

## Impact case study (REF3)

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| <b>Institution:</b> University of Nottingham  |  |  |
| <b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 34: Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management  |  |  |
| <b>Title of case study:</b> Telling Stories: Developing curatorial approaches, informing exhibition design and increasing audience engagement in museums in Nottingham (UK), Beijing, Chengdu, Ningbo and Wuhan (China).  |  |  |
| <b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2007-2019  |  |  |
| <b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>  |  |  |
| <b>Name(s):</b><br>Dr Gabriele Neher  | <b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b><br>Associate Professor in Art History | <b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b><br>1997-present |
| <b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2015-2020   |  |  |
| <b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N  |  |  |
| <b>1. Summary of the impact</b>   |  |  |
| <p>Interdisciplinary research led by Neher and the China Cultural Visiting Hub enhanced the skill base of museum professionals, shaped audience-centred approaches to exhibition curation and influenced new museum design in the UK and China. Nottingham impacts include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the development of sustainable audience engagement practices at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery and Wollaton Hall in two major exhibitions - <i>Leonardo da Vinci: Ten drawings from the Royal Collection</i> (2016) and <i>Dinosaurs of China</i> (2017)</li> <li>improving Nottingham City Council's cultural offering and boosting tourism in the area</li> </ul> <p>Impacts in China include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>new exhibition methods and designs at the Palaeozoological Museum of China in Beijing</li> <li>increased awareness of contemporary, regional Chinese art with the opening and continuing success of Brise Gallery in Chengdu</li> <li>upskilling staff at Ningbobang Museum to attract a younger audience demographic through audience engagement techniques</li> <li>securing the commission to design Wuhan Metro Museum for Greenberg Farrow architects (Shanghai)</li> </ul>   |  |  |
| <b>2. Underpinning research</b>   |  |  |
| <p>In 2015, Neher, Hale and Wang Qi, core members of the University of Nottingham's China Cultural Visiting Hub (CCVH), established the International Creative Economy Leadership Academy to research and deliver international training for creative economy personnel in China, with Neher as Programme Director (Museums). China's cultural sector has experienced an unprecedented increase in the number of new museums, outpacing the development of adequate training for a new workforce of museum professionals. Drawing on strong interdisciplinary research connections in museum studies between the Faculty of Arts and the School of the Built Environment, they created <i>The Art of Telling Stories</i>, a responsive Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme at UoN Ningbo campus, China, for over 150 museum staff from 17 provinces in China funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK Government) (i) and the Ningbo Municipal Government (ii). Masterclasses drew from Neher's, Hale's and Wang Qi's museum-focussed research on identity construction and visual and spatial narrative (1-4), embodied spaces (5-6), and curatorial practice (3, 7 and 8) as an effective way to address the diverse challenges faced by museum professionals in China. The masterclasses were underpinned by new joint research conducted by Neher, Hale and Wang Qi investigating trends and needs in the museum sector. This research focussed on how to engage new audiences in museum exhibitions (3), how to deploy new digital technologies with museum audiences (4, 5 and 8), and how to design museum spaces with audiences in mind (6). The research was deployed in UK projects such as <i>Leonardo da Vinci: Ten drawings from the Royal Collection</i> at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery (2016) (3) and <i>Dinosaurs of China</i> at Wollaton Hall, Nottingham (2017) (7). Neher, Hale and Wang Qi brought together complementary subject expertise to solve the problem of how to engage Chinese museum professionals in CPD.</p> |  |  |

Neher's research in art history concerns the visual, spatial, and ritual construction of identity in relation to civic and gender roles and the narrative and symbolic function of images and architectural spaces in producing these roles. Neher argues that objects and images perform a story-telling function as part of complex visual matrices that are deployed specifically to assert identity, power, and prestige, serving to centre and decentre people, places and groups (1, 2). Neher drew on her research on cultural peripheries in the Italian Renaissance to develop interpretive displays and public programming for the *Leonardo da Vinci: Ten Drawings from the Royal Collection* exhibition at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery (2016). These displays applied lessons from her historical research and trialled curatorial strategies of narrative and spatial decentering. This was achieved by challenging the centrality of the "male genius" in museum interpretation and by disrupting cultural hierarchies through the creation of a public programme that expanded to peripheral non-arts spaces and utilised social media as an exhibition platform (3). Neher subsequently developed this facet of her research on the relationship between exhibition narrative, spaces, and technologies to address the potential of digital technologies to enable visitor-centred curatorial approaches as another means of decentring cultural hegemonies (4). Using a series of digital exhibitions as case studies, including those that marked the quincentennial of Leonardo da Vinci's death, this research reflects on best practice for combining traditional and innovative approaches to exhibition making. Highlighting a shift away from the museum as a repository of expert-generated content and a place of authoritative single voice of instruction, Neher interrogated how digital spaces can create extensions to the physical estate of museums, enabling innovative forms of engagement between visitors and collections (4).

