**Unusual venues for business events:**

**Key quality attributes of museums and art galleries**

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## **Citation**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** This paper aims to identify key quality attributes a museum or art gallery should possess and enhance to become an attractive business event venue.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The research adopted a two-stage case-study methodology. Firstly, three museums were selected in Manchester, UK to explore the venues’ approaches to hosting business events. These were the Lowry Art Centre, Salford Museum and Manchester Art Gallery. Secondly, a business event at another museum in the city, Science and Industry Museum, was accessed to explore the audiences’ perceptions and industry requirements regarding the organisation of events in museums. In total, 21 qualitative semi-structured and structured interviews were conducted with the event delegates, event planners and museums’ management.

**Findings:** Thematic analysis was applied to identify three key attributes: Venue Character, Memorability and Functionality and Feasibility. Venue Character refers to the overall appeal of a venue, including its history, status and interior design. Memorability refers to the authenticity and uniqueness of the attendee experience at a corporate event organised in a museum. Finally, Functionality and Feasibility deals with the availability of functional facilities, space flexibility and diverse venue regulations.

**Originality/value:** The findings of the research provide valuable insights to both museums and event companies. The research reveals the main benefits and drawbacks of using a museum or an art gallery as a venue for business events and suggests key aspects to consider while staging a business event in a cultural institution. Museums could apply the findings in marketing to emphasise their uniqueness, authenticity and flexibility.

**Research paper**

**Key words:** business events, unusual venues, museums, event facilities, Manchester

**Introduction**

There is little consistency and agreement in the literature as to how define business events (Mair, 2014, Davidson, 2019). Same inconsistency exists in venue typology (Hassanien & Dale, 2011). In this paper, a business event is understood as a large- or small-scale event for business communication purposes, including meetings, conferences, corporate workshops and seminars. Unusual venues for business events are those “where conference facility provides additional revenue for the company rather than being the main income stream” (Leask & Hood, 2001, p. 45).

Nowadays, museums, stadiums, concert halls and theatres are becoming increasingly popular settings for hosting small scale business meetings, conferences and corporate entertainment, including evening receptions and gala dinners. There are several factors that determine the increase in their popularity. These are special appeal, available cultural activities and a more engaged and relaxed atmosphere that facilitates networking and knowledge retention. Corporate clients and event planners look for spaces with a “wow” factor that will enhance their reputation and image and impress the delegates (Nolan, 2018). According to the UK Conference and Meeting Survey 2018, unusual venues staged 18% of the estimated 1.3 million conferences and meetings that took place in the UK that year (Rogers, 2018).

Surprisingly, unusual venues for business events, in general, and museums and art galleries in particular, are a relatively neglected area in event, hospitality and tourism studies. Most research has focused on large purpose-built convention centres and hotels (Mair, 2014). A few studies have explored cruise ships and their potential for hosting conferences and business meetings (e.g., Phillips and Geddie, 2005; Fawzy, 2008). Wang (2012, cited in Mair, 2014) explored the perspectives of staging corporate events at theme parks. Parrish, Lee, and Kim (2014) analysed sports stadiums as corporate and social event venues with a focus on effective marketing and branding strategies to enhance the positioning of stadiums as attractive venues. Lee, Parrish and Kim (2015) studied advantages and disadvantages of sports stadiums from the perspectives of meeting and event planners, and sport facility administrators. Based on somewhat dated empirical data collected in 2001, Whitfield (2009) investigated the ways visitor attractions in the UK, including museums, theme parks, castles and stadiums, diversify their products and services to offer conference and social event facilities.

Despite a limited amount of empirical evidence about the value of hosting business and corporate events in unusual venues, the industry demand for such venues will remain or even increase, thus amplifying opportunities for research and examination of how unusual venues can contribute and complement the existing event venue stock (Mair, 2014).

The purpose of this research was to identify key quality attributes of museums and art galleries as business event venues and explore how these attributes affect the quality of event services provided. The research was conducted in the city Manchester, UK. Manchester is an industrial hub situated in the northern part of England. It is a modern city with a diverse urban culture. On a destination level, one of the city’s strategic objectives is to promote Manchester as a leading player on the business event arena. One of the requirements for any business event destination is to capitalise on the available infrastructure. Manchester represents an interesting location to explore the quality attributes of the unusual business event venues. Alongside numerous convention centres, hotels and exhibition venues, there are many unique venues, including stadiums, museums and art galleries, which can accommodate medium and small-scale business events. The following sections will thoroughly review the relevant literature, introduce the applied methodology and present an analysis and discussion of the results.

