TANGIBLE - INTANGIBLE HERITAGE(S): AN INTERPLAY OF DESIGN, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CRITIQUES OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

• Paper / Proposal Title:
Displaying Intangible Heritage: Museology, Making by Hand, and Machine Manufacture

• Format(s):
In-person presentation / Written paper

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• Abstract (300 words):
Intangible cultural heritage is the term for a heritage of the behaviours we learn in our communities, which are as much our birth right as the material, tangible heritage places, buildings and objects we also inherit. The potentially productive relationship between intangible cultural heritage and design history remains under-examined by design historians. This study addresses this gap with an analysis of the ways in which intangible cultural heritage has been curated and displayed using the example of England’s industrial museums. England’s status as the birthplace of industry continues to be touted in tourism and heritage narratives, notwithstanding two counterfactual realities (a) the UK’s shift from heavy industry to service economy as manufacture has been outsourced and (b) increasing recognition of the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene, which is largely attributable to industrialization. I analyse the curatorial strategies and techniques
employed in designing visitor experiences that communicate the UK’s industrial heritage in a century in which industrialization has been relegated to the arena of historical interest, if not inconvenient truth. 21st-century manufacturing processes make extensive use of mechanized processes and robotic technologies, yet they still rely in addition on the dexterity of hired hands to assemble miniaturized electronic goods, among other things. In telling a story of industrialization replacing manual labour and hand manufacture, curators have produced displays which offer visitors a tactile experience appealing to the hand and the sense of touch, as much as to the other senses. Examples representative of England’s industrialization and of a variety of modes of display and visitor experience design will be discussed and will include some of the following: Ironbridge Gorge Museums, Coalbrookdale; the Science Museum, London; Leeds Industrial Museum at Armley Mills, once ‘the world’s largest woollen mill’ and Sheffield’s Magna, Kelham Island Museum, Millennium Gallery and Weston Museum.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Prof Dr Grace Lees-Maffei is Professor of Design History in the School of Creative Arts at the University of Hertfordshire. She leads the TVAD (Theorizing Visual Art and Design) Research Group in its work on relationships between text, narrative and image and is Programme Director for DHeritage, the Professional Doctorate in Heritage in the School of Humanities. She chairs the University’s Researcher Development Working Group. Lees-Maffei researches the design historiography, design history methodology and the mediation of design, from the 19th century to the present. The design industry is a significant part of the creative economy internationally. Prof Lees-Maffei has demonstrated a sustained interest in issues of global economy and, specifically, consumption, creative and digital economy, and globalisations within that theme. Lees-Maffei’s analysis of Italian design has examined its complex provenance: Italy attracts design talent from around the world and Italian design is enthusiastically consumed globally. Working with an international group of researchers, Lees-Maffei has shown that national histories of design have a place in the globalized design world and a globalized design history. Her current projects explore the social significance of graphic design and illustration, the relationship between design history and heritage, and debates about hand making and mechanisation.