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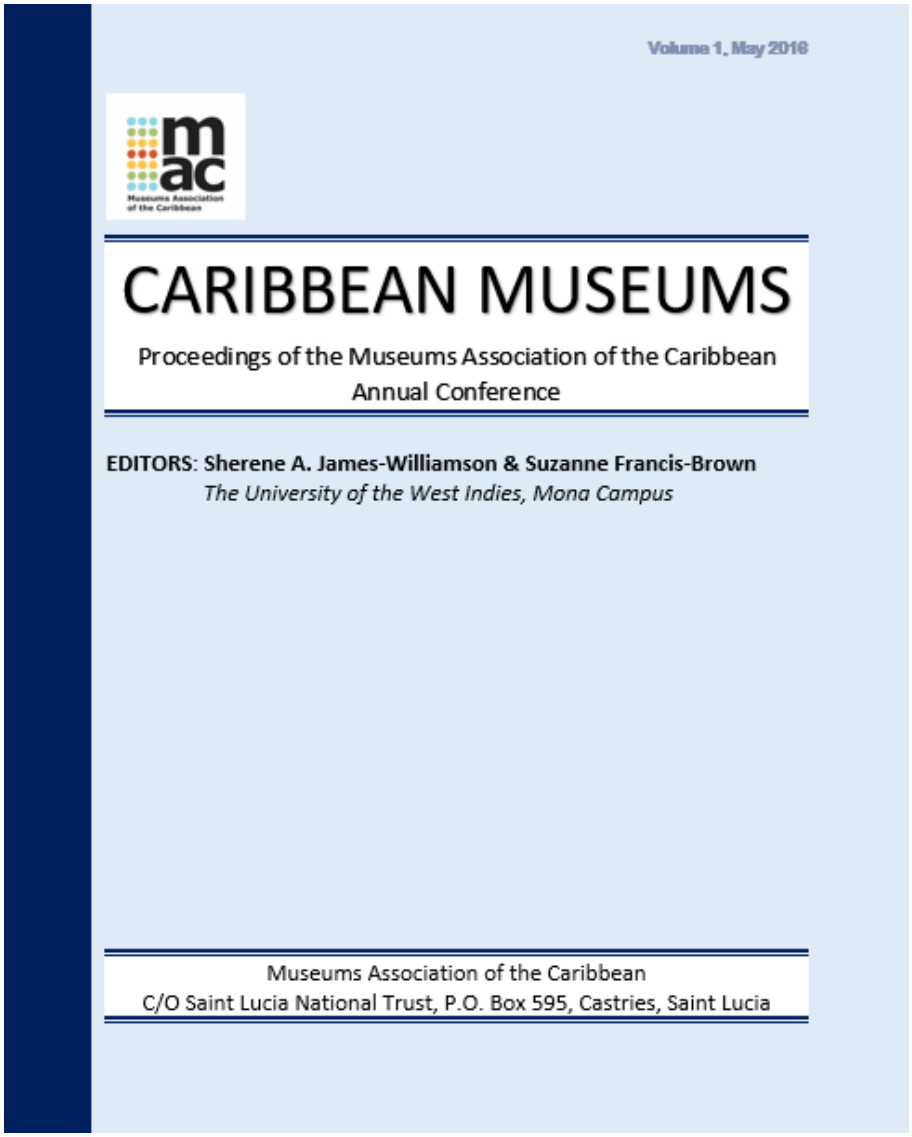

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Initial Thoughts on Developing a Digital Museum of UWI & its Region

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ABSTRACT: Historically and still currently, the UWI has been the intentional creation with the greatest impact in ongoing efforts to create the West Indies as a regional space. This has included the historicizing of the region from within. For all the weaknesses of the regional project, this remains. Additionally, whatever those issues, UWI has contributed to the region's nations and sectors, through the work of its departments, offices and campuses. The UWI Museum's mandate is to reflect on the UWI's history and development, and also its relationship to the region it serves. Challenges include physical limitations of the prime location within the UWI Regional Headquarters as well as restrictions on access by UWIs far-flung stakeholders who are linked, but also separated by the Caribbean Sea. Hence the idea of extending the museum, virtually: Creating a digital arm of the UWI Museum with easy virtual access to anyone with a computer, tablet or smart phone device and an internet connection, and with none of the physical limitations.

This paper aims to share some initial thoughts on what a virtual UWI Museum of the West Indies could look like; mainly from a content perspective at this point.

Keywords: UWI Museum, Online Museum, Virtual Museum vision

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1. Introduction

Among on-going efforts to fashion the West Indies into a unified regional space, the intentional creation of the University of the West Indies (UWI) has historically had the greatest impact. Notable impressions left by the University include the historicizing of the region from within, as well as its continued contribution to the region's nations and sectors through the work of its departments, offices and campuses.