**Unusual Venues**

The selection of an appropriate location for a business event is a critical aspect of event management. Venue choice may affect the delegates’ decision to attend, their involvement and overall event satisfaction. Thus, event organisers pay substantial attention to such factors as the cost of the venue, the quality of the catering and room facilities, the availability of accommodation on site or in close distance to the venue, venue novelty and overall affordability (Crouch and Louviere, 2004; Del Chiappa, 2012).

There are at least three categories of sites that can be chosen for hosting business events. The first category represents purpose-built congress halls and exhibition centres without on-site accommodation (Mair, 2014). They are specifically created to meet the needs of the business events industry offering a high venue capacity, high quality amenities and good access.

The second category includes accommodation venues with congress and banqueting facilities (Mair, 2014). These are hotels or spa resorts which can provide not only basic facilities and equipment required for a conference or business meeting, but also a number of complementary options such as spa, gym, pool or golf (Nolan, 2018).

The last category is rather vague; it includes ‘special’ or ‘unique’ types of venues. Rogers (2013) argues that the term ‘a unique venue’ can refer to a very wide range of sites which do not fit into the common categories. Leask and Hood (2001) include in this category castles, country houses and historic buildings; museums, art galleries and other visitor attractions; boats and trains; sport and leisure facilities; and theatres and concert halls.

The increase in popularity of hiring such unusual venues can be explained by the desire of event organisers to deliver novelty and memorability (Davidson, 2019). In the era of transformative and meaningful experiences (Boswijk, Thijssen, & Peelen, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 2011), when all the five senses should be engaged to deliver an authentic, immersive and memorable experience to event delegates, unusual venues could add a competitive advantage. A corporate meeting or staff training session held aboard a cruise ship or in the zoo is likely to be much more enjoyable and memorable than the same event organised in a meeting room in a hotel or business centre.

Another reason is the rise of smaller and shorter business events in general. Unusual venues are well suited for single day, small corporate events and business meetings, which do not require large spaces and complex logistics (Rogers and Davidson, 2016).

This research is focused on urban museums and art galleries. Due to the changes in the funding system and decreased central and local government financial support, museums and art galleries in the UK seek income from new sources (Whitfield, 2009). Hence, these public spaces increasingly consider venue hire for business events as one of their additional revenue streams, which eventually help them support their main mission of running art collections. A recent industry research indicates other benefits from hosting business events in a museum, including reaching new audiences through marketing and promotion, building relationships with potential sponsors and strengthening links with the local community (Bryan and Hall, 2013).

Despite an increased demand from the business event sector, many museums still consider business events as a one-off opportunity. A strategic vision is required to position and market venue facilities of a cultural institution and approach business events as an appropriate and consistent source of income, without compromising on the cultural stewardship. To do so, it is imperative to evaluate both the advantages and disadvantages of organising events in the unusual venues.

**Advantages and Disadvantages of Unusual Venues**

Unusual venues offer a range of benefits for event planners and delegates. There can be, however, some disadvantages and risks of organising a business event in a museum, art gallery or any other unique venue (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Unusual Venues for Business Events** Adapted from Rogers and Davidson (2016) and Leask and Hood (2001).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Advantages** | **Disadvantages** |
| * Special appeal is good for motivating attendees to attend the event * A built-in ambience, creating an atmosphere for the event and making the event more memorable * Recreational opportunities, things for clients to see and do | * Venue being open to the public * Limited functionality. Does not offer overnight accommodation, in-house catering and parking facilities * Restrictions on licensing and use |

An obvious advantage of hosting an event in a unique venue is the special appeal it provides (Tassiopoulos, 2010; Rogers, 2013).  The appeal and atmosphere of a unique venue can transform a seemingly common business event into a special occasion, providing new experiences for the attendees. Lee, Parrish and Kim (2015) debate that if an event is organised in an unusual location, the prospective attendees have arguably more interest in the event program and are more enthusiastic about attending it.

Hosting an event in an unusual environment provides a “refreshing change of pace” (Anderson, 2017, p. 139). Less formalised settings are likely to calm the attendees; they feel less stressed and have an overall more enjoyable experience at the event, as the venue is not typically associated with corporate events (Bultitude and Sardo, 2012).

Typically, unusual venues have a comparatively rich and diverse spectrum of recreational activities to offer (Rogers and Davidson, 2016). For example, at a sport stadium, guest tours can be organised as part of the delegate itinerary. Leask and Hood (2001) provide an example of the royal yacht “Britannia” in Edinburgh. Decommissioned in 1997, the yacht is used as a visitor attraction and corporate hospitality venue. The conference guests can experience the maritime luxuries of the Queen, Royal Family and state officials. Such complementary activities enrich the attendees’ event experience and differentiate the unique event location from purpose-built venues (Lee, Parrish and Kim, 2015).