Working alongside Neher in the CCVH and extending Neher's research on new exhibition engagement techniques, Hale used augmented reality technologies in the design of exhibitions outside museums and identified the important contribution of bodily immersion in real architectural space for the successful creation of engaging and effective museum learning experiences (5). This research drew on Hale's earlier work addressing the role of architectural design in the process of storytelling and interpretation in museums (6). Wang Qi drew on Neher's 2016 Leonardo da Vinci project to develop the *Dinosaurs of China* exhibition (2017). This project found that specific architectural characteristics of Wollaton Hall, aligned with specific patterns of visitor movement, enhanced the processes of audience understanding and interpretation (7). The *Dinosaurs of China* exhibition project drew on Wang Qi's earlier research on spatial narrative in museum exhibitions which identified that architectural characteristics such as form, materiality and atmosphere, allied to visitor movement, can significantly enhance the processes of informal learning, understanding and interpretation in museums (8).

### 3. References to the research

#### Key outputs

- (1) Book chapter: **Neher, G.** 2008. "Verona and Vicenza" in P. Humfrey (ed.) *Venice and the Veneto (Artistic Centers of the Italian Renaissance)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.252-284. ISBN 978-0521808439
- (2) Book chapter: **Neher, G.** 2020. "Caterina Cornaro's 1497 Entry and Glimpses into Life and Politics of a Renaissance Border Town". In: Butters, H. & Neher, G., ed., *Warfare and Politics: Cities and Government in Renaissance Tuscany and Venice* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press), pp.227-240. ISBN 978-908964747 4.
- (3) Report: **Neher, G.** 2020. "Project Report: Leonardo da Vinci: Ten Drawings from the Royal Collections at Nottingham, Nottingham Castle, 30 July – 9 October 2019," University of Nottingham. URL: <https://nottingham-repository.worktribe.com/output/5156479>. ISBN: 9780853583363.
- (4) Book chapter: **Neher, G.** 2021 "Telling Difficult Stories: Digital Heritage and Active Audience Engagement". In: Ch'ng, E., Gaffney, V. & Chapman, H., ed., *Visual Heritage: Digital Reproduction and Contextualisation in Heritage Science* (New York: Springer) [Publication delayed by COVID-19], online University of Nottingham pre-print publication (2020). URL <https://nottingham-repository.worktribe.com/output/5155679>. ISBN: 9780853583370.
- (5) Book chapter: Hale, J. and Back, C., 2018. "From Body to Body: Architecture, Movement and Meaning in the Museum". In: Macleod, S., Austin, P. & Hale, J., eds., *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design* (New York: Routledge). ISBN 9781138568204.

(6) Book chapter: Hale, J., 2012. "Narrative environments and the paradigm of embodiment". In: Macleod, S., Hanks, L. & Hale, J, ed., *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions* (New York: Routledge), pp.192-200. ISBN 9780415676038.

(7) Journal article: Wang, Q. & Zheng, C., 2017. "Culture-led Urban Regeneration: The Museum Development in Middle Size British Towns, Case Study of Nottingham 'Dinosaurs of China – Ground Shakers to Feathered Flyers' Exhibition". *Journal of City & House*. Vol. 24, pp.6-10.

(8) Journal article: Wang, Q. and Lei, Y., 2016. "Minds on for the wise: rethinking the contemporary interactive exhibition". *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Vol. 31, Issue 4, pp.331-348. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2016.1173575>.

#### Key Grants:

(i) Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) China Prosperity Fund, 'Developing China's museum infrastructure to maximise the potential for international collaboration and to create business opportunities for the UK,' 2016-17. Award value: £82,363. Grant reference: 16CR07.

#### 4. Details of the impact

##### ***Global to Local: Increasing audience engagement, tourism and increasing the skill base of the staff at Nottingham City Museums and Galleries.***

In 2016, the Exhibition Curator for *Leonardo da Vinci: Ten Drawings from the Royal Collection* at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery "sought out Dr Neher's expertise on the Renaissance period to assist with the interpretation and contextualisation of the artworks for wider public learning, and for a deeper understanding of the life and times of Leonardo" [A]. Neher's research on Renaissance identity (1, 2) and museum engagement strategies (3) informed the public engagement programme of the exhibition, which led to the Museum reaching new audiences and a change in curatorial approaches following the exhibition. Neher's research generated new approaches to public engagement, including a Mona Lisa selfie station, which the Exhibition Curator pinpointed as "one of the most effective methods to engage visitors with the subject matter and one of the most enjoyed elements of the exhibition" [A], community-led life drawing, interpretation panels outlining the social history of Leonardo, public talks and articles for *The Conversation* (with a readership of over 65,000). Neher's research brought "unprecedented attention to the Castle via social media" and also informed a new approach to curating and museum interpretation across Nottingham, with the Exhibition Curator commenting that Neher's research "offered a new perspective on community partnerships and linking to local business that contributed to the overall success of the exhibition, and now encourages me to take more risks and work with new—often diverse—external partners to increase engagement with subject matter within my own curatorial practice. Looking outside of the 'gallery walls' to neighbouring organisations and community groups now informs most of my exhibition planning; with a more relaxed and less institutional attitude, I have implemented and fostered new relationships with holiday accommodation businesses, respite homes and youth groups near Newstead Abbey and Wollaton Hall." [A]