Mandated to *reflect on the UWI's history and development, and also its relationship to the region it serves* – the UWI Museum has faced and continues to face a number of unique challenges. Among these are:

(a) **The limitation of space**: The museum currently resides in a prime location within the UWI Regional Headquarters. Despite this, the current location does not allow for the requisite physical space to adequately catalogue and reflect the UWI's history and continued development. This shapes the first conundrum – the museum has been placed optimally in terms of geography, yet exists sub-optimally in terms of footprint;

(b) **The limitation of access**: As a service to the University and its far-flung stakeholders, the museum stands rightfully as a chronicle of the effort for scholarly excellence within the region. However, as a physical space, the museum inherently creates

disparities of access between those it serves. Especially so for those linked, but also separated by the Caribbean Sea. This shapes the second conundrum – the museum undoubtedly casts a true reflection of the work of the UWI, however, this is only experienced by the few able to complete the sojourn to the space.

Figure 1. Museum logo on the door into the single gallery space.

Figure 2. A proposed floor plan to make best use of the under 1600 square foot gallery (space plan created courtesy Institute of Jamaica).

Given the noted challenges, logic dictated that any solution must have at least four qualities: a location that is easily found and readily associated with the UWI's overall brand; a space which allows for dynamic expansion in a timely and cost-efficient manner; and finally, the space must facilitate the accurate, appropriate and complete reflection of the work of the UWI, its departments, offices and campuses. ***Hence the idea to digitally extend the museum***.

Initial thoughts canvased the creation of an online arm of the UWI Museum with easy virtual access to anyone with a computer, tablet or smart phone device and an internet connection. This would remove any and all of the physical limitations for potential visitors not located at Mona or in Jamaica generally. Over multiple iterations the idea has evolved beyond simply expanding access to the knowledge and collection of the existing UWI Museum, but to instead develop a "born-digital" UWI Museum of the West Indies.

This new museum would draw on all the rich stores of knowledge – and artefacts – within the far-flung branches of the university in a manner that is collaborative and respectful of departmental, campus and national sensitivities. Additionally, the initiative would be representative of the region as a whole, given that the UWI – through its far-flung branches – is inherently qualified as West Indian, even beyond its initial roots in the then British colonial Caribbean, post-World War 2.

The existing (pan-)UWI Museum provides both content and a potential internal network within which to test out the possibilities of an online museum offering; and the context within which to subsequently extend the offering online.

2. UWI Museum Context

The rhetoric reflected in the UWI Museum dates back to the birth of the university as a regional institution, and has held different meanings at different times. The earliest manifestation of the concept was a medical museum to facilitate the learning of early medical students, and there was also advocacy for an art gallery to house the University's collection. In lieu of a mature and unified museum, the UWI Library has served as the repository for most of the artefacts given to the university, including significant collections of artwork. Significant historic university documents are now accessioned within the UWI Archives. Departmental collections have also been developed, often for teaching purposes, and in some instances these have been organized and given varying degrees of public access. The UWI's Zoology Museum at the UWI St Augustine Campus in Trinidad & Tobago is an example. In some instances, these were enriched from national collections. The UWI Geology Museum at Mona in Jamaica, emerged when the Department of Geography & Geology's teaching collection was enhanced by the transfer of nationally collected artifacts and currently thrives on material collected by faculty through research. The National Herbarium of Trinidad & Tobago has long been associated with the UWI St Augustine Campus.

The Medical Museum at the Medical Faculty, Mona, the university's oldest faculty, has been in a hiatus.

Sporadic efforts to develop campus museums, incorporating various collections, have so far not been realized. However, links to the various collections at St Augustine have been pulled together on a common webpage: http://sta.uwi.edu/museums/ , as a step towards that vision of a unified resource. This initiative involved MAC member Mike Rutherford who curates the UWI St Augustine Zoology Museum collection and Glenroy Taitt of the St Augustine Main Library.

3. Existing UWI Museum & the Online Idea

Established in June 2012 as a project within the new UWI Regional Headquarters at Mona, the museum inhabits a 1600 square foot open plan gallery, which is purposed according to need. The strategy thus far has been to offer either a single *semi-permanent exhibition*; or a shared exhibition comprising a smaller, temporary *cameo exhibition* on a relevant theme adjacent to a scaled down version of the usual exhibition. When a cameo exhibition is running, usually for periods of weeks or a few months, the necessary spatial and/or thematic division has been created by the rearrangement of display cases and partitions and hanging poster boards.

4. Collection

The UWI Museum collection emerges from and highlights the UWI's history as

well as the wider regional project of which it is an important part. The museum backdrop, a historic map of the West Indies, underscores this regional focus.