However, the use of unique venues for business events can come with a few limitations. Obviously, cultural venues, such as museums and art galleries, are places open to the public as visitor attractions. Often, this causes logistics issues, due to a limited time for setting up the venue for corporate clients (Whitefield, 2009). As planned events are usually a secondary source of income for not purpose-built venues, there is a need to balance the primary use of the venues with their corporate use (Davidson and Cope, 2003). Either the venue will be hired for a corporate function outside of its opening hours, or the event will happen alongside the museum being open in accessible breakout spaces.

Some unusual venues can have design and layout restrictions due to their primary function and unique architectural solutions (Davidson and Cope, 2003). Various venues offer outdoor spaces for events, which may not be ideal in unpleasant weather conditions (Lee, Parrish and Kim, 2015). Unusual venues usually do not provide any on-site accommodation (Davidson and Cope, 2003). Finally, there might be limited parking available as well as a lack of in-house catering and other conference equipment such as staging, seating, tables, lighting and audio (Leask and Hood, 2001).

The legal restrictions of using a unique venue are another concern (Van der Wagen and White, 2018). The protection of the venue and its property is an important legal consideration (Silvers, 2012). Certain regulations should be put in place to ensure that the guests do not cause any interior damage as some of the buildings may be listed as cultural heritage property. This is particularly important in museums and art galleries with unique and expensive collections.

Overall, the popularity of unusual venues is fast growing and these venues “are emerging as formidable competitors for the more traditional types of meeting facilities” (Rogers and Davidson, 2016, p. 213). While such venues possess distinctive advantages, the unique appeal of unusual venues could have some organisational disadvantages, which should be carefully considered by event planners prior to booking the space for their event. The management of the unusual venues, in their turn, should employ a proactive approach to staging corporate events on their premises, obtain enough industry knowledge and review available facilities and market them properly (Davidson and Hyde, 2014).

As already mentioned, there is scant research in the field of unique venues, and museums and art galleries, in particular. The main gap lies in understanding what characteristics or attributes a museum or art gallery should possess, develop and enhance to become competitive on the corporate event market and to successfully host business events. The aim of this study is to identify these attributes.

**Research Design**

This research is of a qualitative and exploratory nature and was guided by a philosophical perspective of pragmatism. The aim of a pragmatist research is to concentrate on the action-oriented approach and become a resource for informing human practices, suggesting possibilities for solving concrete social problems (Powell, 2001). Pragmatist research on the quality attributes of museums as venues for business events can be effective in informing a ‘community of inquiry’ (Rumens & Kelemen, 2013) about strategies that can be adapted by other researchers or practitioners who pursue their own academic research or managerial projects. For example, the results of this research can be productive in terms of insight into the practice of venue selection and marketing and overall management and positioning of unusual venues in the business event market.

Pragmatist knowledge is partial and limited to the knower’s geographical location, historical background, or point of view, shaped by a particular set of knowledge production practice. At the same time, knowledge is plural, as there may be multiple epistemically acceptable sets of practises, capable of producing knowledge of the same phenomenon (Longino, 2002). To obtain and evaluate diverse perspectives on the quality attributes, the researchers attempted to collect and scrutinise the viewpoints of the key stakeholders, including museum event teams, corporate event attendees and business event organisers.

A two-stage multiple case-study methodology was adopted with a purposive homogenous sampling. During the first stage, three cases were identified to explore current approaches and strategies employed by museums and art galleries in relation to hosting corporate events on their premises. The key selection criteria were the availability of spaces for business events and the venue’s active approach to offering unique experiences for the delegates. The venues are the Lowry Art Centre (the Lowry), Salford Museum and Art Gallery (Salford Museum) and Manchester Art Gallery (see Table 2). All three venues are well-known visitor attractions and play a significant role in the cultural life of Manchester. The identified museums consider business and corporate events to be an important source of revenue and a valuable component of their marketing and promotion.

