Population ageing as catalyst for social change - the case of cultural institutions - a literature review

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There is much evidence to suggest that museums and other cultural institutions have great capacity to promote and facilitate healthy and inclusive societies. As storehouses of cultural heritage, artifacts, memories, history, identities and stories, they have the potential to engage deeply with their publics and provide them with rich social, educational, developmental and emotional opportunities. Ageing populations have acted as a catalyst for the exploration and realisation of this potential as governments seek cost-effective ways of promoting healthy, positive, active ageing in place.

The role of cultural institutions has changed dramatically over the past three decades. Along with ageing populations, technological innovation, globalisation, changing consumer expectations, urbanisation, and political and economic pressure have all contributed to this change. Museums have been forced into the marketplace and this has led to their becoming more inclusive, socially aware and socially responsible (Ross, 2004). These trends also reflect priority issues of access, education and equality on governmental agendas, and have resulted in improved accessibility, greater public participation, reduced elitism and more democratic representation.

Concurrently, attitudes to ageing have evolved considerably and many now view the stage between retirement and functional disability or the third age, as a time of growth and opportunity. Alongside the well-known biomedical or deficit model of ageing, new models of successful, positive, active and healthy ageing based on a biopsychosocial model, have been developed and promoted in recent times. Research into psychological growth and development has pointed to the potential capacity for positive change and creative expression in the second half of life (Cohen, 2005).

The Baby Boomers, one of the largest generational cohorts to date, began retiring in 2011. This generation is of great interest to governments, businesses and entrepreneurs whose products and services are aimed at them. “They are active agents in the changing meaning of retirement, just as they have been at the forefront of social transformation for the last 50 years” (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). Boomers are quite different from the previous generation - economically, socially, in terms of their values and education levels, attitudes, expectations, health and wealth. These differences will have a major impact on the types of services, activities, care and residential accommodation that they will need, seek, prefer and be able to pay for. Older people are key consumers of culture, and data from the Australia Bureau of Statistics shows increases in
cultural attendance of the 65-74 years age group from 2005/6 to 2012/14, at museums 19% to 29% and art galleries 22% to 28% (ABS, 2009, 2012). This upward trend in cultural attendance is expected to continue.

There are multiple ways in which the arts have been shown to have a positive impact on health and wellbeing. Specifically, participation in the arts can provide: a sense of control, which triggers a boost in the immune-system cells; social engagement leading to reduced blood pressure and stress levels; cognitive challenges enhancing brain reserve; and bilateral brain involvement enabling better left and right brain integration (Clow & Fredhoi, 2006; Cohen, 2005, 2006). It is important here to differentiate between art therapy, which is a form of psychotherapy, and arts engagement, which is a leisure activity. Epidemiological research provides evidence that ‘general cultural attendance’ on a regular basis increases longevity and has a beneficial impact on mental health and wellbeing (Bygren, Konlaan, & Johansson, 1996; Davies, Knuiman, Wright, & Rosenberg, 2014; Konlaan et al., 2000; O’Neill, 2010; Ruiz, 2004; Staricoff, 2004; Wilkinson, Waters, Bygren, & Tarlov, 2007).

Creativity requires flexibility, adaptability and openness to new ideas (Fisher & Specht, 1999). Engagement in the arts develops habits, characteristics and attitudes that can optimise health and wellbeing in older age such as: humour, intergenerational connections, mastery of craft, learning for living, comfort with death and dying, positive emotional experiences, lifelong learning, and growth (Froggett & Little, 2008; Sheets & Liebig, 2011).

Museums are places of social activity, where the arts act as catalysts for conversations and interaction. In addition to the well-documented benefits of art therapy, the arts are meaningful, stimulating mediators in both formal and informal learning. They can provide a sense of purpose that strengthens personal identity and sense of self, they can help make sense of change and maintain a sense of coherence, and they can provide opportunities for positive social encounters, all leading to self-reported perceptions of happiness, resilience and quality of life. (Antonovsky, 1987; Davies, Knuiman, & Rosenberg, 2016a; Goulding, 2013a).

Partnerships between museums and the healthcare sector have the potential to achieve population level impact on health and wellbeing (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013). With over 19,300 museums in the EEU and a similar number in Canada and the USA, the potential for these partnerships is great. As museums become more socially active and aware of the interests and needs of their local communities, many have developed in-house and outreach programs and activities targeted at those who are often socially excluded. Camic and Chatterjee have developed a ‘Culture and health framework for museum and gallery involvement in public health’ (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013). This framework proposes that: healthcare, social care, charities and museums develop partnerships and that health care and social services refer
people to museum-based programs wherein local museums offer coordinated ‘health, wellbeing and social inclusion’ activities for different groups.

Until recently museums were rarely considered as partners by social, welfare and health organisations and agencies. However, this situation is changing rapidly and the UK’s leading age-friendly city Manchester, provides many examples of how museums are changing perceptions of ageing and culture, and contributing to the health and wellbeing of its older citizens. Age-friendly programs that focus on neighbourhood participation and social change have been co-created with older citizens. These programs include initiatives such as: mobile museum collections that visit hospitals and aged care facilities; ‘Culture Champions’ a large-scale volunteer ambassador scheme; the ‘Coffee, Cake and Culture’ series of guided museum tours combined with sensory-based activities; and ‘Philosophy Café’, informal discussion sessions (Ward & Winn, 2015). In Melbourne, Museum Victoria runs a mobile outreach program that provides access to museum collections for those who may not be able to visit the museums. Some examples developed for dementia specific audiences in aged-care settings, are ‘Memories of Childhood’ and ‘The Good Old Days’ (https://museumvictoria.com.au).

Museums have an important role to play in civic life and can be agents for social change and the creation of a more cohesive society. Research suggests that museums can act as catalysts for social change not only in terms of challenging stereotypes, promoting tolerance and connecting and empowering communities, but also by providing safe, rich and stimulating environments where beneficial social and cultural encounters may occur. In the context of ageing populations, there are a number of museums around the world that are now actively participating in changing the perceptions of ageing and culture, and contributing to the health and wellbeing of their older citizens. The potential of museums and other cultural institutions to contribute to the health and wellbeing of its older citizens, and to act as facilitators of age-integrated societies, is only beginning to be explored.

There is great opportunity in exploring and leveraging the potential of cultural institutions. Cultural institutions are already part of existing infrastructure the world over, and the arts are an important part of many people’s social, emotional and intellectual lives. We know much about younger people and families in the context of cultural institutions, but little about the older cohort which until recently had been largely ignored. This short article presents the findings of a literature review, part of a pilot research project examining the potential of cultural institutions to facilitate age-integrated societies. This research aims to address the gap in knowledge around older people with an interdisciplinary research team incorporating expertise in arts, history, archaeology, curation, gerontology, social policy, education, design, architecture, urban planning, social history and community development.
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