Following the success of the collaboration on *Ten Leonardos*, in 2017 Nottingham City Museums and Galleries approached Wang Qi to apply his research on Spatial Narrative principles (7, 8) to enhance visitor engagement at their blockbuster summer exhibition, *Dinosaurs of China* at Wollaton Hall and following this, for the redevelopment of Wollaton's galleries. The Museums Development Manager for Nottingham City Council stated that, "As a direct result of the exhibition *Dinosaurs of China*, a four-year Wollaton Hall Transformation Plan commenced in 2019 to totally re-design the internal gallery spaces throughout Wollaton Hall, embedding Dr Wang Qi's 'Minds-On Spatial Narrative' approach at its heart" [B]. They state that the exhibition concepts developed by Wang Qi "have been a catalyst for discussion within the Service at Nottingham City Council regarding the new-found confidence and ambitions for Wollaton Hall; underpinning the future plans for the Hall to become a centre of excellence for the Natural Sciences and a key venue for international exhibitions" [B]. Nottingham City Council recognised Wang Qi's valuable contributions to the cultural life and economy in the city through his positive influence on Nottingham City Council's vision for its £1.3 million redevelopment of Nottingham Museums and Galleries that began in January 2019 [C]. The Nottingham City Councillor commented that "*Dinosaurs of China* is heralded as a major contributor" to the increase of 3.4% of the value of tourism in Nottingham in 2017 (£35.42 million) [C].

***Local to Global: Informing new audience engagement methods, museum design and sustainable cultural development in the museum sector in China.***

Training professionals from nineteen of the twenty-three regional provinces in China between 2016-19, the *Telling Stories* programme, developed and delivered by Neher, Hale and Wang Qi, increased the skills and knowledge base in recipient institutions and led to these institutions implementing changes that represent wide-ranging innovations in the sector.

**Brise Gallery, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China**

After attending two masterclasses in 2015 and 2017, a participant established Brise Gallery – the first international contemporary art gallery in Chengdu. Commenting that research shared in the masterclasses “enabled Brise Gallery to become a nationally and internationally significant art space that is crucial to the continued exhibition and consumption of contemporary art in regional China” [D], the gallery Director drew from Neher’s expertise on audience engagement through new technological platforms (4) to create a new Young Artists’ Brand Programme, which enables young artists to act as their own curators, bringing “a new perspective to exhibition making that is previously unheard of in Chengdu” and beginning “a trend that will encourage other young artists to innovate and have the freedom to make their own exhibitions in the future in China.” [D]. The Director asserts that the “lessons learnt from the masterclasses enabled Brise Gallery to thrive through adopting an innovative model of operation and as such, the gallery is providing a much needed, local voice as a vehicle to change art consumption patterns in regional contexts” [D].

**Paleozoological Museum of China Beijing, Hebei Province, China.**

Due to its building being mainly used for research purposes, The Paleozoological Museum of China has faced unique challenges when creating exhibitions of specimens for a general audience. International palaeontologists and curators from the museum attended all iterations of the *Telling Stories* programme 2016-2019 and applied Wang Qi’s research on spatial exhibition design to their own exhibitions and institutions. The Executive Deputy Director commented that Wang’s spatial narrative principles “gave us inspiration about the importance of exhibition space as part of the narrative” and that the museum implemented Wang Qi’s “idea of using the exhibition space to enhance the story and message conducted in the temporary exhibitions we delivered in China, such as “From Fish to Human”, “Flying to the Sky”, and “Flying to Cretaceous-China Pterosaur Exhibition” (2017-19) [E]. The Director of the Institute of Vertebrate Palaeontology and Paleoanthropology, a research centre that sits within the museum, also attended every iteration of the masterclasses and commented that Wang Qi’s spatial narrative research “will become a useful reference for the future development of the Paleozoological Museum of China.” This museum also used the CPD program as a springboard to develop the *Dinosaurs of China* exhibition in Nottingham and establish a lasting collaborative partnership with Nottingham City Council [F].