**Table 2: Research Sample: Three Museums and Art Galleries in Manchester**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Venue** | **Description** |
| The Lowry Art Centre ([thelowry.com](file:///C:\Users\Ardle\Downloads\thelowry.com)) | The Lowry opened in 2000 and is a not-for-profit arts centre and gallery. The aim of the project is to raise the cultural profile of the city and bring more visitors and business to the area. The gallery includes the largest collection of paintings by Laurence Stephen Lowry, an English artist famous for painting scenes of life in the [industrial districts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_district) of [North West England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_West_England) in the middle of the 20th century. The Lowry art centre offers a diverse range of programmes such as theatre, opera, musicals, dance, music and comedy as well visual arts. The venue has 13 event spaces including two theatres, an auditorium, several bars and a restaurant. |
| Manchester Art Gallery ([manchesterartgallery.org](http://manchesterartgallery.org/)) | The Manchester Art Gallery opened in 1823 and is a publicly owned art museum in the centre of Manchester. It is housed in three connected buildings and offers a variety of event spaces for event hire including the Victorian entrance hall, atrium, galleries and gallery restaurant as well as a purpose-built lecture room and a meeting room to use for breakout sessions. |
| Salford Museum and Art Gallery ([salfordmuseum.com](file:///C:\Users\Ardle\Downloads\salfordmuseum.com)) | The Salford Museum and Art Gallery first opened in 1850 as the Royal Museum and Public Library. It has a focus on the history of Salford which is an area of [Greater Manchester](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_Manchester), England,  and the Victorian era in general, with a Victorian gallery and Larkhill Place, a reconstructed Victorian street. The venue offers its galleries for special events hire. |

In the second stage, the focus was on the perceptions, expectations and experiences of the event organisers and attendees at an unusual venue. A corporate event hosted in another museum, the Science and Industry Museum in Manchester, was identified as a case. The [museum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Museum) is devoted to the development of science, technology and industry with an emphasis on Manchester’s achievements in these areas. It incorporates a purpose-built conference centre with a variety of spaces and offers numerous conference packages. The event was themed around Intelligent Mobility and brought together knowledge exchange experts and industry professionals for a 1-day discussion and interactive networking.

The primary data in this research were collected applying a qualitative interview method. Interviewing can be defined as a conversation with the specific purpose of gathering information (Berg, 2007). An interview is one of the most important sources of evidence for case-study (Yin, 2014). Both structured and semi-structured interviews were used.

In a structured interview, a participant is asked a series of pre-established questions (Qu & Dumay, 2011). This is a standardised method, along the lines of a formal survey (Yin, 2014). The attendees of the selected event were asked five questions about the advantages and disadvantages of the museum as a corporate event venue, and their experience and feelings and willingness to attend another business event organised in an unusual venue. A structured interview was a preferable option due to the limited amount of time available for the researchers to interview the conference attendees during the coffee breaks. Each interview lasted around 12 minutes.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore the viewpoints of event organisers and museum management. This type of qualitative interview provides a flexible guide or schedule around a list of topics without fixed wording or a predetermined order of questions (Minichiello, 1995). A researcher is able to probe, explore and ask additional questions, discovering the subject area in-depth (Patton, 2002). The time and settings for each interview were preliminary agreed. Both the participants and researchers had enough time to ask necessary questions and provide detailed answers. The duration of the semi-structured interviews was approximately 40 minutes each.

There is no clear methodological guide on the number of interviews enough to achieve saturation, the point in data collection when no additional insights are identified (Kerr, Nixon & Wild, 2010). Recent research by Hennink, Kaiser and Marconi (2017) suggests having between 4 and 24 interviews to achieve data saturation on the code and meaning levels. The saturation in this research was influenced by its purpose and sampling strategy. Overall, 21 interviewees participated in the research (see Table 3), which was enough to develop a stable codebook with several core codes and themes.

**Table 3: Research Sampling: Number of Interviews**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Sampling groups** | **Venues** | **Number of interviews** |
| Venue management | The Lowry | 2 |
| Salford Museum and Art Gallery | 1 |
| Manchester Art Gallery | 1 |
| Event attendees | Business event at the Science and Industry Museum | 15 |
| Event organisers | Business event at the Science and Industry Museum | 2 |

Secondary data were collected in the form of official museum leaflets and web-pages which introduce the museums as business and corporate event venues, and contain information about availiable delegate packages, space capasity, venue layouts and other conference options.

The research data were analysed thematically. Thematic analysis is an inductive set of procedures designed to identify and explore codes and themes from textual data (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The process of coding breaks down the data into manageable fragments (Schwandt, 1997). A code is a word of phrase that symbolically captures the essence of the portion of text (Saldaña, 2013). These codes can then be used to identify overarching themes. A theme is a construct or idea that runs throughout several chunks of data (Harding, 2019).