The initial effort has been to research and collect artefacts of the early period, which were in greatest danger of loss. In some instances, important artefacts are on long loan from various repositories including the Library, Archives and Chapel.

5. UWI Museum Exhibitions

To date, the semi-permanent exhibition has focused on the *Origins* (Roots & Symbols) of the university, through an exhibition whose topics include:

- The Irvine Committee process & recommendations to establish a regional university
- British Government approval including Royal Charter and Coat of Arms; building support, and University of London association
- University College of the West Indies (UCWI)/UWI governance
- Symbols and representation of the university
- Student life at a time when the university was fully residential, serving an academic elite
- 1953 promotional film on the nascent university, with attached 'FreezeFrame & Annotate' exhibition aimed at gaining more knowledge on the people, time and events represented
- Early students, staff, administrators, faculty
- Campuses
- UWI Chapel

Additionally, the museum has held the following temporary, *cameo exhibitions*:

- A Great Day for All: Celebration, Ceremony & Academic Dress at the UWI
- Reggae Posters
- Cave Hill @ 50
- Our Child & Father to Be: NW Manley & UWI
- Season of Renewal (50th anniversary Trinidad & Tobago art; sponsored)
- Spanish Trinidad (sponsored)
- Mexican Suns (sponsored)
- IGDS at 20 (sponsored)
- People & Region
- Freeze Frame & Annotate: Engaging with a 1953 Film on the UCWI
- Scottie: The Legacy of AD Scott
- (UWI's 4th, and truly Global, Chancellor (Sir Shridath Ramphal)
- (LEWIS100 – The Centenary of Sir Arthur Lewis, UWI's 1st Vice Chancellor)

The bracketed exhibitions in above list post-date the November 2014 MAC Conference at which this paper was first presented.

6. New Media

The museum has been seeking to use new media as a means of taking its story beyond the museum walls.

- A website has been discussed but is not yet in place and this, under the banner of the UWI website, would be the gateway to the new offering.
- The UWIMUSEUM blog www.uwimuseum.wordpress.com has, since August 2012, been a consistent means of discussing museum issues, events, the collection and related issues, as well as drawing in a range of stakeholders, including campus kids, alumni and retirees.
- A Facebook page, UWI Museum, has become a platform for date-related snippets of UWI history, photos of our visitors and related items. We have introduced a collection-oriented 'Museum Mondays' slot, as well as making use of the popular 'Throwback Thursdays' and 'Flashback Fridays'.
- Since 2014 we have been more actively using Twitter to carry date-relevant, event oriented and otherwise appropriate snippets.

- Our YouTube account is presently mainly a support mechanism for video links, though it has more potential.

7. Developing an Online and Potentially a Virtual Space

Beyond new media, the idea is to use online mechanisms to create complementary programming to what can be seen in the physical space, to gradually engage with wider audiences, and to take advantage of the possibilities for wider engagement and reach:
To take the pan-UWI story to a wider UWI, regional and global audience, while retaining links to relevant history and heritage initiatives on the constituent campuses. Moreover, to tell the regional story, through a UWI lens, for those audiences.

This might involve two non-exclusive phases:
- Development of an intranet space within the museum, where visitors with appropriate devises (smartphones, iPads, etc.) have access to enhanced content;
- Creating an online museum space where elements of this existing and enriched content can also be offered in addition to complementary online exhibitions on relevant regional history, geology, zoology, anthropology, politics, society etc. – areas which can be interpreted through expertise existing within the UWI. Eventually this could morph into a full digital museum within which visitors can engage with 3-D displays. To the extent possible, the development of these displays would draw on artefacts already within UWI collections, while the physical artefacts would either remain within or remain associated with their home collections.

8. Steps to date

Informal discussions have been held with various UWI IT professionals/academics, with a view to finding as approach that works and that benefits the museum, the UWI and beyond. One element generally discussed has been possibility of developing student projects, appropriate to both the departments and the museum, that research and produce audio-visual material and applications, and more. It has also been pointed out that co-curated museum exhibition could be one among the possible outputs for relevant UWI research.

From these initial discussions, necessary specific elements include:
- The setting up of an internal website;
- The production of enrichment content;
- The creation of relevant models and software applications to enable access to content by smartphones and other devices within the museum space;
- The decision re making content available online;
- The development of a public site, using the elements already developed and tested in the museum, as well as other relevant material;
- The conclusion of specific connections with relevant departments and experts to facilitate all of the above.