**GreenbergFarrow Architects, Shanghai, China/Wuhan Metro Museum**

After attending the *Telling Stories* masterclasses and learning about Hale’s research on embodied engagement (5, 6), GreenbergFarrow Architects (Shanghai) approached Hale to embed his research into their design proposal for the new Metro Museum in Wuhan, the largest metro museum in China. The firm were successful and retained by the Wuhan Metro Group and the Chinese government to design the 150,000 square foot museum at a projected cost of \$40.8 million [G]. Hale’s spatial design principals, particularly work on museums as creative mediums, were central to the firm’s success, providing ways to intertwine social, commercial and museum spaces as places for both socialisation and curiosity, allowing the museum to create multiple revenue streams crucial for its sustainability, with Director of GreenbergFarrow China commenting that Hale’s “research became a strong influence on the direction and outcome of our conceptual and detailed design for the Wuhan Metro Museum. Your role as museum design consultant during the competition phase gave us a decisive advantage over the other design teams and proved a significant factor in our successfully winning the competition” [H].

**Ningbobang Museum, Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, China**

Ningbobang museum is the largest privately-owned museum in Ningbo dedicated to cultural history and vernacular culture and serves a region of almost 4 million people. Its focus differs

from that of most state-owned museums in the region, which tend to centre on the narratives of key political, military and historical figures. As a result, curators, researchers, exhibitions assistants, learning officers and senior museum management staff attended every iteration of Neher's *Telling Stories* masterclasses to help integrate the stories of everyday life into the museum's programme. Neher's research has informed the integration of everyday people's stories in the museum's public engagement strategy and through this has diversified the audience base to include hard-to-reach local audiences, including the under-18 demographic. The Director of Curating and Research commented that "*Dr Neher's expertise in telling stories and audience development has enhanced the vitality and external influence of the museum with new audiences and generations in Ningbo and beyond*" [I]. Drawing on Neher's research into widening audience participation outside museum spaces (3) and new technologies as a way to broaden audience engagement (4), Ningbobang organised weekly painting and calligraphy workshops, and a series of interactive activities utilising material and digital objects that ran alongside the exhibition *Listening to Open Appreciation, Run Wu Xi Wu Sheng*. The Director of Curating and Research also stated that "*the social education and cultural services will be better provided for young people through new technologies.*" [I]. Among the developments credited to Neher's influence are the uptake of an official WeChat account for various activities, development of content for apps for the museum and using the audience's comments to develop exhibition programming [I].

The influence on public engagement strategy culminated during the 2019 special exhibition to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China – *Following the Motherland*. The exhibition was accompanied by a programme of activities that drew from the approaches presented at *Telling Stories* masterclasses. The Director of Curating and Research commented that "*Through Dr Neher's 'telling stories' method, we were able to effectively reflect narratives of home and entrepreneurship through placing significant historical events in parallel with individual's personal histories to lead the public to engage with and experience the development of the motherland for 70 years, and reflect the group spirit of Ningbobang*". The Director of Curating and Research also stated that "*as a result of Neher's research and teaching, Ningbobang has improved its public image by launching Ningbobang as a humanities brand, strengthening the sense of quality, and boosting the museum's public influence*" [I].

##### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[A] Testimonial from the **Exhibitions Curator** for *Nottingham City Museums and Galleries* on Neher's impact in the 2016 exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci: Ten Drawings*

[B] Testimonial from the **Museums Development Manager**, *Nottingham City Museums and Galleries* on the successful application of Wang Qi's 'Minds-On Spatial Narrative' principle in the 2017 exhibition 'Dinosaurs of China'.

[C] Testimonial from a **Nottingham City Councillor** on the role the exhibition *Dinosaurs of China* played in increasing the visitor economy in Nottingham and the transformation plans within Nottingham City Museums and Galleries.

[D] Testimonial from **Director** of *Brise Gallery*, Chengdu, China detailing ways in which Neher's research enabled him to start the gallery and bring new contemporary art to Chengdu.

[E] Testimonial from the **Executive Deputy Director** of the *Paleozoological Museum of China*, Beijing on the exhibitions the PMC developed as a result of Wang Qi's research.

[F] Testimonial from **Director** of the IVPP, *Paleozoological Museum of China*, Beijing on the ways the Dinosaurs of China exhibition positively impacted China's new initiative to collaborate with more international partners in the UK.

[G] Press release on GreenbergFarrow winning competition for Wuhan Metro Museum on worldarchitecture.org detailing the contributions of Hale.

[H] Testimonial from the **Director** of *GreenbergFarrow* China, Shanghai on the influence Hale's research had on their successful entry for the design of the Wuhan Metro Museum.

[I] Testimonial from the **Director of Curating and Research**, *Ningbobang Museum*, Ningbo, China on the ways Neher's research has shaped their upcoming programme and training of staff.