In this research, a two-cycle coding approach was utilised (Saldaña, 2013). The first cycle entailed initial coding of data, where interview transcripts were broken down into discrete segments and examined for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each data set, obtained from museum management, event organisers and event attendees, was firstly analysed separately and secondly, combined and examined together to compare the results of the initial coding (Bazeley, 2013). The examples of initial coding are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

**Table 4. Data coding. Interviews with the management of the museums and art galleries**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Codes** | **Data extracts** |
| **Uniqueness**  **Individuality** | The Lowry is unique in terms of the actual lay out of the building. It is not just a generic kind of meeting space with blanks walls and a few windows here and there; you will find that each space is completely individual (Venue management, the Lowry). |
| **Added Value**  **Attendee experience**  **Art as add-on** | I think it is like the add-on that they [conference attendees] can have here. We have had events where they have had a conference in the day and then they have gone into the theatre in the evening, or they have had a gallery tour, or they have had a building tour (Venue management, the Lowry).  It is an add-on with the art being here, so even if they [event attendees] use the lecture room, during the breaktime they can go up to the gallery’s spaces (Venue management, Manchester Art Gallery). |
| **Restrictions**  **Regulations** | We are not allowed to put promotional products around (Venue management, the Lowry).  All our spaces are open for hire with health and safety taken into consideration (Venue management, Salford Museum).  Whatever space we have, so long as there is no artwork that has loan conditions, which doesn’t permit food and drink, or entertainment in there, we will use (Venue management, Manchester Art Gallery). |

**Table 5. Data coding. Interviews with the event organisers and attendees**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Codes** | **Data extracts** |
| **Better than conference venues** | It is much better than conference venues. If you have time over lunch, you can go and look round and see some interesting things which in most hotels or whatever you cannot (Event attendee 1). |
| **Art as add-on** | You have this thing where you think “Oh I would like to look around the museum (Event attendee 10). |
| **Available facilities**  **Logistics** | In terms of conference facilities, it does not compare with the best. I would say the facilities are probably similar, the set up in the room, like the technology, the catering outside, the toilet facilities, and it all seems fairly similar to those I have been to before (Event attendee 1).  It has good access. They let us in early, they have a good loading bay, because they are used to big exhibits (Event organiser 2). |
| **Location** | Location is key. If it is a museum at the edge of a city with not the greatest transport links, then that has the complication to effect attendance (Event organiser 1) |
| **Restrictions** | The main disadvantage of venues like this is that we normally like to put branding up on the route into the place. Because it is a museum, we cannot put our pop-ups or our logo downstairs (Event organiser 1). |

The second cycle of coding included the development of pattern codes, which are “explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration or explanation. They pull together a lot of material… into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 86).

At this stage, the thematic analysis revealed the interplay of three key attributes a museum should enhance to become a successful business event venue (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Key Quality Attributes of Museums and Art Galleries as Business Event Venues**

Venue Character reflects the overall image, appeal and reputation of a museum or art gallery. Memorability refers to the extent to which museums are capable of providing a unique and authentic experience to the corporate event audience through the enchanting atmospherics of the venue. Functionality and Feasibility deal with the availability of an appropriate infrastructure to successfully organise a business event in a museum or art gallery. Each of the attributes is discussed in detail in the next section.

## **Data Analysis**

## **Venue Character**

Venue Character refers to the unique appeal of a venue, its historical background, architectural distinctiveness and spatial design. Each of the three selected venues for this study has a unique history. Manchester Art Gallery and Salford Museum were built in the Victorian era. This provides the venues with a rich historical value and highlights them as important elements of the cityscape and, as a result, intriguing places to organise a business event. The Lowry, in contrast, is a relatively new project, completed in 2000. However, due to its permanent collections, temporary exhibitions and other cultural events hosted, it has become a cultural landmark for Manchester and for the UK in general.

Original architectural solutions allow the museums under study to stand alone and to be relatively competitive in the corporate event market. For example, the three buildings which constitute the Manchester Art Gallery are designed in [Greek Ionic, later Neoclassical style](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_Revival_architecture) (The City Art Gallery building), Italian [Palazzo style](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palazzo_style_architecture) ([Manchester Athenaeum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manchester_Athenaeum)) and Modern style (a Connection between the two buildings). Together, the mix of styles forms a single distinctive Gallery precinct. Diverse architectural solutions make the venue attractive and enchanting. The galleries of Salford Museum were built in a distinctive Renaissance style.

The exterior of the Lowry Centre

is made of up geometric shapes and a combination of materials which together signal a maritime theme. When viewed from across the canal the building looks like a ship blending into the skyline. Porthole windows are included in the exterior design. This is a prime example of innovative modern architecture. (Andrew Wallace Architects, n/a)

All three venues incorporate their distinctiveness into their communication and marketing strategy as one of the key selling points. Thus, Manchester Art Gallery positions itself as a “unique setting for extraordinary events with beautiful architecture, light-filled spaces and housing the country’s finest collection of art, design and fashion” (Manchester Art Gallery, n/a). As one of the respondents argues: “I have been to a lot of purpose-built venues. Whilst they are very modern and very nice, and they are there for the clients’ comfort, you cannot beat the Victorian architecture, the priceless artwork” (Venue management, Manchester Art Gallery).