Once an intranet of enhanced content can be created and tested, the development of an online representation of the existing museum could begin by uploading existing and extended material from the current museum mandate in a planned and user-friendly way. The widening of the content beyond the existing museum content would be a movement to a wider plane – *the development of an overlapping and complementary online space with a far wider scope that space allows the UWI Museum.*

This online museum is conceived as taking off from the second part of the museum's mandate: to focus on the history and

development of the UWI and *its relationship to the region that it serves*.

So the content of this digital space would go beyond – eventually *significantly* beyond – what currently exists on the ground; and it would do so by drawing on the expertise and the specialist collections of various parts of the UWI to illustrate our regional story.

The Online Museum would thereby be contributing to the **enduring mission of the UWI**: To advance education and create knowledge through excellence in teaching, *research*, *innovation*, *public service*, *intellectual leadership* and *outreach* in order to support the inclusive (social, economic, political, cultural, environmental) development of the Caribbean region and beyond.

Beyond the history & development of the UWI, and its contributions to the development of the region and its individual states, the museum could explore and provide expert knowledge on the geology and geography, natural history, ethnography and history (social, economic, political etc) of the Caribbean.

9. Visitor Experience

Museums internationally are engaging with the new technology at different rates and in different ways. In many cases, existing websites have been enriched with interactive game elements related to themes explored in mini-exhibitions, using multimedia presentations, videos etc.

More expansively, some museums have created virtual spaces. The Smithsonian Natural History Museum on the Mall in Washington has a virtual version of itself online, within which visitors can navigate.

A UWI online museum would require the modelling of spaces within which to effectively interpret regional development using digital versions of the traditional museum's text panels and artefacts as well as information points, interactives, audio-visuals etc. Sponsorships for virtual galleries could be sought as is done in physical museums. Issues of good navigation and user-friendliness to create a space that is educational and entertaining, would be especially relevant.

The artefacts would be digital representations of actual material, from collections within and in instances also the UWI; and the content would be generated with the input of experts within the UWI system, drawing on work with as well as beyond actual collections; exploring aspects of the region, interpreted through the expertise of the UWI.

10. Approach to the Technical Challenge

The development of the necessary digital platform, coding and applications requires significant discussion with the UWI's technical experts. The design of the space to be eye-catching, interactive and user-friendly is also important to audience engagement.

It is presumed that there is potential for seeking a collaborator among the major technological providers; however this requires further targeted discussions within and beyond the university.

11. Approach to Content

Beyond the digitization of the existing museum, the proposal is to develop a flow and a set of topics for each proposed exhibition/gallery. The involvement of relevant experts drawn from within the UWI system, as co-curators, would be crucial to ensuring the required standard and reach. The idea is to draw on existing collections for the most relevant artefacts to illustrate the script and excite viewers. Source collections would be acknowledged

and visitors with in-depth research agendas would be re-directed to the curators of the source collections.

The Online Museum would thereby be:

- a resource for students and educators and a broad general audience locally, regionally and internationally;
- an advertisement of UWI's expertise;
- a potential source of projects and cross-disciplinary collaboration.

12. Context & Summation

The idea for this virtual space, extending and complementing the initial work of the UWI Museum, emerges from the notion of public history and from the burgeoning possibilities offered by technology. Prior efforts under this rubric, by collections within the UWI, include creation, in 2013, of a linked page where viewers can virtually access the pages of all the UWI collections at St Augustine. The UWI Mona Herbarium has also gone online.

While I'm not aware of any precursors to the UWI Online Museum of the Region, the idea of a born-virtual museum is not unique. Alexander and Alexander's Museums in Motion, published in 2008, quotes Professor Simon Knells 'The Shape of Things to Come: Museums in the Technological Landscape' as offering an option for an under-resourced museum that involved small scale physical operation and a major commitment to online interpretation and digital collecting (Alexander and Alexander 2008).

And Maria de Lourdes Horta of Brazil was quoted as asserting: "A museum without walls and without objects, a true virtual museum, is being born in some of those communities, which look in wonder to their own process of self-discovery and recognition…" (Alexander and Alexander 2008)

Currently, the University of Leeds, UK is looking at virtual museum projects as part of its Communities & Culture Network.

This idea for a UWI online and perhaps, eventually, virtual museum is an evolved museum space complementary to the existing physical museum: virtual in its design and architecture, but object/artefact as well as concept driven as with most museums; holding to the importance of research, authenticity and protecting collections – museum activities that the Alexanders quote Simon Knell as privileging over technology and entertainment.

For the Caribbean, the embrace of technology can allow us to overcome realities of physical insularity and distance. This is doubly the case for the University of the West Indies which was created to serve the region. Hence the notion of an online museum, with easy and equal access to all, is a practical utilization of technology to achieve an educative and public service mission that hopefully can also be entertaining to visitors.

Acknowledgements

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