What does heritage change?

Reflecting on the mobile contact zone:
Cultural diplomacy, touring exhibitions and intercultural heritage experiences
Lee Davidson, Museum & Heritage Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, NZ

International exhibitions have long been promoted for their potential to connect people, objects and stories across political, cultural and geographical divides. Recent commentators have linked touring exhibitions to cultural globalisation, diplomacy, and the advancement of intercultural understanding, while others have critiqued them as revenue generators driven by public appeal or as ‘politically-safe’ forms of national branding. Very few studies, however, have attempted to empirically investigate the complex processes and contexts through which international exhibitions are produced, and thereby substantiate what they might change, and how.

This session explores international touring exhibitions as mobile “contact zones” which undergo processes of transformation and reconstruction as they traverse contested museological, cultural and political terrain. This approach highlights their nature as dynamic sites of encounter, performance and interpretation. We also examine how the mobile contact zone is experienced by the actors involved, both heritage professionals and visitors. Responding to the main conference theme, an overall question that the session addresses is: what do international touring exhibitions, and the intercultural heritage experiences they facilitate, change? Do they help us develop intercultural understanding, facilitate dialogue and build bridges between us?

We invite papers that explore these questions, with a particular emphasis on gathering in depth empirical evidence from multiple sources and perspectives of exactly what touring exhibitions do change, and how. Our interest is in building a theoretical understanding of international touring exhibitions, as well as critiquing the role of museums in cultural diplomacy and the development of a transnational, intercultural museum practice.

Related conference sub-themes include the role of heritage in globalisation and transnational processes, particularly its circulation and mobility through touring exhibitions; the ‘uses’ of heritage in terms of tourism (the international blockbuster as tourist attraction), and national identity-making and “imagined communities” as constructed through such exhibitions and utilised for cultural diplomacy. Through detailed investigation of these processes and possibilities, this session will attempt to gain a deeper understanding of their implications for intercultural heritage experiences and for the creation of touring exhibitions that fulfil their potential as spaces in which power, identity and notions of civility are performed and explored in open-minded, reflexive and constructive ways.