The Lowry is introduced as “filled with originality and creativity” and a contemporary venue with spectacular views and stylish and innovative event spaces (The Lowry, 2018). The interviewee from the Lowry comments that “you have got a theatre that is running its own program, you have got an art gallery, that is running its own exhibitions, we have got the restaurant. The mix of those different elements really make it [the venue] unique” (Management, The Lowry). Salford Museum introduces its Victorian architecture and a stunning collection of 18th century paintings, sculptures and decorative arts as a servicescape for corporate events and gala dinners.

Overall, the enchanting appeal of a museum or art gallery differentiates it from any purpose-built event venue. In addition to conference rooms, which is a standard requirement for event venues, museums can offer culture and art as part of the conference package, “[giving] the attendees an opportunity to explore… So, if we can add further value by the ambience and experience… that is the reason why we choose locations like this” (Event organiser 1). The mix of contemporary event spaces with rich collections of art and distinctive design and architecture can provide a different and authentic experience for the attendees. Positive feelings gained from wandering around a museum can then increase the attendees’ likelihood of memorising the event and its captivating atmospherics.

## **Memorability**

One of the obvious advantages of organising a business or corporate event at a museum is its unique and authentic atmosphere and ambient conditions that create positive emotional effects in delegates:

we always try to organise events in a location which is a bit different so, it gives the attendees the opportunity to explore. Attending an event is a big commitment in someone’s working day. Lots of people today have travelled from Lancaster, Derby, York, Nottingham. So, it is a sizable chuck on their day. If we can add further value by the ambience and experience… (Event organiser 1).

We also wanted a venue in Manchester that would attract people to come and have a look at. So, not just come to the event but, maybe, have a look at the museum while they were here (Event organiser 2).

The venues under study offer their exhibition spaces for corporate dinners and receptions which contributes to the uniqueness of the experience: “We can set up a meal in the Victorian gallery around artwork that is hundreds of years old. It is not what a lot of corporate venues can provide” (Venue Management, Salford Museum). In Manchester Art Gallery, “entertainment amongst the art” (Venue Management, Manchester Art Gallery) is organised in a hall that contains the Pre-Raphaelite signature collection of the museum. In the Lowry “we offer the promenade section of the gallery complementary you can build a bar in there and it’s a really good kind of drinks reception” (Venue Management, the Lowry). Being surrounded by art improves the perceptions and overall satisfaction of the attendees and adds a ‘personal touch’ to the event design and production.

Another competitive advantage is an opportunity for delegates to explore the collections of art or technology during or after the event. “It is much better than conference venues. If you have time, you can go and look around and see some interesting things which in most hotels or whatever you cannot” (Event attendee 1). A complementary tour provides the attendees with an additional immersive and authentic experience which “makes you remember the event more” (Event attendee 11). Museums and art galleries use such tours to expand their target audience and attract those who may wish to visit the museum again with family or friends after the corporate event, as well as recommend the museum to others. For event organisers, guided tours provide an opportunity to decrease the need for further entertainment during the event; free time is allocated for attendees to explore the museum’s galleries on their own or with a guide tour.

A museum can also be linked to an event theme, as explored in the Science and Industry Museum. The museum contains exhibitions relating to transport, science and innovation, which were closely linked to the topic of the conference and was one of the reasons why the event organisers chose the venue. Such theme match provides further value to the event and adds to the attendees’ experience and overall satisfaction: it “makes it stand out a little bit more” (Event attendee 6) and “It sticks in your memory” (Event attendee 7).

## **Functionality and Feasibility**

The last attribute of a museum as a unique business event venue is Functionality and Feasibility. By providing necessary facilities in addition to venue authenticity and a unique attendee experience, a museum or art gallery can become a more desirable place for event organisers and compete with other event venues. Although it is irrelevant to compare the technological advances of a modern, purpose-built venue to the facilities provided by museums, all three venues under study have a variety of modern spaces with appropriate conference equipment. The Lowry, for example, provides black-out facilities, dimmable lights, an inclusive screen and projectors as well as different technical packages. The Manchester Art Gallery and the Lowry also offer their own on-site catering: “Here we cook everything in our kitchen downstairs. It is fresh and seasonal, from the local producers” (Venue management, Manchester Art Gallery).

Several issues with logistics and operations have been identified in this research. For example, occasionally, the Manchester Art Gallery has to close certain halls and rooms to the public, which results in complaints from the public. At the Lowry, however, the quantity and flexibility of available conference spaces allows the main gallery to be always open to the public no matter how large an event is. A solution might be to organise events outside of museum opening hours. However, this might affect the overall event experience and cause logistical concerns.

