> project put UCL Museums &amp; Collections at the centre of public interaction at the heart of UCL.</li> <li>• <b>Media coverage</b> – We had known that disposal was controversial and that this may make it media-friendly, but the coverage we received surpassed all expectations. We began well with articles in the <i>Guardian</i> and on the <i>New Scientist</i> website. These were picked up by other papers, magazines and radio stations nationally and internationally. These include: the <i>Saturday Times</i>, ‘As it happens (Canadian Broadcasting Company),’ Radio Free Europe, <i>Time</i>, <i>Harper’s Magazine</i>, <i>The National</i> (newspaper in the UAE), and <i>The Art Newspaper</i>.</li> </ul>
<p><b>What could have been done better?</b> [200 words – barriers , failures and things that could have gone better provide some of the most valuable learning points for others.]</p>	<p>Barriers included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The lack of an appropriate infrastructure for dealing with internal exhibitions (<i>Disposal?</i> was the first inter-collections exhibition to be put on by UCL Museums &amp; Collections) combined with poor communication on both sides, made project management an uphill battle.</li> <li>• Although it did create a vibrant atmosphere for the exhibition, locating the exhibition in a working university space meant we had to invest a lot of time liaising with the department to ensure everything ran smoothly. It also meant that despite our best efforts, the installation, running and de-installation of the exhibition was inevitably disruptive to teaching.</li> <li>• Things we wish we had known before the project started:</li> <li>• That it is important to keep up marketing even after the exhibition opens and that media coverage does not necessarily translate into actual footfall.</li> <li>• That exhibition was going to be as popular as it was. Given the amount of work that went into it – including purpose-built furniture and bespoke graphics – we would have kept it open for longer.</li> <li>• Not to bother opening on a Saturday. The college and surrounding area was a virtual ghost town and the people who did happen to walk by were going elsewhere.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Conclusions and recommendations for the future</b> [150 words. Briefly identify the most important points in the case study for others and where this project might lead in the future.]</p>	<p>Important points to note:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation works. Asking audience members to contribute to discussions about collections management is a democratic and practical way to ensure that collections remain pertinent and useful.</li> <li>• Museum audiences can be interested in abstract/niche topics if these are properly contextualized. Involving the audience in particular discussions can lead to their involvement more broadly</li> <li>• Success is what you make it. We are a relatively small organization, but we didn’t let our size stop us from discussing big and important things, and using those discussions to make positive changes.</li> </ul> <p>We are hoping to develop <i>Disposal?</i> as the nexus of a series of consultative exhibitions about controversial museum topics, e.g. repatriation, illicit objects, managed by UCL and incorporated objects from other collections across the UK.</p>

**Image** [please attach an image connected to the project.]



Image © UCL Museums & Collections, courtesy Richard Hubert Smith

**Contact name and email address**  
[contact details for someone connected with the project who is willing to share more information with members.]

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**Date of submission**

Tuesday May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010