

New Museum School Podcast Transcript– 2019/2020

PODCAST TITLE: *Nothing to See Here*

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SCRIPT

NMS INTRO STING

LINK 1

I'm Keilah Boyd, a New Museum School trainee at the National Trust's Sutton House, and you are listening to *Nothing to See Here*.

LINK 2

What is a museum? Seems like an obvious question, but let's see what the public have to say? What kind of things do they associate with museums?

VOX POP 1 |

Beauty and lots of things to see. And an interesting time.

VOX POP 2 |

I think of donations. I think about where the exhibitions have come from.

VOX POP 3 |

A lot of objects, probably, and a lot to look at, and old things usually.

LINK 3

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a museum is a “*building in which objects of a historical, scientific, artistic or cultural interest are stored or exhibited*”. This would mean that to be a museum you must have things to look at, but what if that wasn’t the case?

LINK 4

Sutton House was originally built as a country home for Tudor courtier, Ralph Sadler, but has since been a school, a trade union headquarters and a squat, to name a few of its varied uses. Because of this we have a unique situation here at Sutton House: despite 500 years of rich history, we have a very limited collection. This is common for heritage sites that have changed hands a lot, as previous owners will likely have taken their belongings with them when they moved out.

Some might see this as a shortcoming and are vocal about it, but I believe this challenge is one of our greatest opportunities.

LINK 5

“*There’s nothing to see here*” is a criticism I received while working on the Visitor Reception at Sutton House. It’s a tragic statement, considering the house is the oldest domestic building in East London. However, without a guided tour or prior knowledge of the house, it’s easy to feel there’s nothing to see.

LINK 6

Perhaps, as most people's understanding of museums is tied to objects and tangible evidence we are then doing them a disservice in our current state. In having a collection, an institution can engage with a much wider audience - across different ages, social class, or levels of education. Visual prompts allow visitors to draw their own meanings and interpretation, without the need for staff.

Collections make a museum more easily marketable. It is a lot easier to sell tangible traces of the past as opposed to an idea or feeling. Visitors to museums with vast and elaborate collections may feel that they've had a better customer experience and that they're getting better value for money, if they have paid for admission.

LINK 7

However, according to **Gemma Bending, Sutton House's House and Gardens Manager**, our minimal collection adds to the House's charm.

INTERVIEW CLIP 1 |

Gemma Bending, House and Gardens Manager, Sutton House

Our collection at Sutton House is quite unique. And I think partly what makes Sutton House so special, although minimal, it's made up in a number of ways. So, we have objects that have been brought into the house that are relevant to the historic eras of the period rooms. We have quite significant historic interiors that are original to the house and those include Tudor linenfold panelling and graffiti that spans from the 18th to the 20th century.

INTERVIEW CLIP 2 |

Gemma Bending, House and Gardens Manager, Sutton House

Then we also have indigenous smaller items like Victorian slippers which were found under the floorboards and crockery and playing chips which were found in archaeological digs more recently when we were building our garden space.

INTERVIEW CLIP 3 |

Gemma Bending, House and Gardens Manager, Sutton House

I think our challenge is ensuring that the everyday visitor to Sutton House is able to access that varied rich history when there isn't a collection which makes it so easily accessible. And I think that's what makes working at Sutton House really exciting. It's thinking up ways to surprise, intrigue and delight our visitors, to share our stories and to use our spaces in a unique way.

LINK 9

So, what are the advantages of our collection?

INTERVIEW CLIP 4 |

Gemma Bending, House and Gardens Manager, Sutton House

I think the benefit of having quite a minimal collection is that it opens up the potential to interpret and use the rooms in a number of different ways. We use them for weddings, for the community, for exhibitions, and as part of our quite varied events programme. In a historic house that has a complex high value collection, the ability to do this is more challenging because of the importance of balancing conservation and preservation with engagement. Although this is still a huge consideration for Sutton House, the flexibility of our rooms because we have a minimal collection does widen our scope and our potential.

LINK 10

At a time when many heritage institutions are facing criticism for failure to repatriate parts of their collections, and with Greece demanding the return of the Parthenon Marbles in exchange for a UK trade deal, perhaps we should assess the ethical debate surrounding collections.

LINK 11

Sutton House massively benefited from the rewards of more problematic periods in history, but due to its lack of collection, the house could very easily ignore its more contentious histories. After all, there are no objects for foreign nations to reclaim. However, as the artist Fred Wilson, a highly esteemed critic of whitewashing in museums, says: *“What they put on view says a lot but what they don’t put on view says even more”*.

LINK 12

Some of the most talked about features in the house were funded with money accrued through association with the East India Company. Founded in 1600, to establish spice trade relationships with East and Southeast Asia and India, the East India Company would later branch into politics, becoming an agent of imperialism in India.

Captain Milward and family moved into Sutton House in 1634, and as a member of the Company’s governing body, known as the Court of Committees, he was able to renovate the house to show off his affluence. The house’s linenfold panelling and ornately painted staircase were additions linked to Milward’s wealth and prestige.

Engaging with, and confronting, problematic histories is an active choice heritages sites have to make, regardless of the state of their collection. In a way, having no collection, allows for more conscious, creative and interesting ways to engage with these stories. Sutton House has commissioned and co-curated a set of sails to tell the story of the East India Company’s links to the house. This type of programming

promotes greater diversity and representation within museums and doesn't need a collection to do so.

LINK 13

Sutton House is currently a part of the *Colonial Countryside* project, an initiative with the University of Leicester which aims to help Historic Houses confront and recognise their more challenging histories. Sutton House has used this as an opportunity to engage with local communities to co-curate exhibitions that tell more rounded and reliable accounts.

LINK 14

We've spoken about people visiting museums to look at objects. But aren't there lots of other reasons why people visit heritage sites? What if understanding more about the past or a specific topic or historical figure isn't your main motivation?

In July 2018, *The Independent* ran an article titled, 10 BEST PLACES IN THE UK TO COOL DOWN. It suggests visiting a museum to avoid the summer sun – because they “are often kept at a cool temperature to protect the valuable collections within.” But that's only one example. Let's see what the public have to say. I went to the British Museum and asked, 'Why do you visit museums?'

VOX POP 4 |

To see things that I wouldn't otherwise be able to experience.

VOX POP 5 |

...it's a good way to spend an afternoon.

VOX POP 6 |

To occupy myself through a day of space. To take her to look at stuff.

LINK 15

I then decided to ask explicitly, “Would you visit a museum if there wasn’t a lot to see in it?” and this is what people had to say:

VOX POP 2 |

I suppose some people visit for the architecture

VOX POP 8 |

Yes, I would go to a museum if there is not a lot to see in case the building is beautiful, people are nice. For example, Tate Modern. I didn't see anything because I was not in the mood. I just saw the building.

LINK 16

I truly do believe that Sutton House proves that having a minimal or no collection needn't be the downfall of a museum. If anything, it works as motivation to create thoughtful and engaging programming, that tells deeper stories better than an object ever could. Perhaps, rather than being a criticism, *'Nothing to See Here'* is actually Sutton House's saving grace.

NMS OUTRO STING

SCRIPT ENDS