Often, spaces in museums and other unique venues are not specifically designed to accommodate conferences and business meetings. The layout flexibility can become another concern: “Sometimes you get some funky layouts, because you have got to account for lots of characteristics of the building, so it not always easy for a venue to set itself out and make itself relevant to lots of different things” (Event attendee 11). The Lowry venue plan is a good illustration of possible confusion that might occur during the event planning stage. On paper, the catering and certain event spaces are technically four floors apart. However, the ground floor curves around the building at a slight incline, so guests go from the ground floor to the first without even realising it. There is no second or third floor; instead, there are triple rooms from the first floor. Therefore, these rooms are actually very close together but when communicated on a spreadsheet or over the phone, it can be difficult to explain. Finally, the capacity of the rooms available for hire is considerably lower than in purpose-built congress halls or hotels.

In the UK, many historical buildings that house museums are of special architectural or historical interest and belong to Grade 1 or Grade 2 building regulations. Listed buildings have extra legal protection and restrictions within the planning system, which means certain works and infrastructure changes are not legally allowed. Thus, in Salford Museum, there are issues with central heating in some of the rooms allocated for corporate events, which again raises a question of the overall feasibility of hosting an event in such venues.

Event branding is another area for consideration linked to Functionality and Feasibility. Typically, event organisers are not allowed to use promotional and branding materials in and around the museum. Firstly, the museums are non-commercial organisations. Secondly, any visible promotional signage is likely to disrupt visitor experience. This may cause difficulties for corporate event attendees to identify the venue and find their way to the event: “When I turned up, there was no signage … we had to ask someone where to go” (Event attendee 12).

Location always plays a significant role in the overall venue attractiveness. The interviewed event organisers emphasised the importance of a venue close distance to the main city transport links as on of the key advantages of any business and corporate event venue: “The fact that this particular museum (the Science and Industry Museum) is right in front of Deansgate stop and close to convenient road networks is really important” (Event organiser 1).

Another important finding relates to the organisational culture in the museums and art galleries which can affect the overall willingness to host business and corporate events. Thus, in Manchester Art Gallery not all the employees considered staging business and corporate events as a necessary strategy: “[T]here is a mindset among the staff of why are we doing all these events? It is a gallery; we are here to promote artwork. We are not here to be an event space” (Venue management, Manchester Art Gallery). A possible ‘clash’ between the gallery’s primary function as a centre of art and culture and a corporate event venue requires serious considerations and strategic solutions:

It has been quite a long process of trying to educate ourselves internally, that this is something we have to do, because the arts funding is cut. We have to prove that we generate quiet a lot of our own income, so it is just trying to become self-sufficient and not relying on grants and sponsors, and that sort of thing. (Venue management, Manchester Art Gallery)

Overall, the identified attributes cover a wide spectrum of unique venue characteristics, which can be utilised by museums and art galleries to attract business events, generate income and increase their overall social importance and reputation. The analysis also identified several operational issues which can affect the overall feasibility of hosting and staging business and corporate events in these unusual venues.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Organising a business event in a museum can provide benefits for all the involved parties, including the museum, event organisers and the delegates. Figure 2 summarises key strategies and decisions that can position a museum or art gallery as an attractive space for business events and facilitate the process of event planners’ decision-making aimed at satisfying corporate delegates and delivering positive and authentic event experiences.

Marketing and Infrastructure

(Museum)

Selection Process

(Event Planners)

Experience and Satisfaction

(Delegates)

**Figure 2: Unique venue positioning, selection and experiencing**

The cultural industry, where museums and art galleries play the central role, witnesses a changing role of museums from functional and object-based with the emphasis on collection, preservation and display of art to purposeful and people-based where the focus is on visitor services, including education and enjoyment (Besterman, 1998, Rentschler, 2007a). Hence, a new market positioning and new ‘stories’ are required to reflect this paradigmatic shift.

Many museums showcase themselves as unique settings for business meetings, conferences and other special events. The findings of this research support the results of previous studies, emphasising the special appeal, ambient atmosphere and optional recreational opportunities, offered to the delegates (Rogers and Davidson, 2016, Leask and Hood, 2001). The identified quality attributes can become a basis for the development of new marketing strategies to meet the requirements of the business event industry. The promotional message can include such elements as the venue’s history, its unique character, its architectural and design distinctiveness, as well as its status and reputation.

Marketing, however, is still a “dirty word to some in museums” (Rentschler, 2007b, p. 12). As it is demonstrated in this study, museum staff can oppose a perspective of selling museum spaces for commercial use. In general, market repositioning strategies of museums face criticism as they potentially can diminish authenticity of the offer, negatively affect museum distinctiveness and blurry its core mission (Kotler and Kotler, 2007). In addition, as Marr (2011) argues, planned events or other large function add new dimensions to the normal work process at unusual venues. This requires better communication between the departments, knowledge exchange and a shared strategic vision. Kotler and Kotler (2007) argue, it is the manager’s role to encourage staff and demonstrate that opening to a broader target audience, including the business event sector, will not jeopardise the museum’s integrity and standards.

As an unusual venue, a museum or art gallery can offer four types of experience. These include object experience (e.g., seeing rare, uncommon and valuable things); cognitive experience (e.g., gaining information, enriching understanding); introspective experience (e.g., feeling a sense of belonging or connectedness); and, finally, social experience (e.g., spending time with other people) (Doering, 2007). The Memorability attribute identified and analysed in this research incorporates all these experiences. The authenticity and uniqueness of the site and its mesmerising ambient atmospherics (Kotler, 1973) provide an overall positive and enjoyable experience and facilitate networking and learning. By offering private tours, art and cultural presentations and evening receptions in inviting galleries, museums widen the ‘experiential menu’ for business delegates and evoke positive memories and excitement, providing unique advantages in comparison with the purpose-built venues and hotels. Lee, Parish and Kim (2015) identified the same quality of unique and glamorous experience provided by sport stadiums as meeting, corporate and social event venues.

Becoming a business event venue requires strategic considerations in relation to the venue functionality and flexibility. This research demonstrates that all the venues under study are capable of meeting the requirement of the business event industry, including quality of food, suitability of the conference facilities and accessibility (Crouch and Louviere, 2004; DiPietro, Breiter, Rompf and Godlewska, 2008; Elston and Draper, 2012). There are, however, some limitations, including restricted opening hours, lack of space flexibility, basic conferencing equipment and strict venue regulations. This appears to be a common issue with unusual venues. Whitefield (2009) and Leaks & Hood (2011) identified the same problems with break-out rooms and facilities. These are the areas that require management attention, particularly in old historical buildings such as Manchester Arts Gallery and Salford Museum.

Another aspect discussed in this study as well as in the literature (e.g., Rogers and Davidson, 2016; Davidson and Cope, 2003; Nolan, 2018) is the availability of museum spaces for hire during the open hours. Closure or limited access to museum galleries can have a negative impact on the image of a museum and overall visitor satisfaction. Current practice of running after-hours cultural events in museums have demonstrated its potential in attracting and engaging new audiences (Easson and Leask, 2019). Corporate entertainment events such as receptions and gala dinners hosted after-hours in an art gallery of museum not only provide extra revenue for the venue but can also expand its audience and strengthen community and business links. Overall, an analysis and evaluation of the available resources and opportunities could justify certain investment into museum infrastructure and venue refurbishment in order to meet the demand of the event organisers.

Due to the qualitative nature of this research and limited number of cases and conducted interviews, the findings may not at this stage be generalised to a wider population of museums and art galleries. Nevertheless, the study provides several useful implications for museum managers and event planners. While such venues cannot compete with the purpose-built venues in terms of conference equipment and technological advances, they can capitalise on their aesthetics and unique atmosphere. Museums should strategically use the identified attributes in their marketing to emphasises the venue character, memorable experience provided and its functionality. For event planners, the identified attributes provide a solid ground for informed decision-making. When choosing a venue for a new event, it is imperative to carry out a feasibility study to ensure the venue meets the event requirements, including venue reputation and image, its location, space capacity, costs, offered incentives and overall match with the event’s theme.

It is necessary to reflect on the future directions of academic inquiry that derive from this research. It would be beneficial to utilise quantitative data collection techniques and explore the attributes identified in this study within a wider population of museums, event organisers and attendees. A comparative study of museums and other unique venues such as castles, theatres, universities and public halls could generate further development of the suggested attributes. Another promising direction is the evaluation of museums’ and art galleries’ websites as eMarketing tools and how the identified attributes are employed to increase venue bookings.

From the perspective of business and corporate event management, it would be interesting to explore a performance measure of ROE (Return on Experience) (Getz, 2018). Event experiences are co-created with the audience, and a venue is a significant component of this process. Thus, both qualitative and quantitative data can be collected to evaluate the effect the attributes on client satisfaction, brand loyalty, delegates engagement, networking and even sales and revenue.

Overall, as this research demonstrates, cultural institutions are arguably well situated in the market and able to fulfil the demands of the business event organisers and their audience. Museums and art galleries are increasingly becoming more industry oriented and flexible, offering a range of unique benefits to corporate clients. The quality attributes identified and explored in this study can provide such venues with opportunities to maximise benefits from selling their spaces.

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