

In Conversation with Sharon Ament

Joseph Court

Sharon Ament is the Director of the Museum of London, and inspiring passion in the capital and its museum is her goal. Sharon joined the Museum in September 2012 to steer the world's leading city museum through to the next phase of its development by inspiring a passion for London and reflecting the capital's energy and dynamism. Throughout her career Sharon has been driven by the simple aim of 'turning people onto great ideas and causes'. This started early with her work for a number of social causes in Liverpool. Thereafter she became involved in wildlife conservation and worked with the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, moving from Lancashire to Slimbridge to oversee a national portfolio of wetland centres. In the 1990s she worked at the Zoological Society of London and from there joined The Natural History Museum.

CJLPA: What role does the Museum of London play in London? How do you want this to develop?

Sharon Ament: Putting it simply, the Museum of London tells the story of what I consider to be the greatest city in the world and its people. It's also a complex city with a long and rich history containing every positive and negative aspect of urban life and one that lives with a legacy of being at the centre of an empire. Central to our identity as a cultural institution is the idea of openness. London has always been an open city—open to all people, faiths, cultures, perspectives, and conversations—and it's in that spirit that we tell London's story. In the next few years, we're recreating the Museum of London in West Smithfield, an old marketplace that has lain untouched for 30 years and been an important trading place for many centuries. We're saving this remarkable building for society and breathing a different sort of cultural life into the City of London as a result. We will be London's shared place: smack bang in the middle of the story, open for all, and created with Londoners who've joined us along the way. Post-pandemic our project has more meaning than ever before.

CJLPA: Like all cultural institutions, the Museum has struggled in the COVID-19 pandemic, having only been open for 13 weeks between March 2020 and 2021. Do you see any upsides to COVID-19?

SA: The past year has been a real struggle for the whole culture sector in the UK, but what has been front of my mind is the impact the museum and gallery closures are having on young people. In my opinion, these young people have to be at the heart of our efforts to rebuild cultural institutions. Creating a new museum in the aftermath of the pandemic provides a special opportunity. It's a time when we can really step back and think about what social history museums should be now and in the future. Who are they for? Who should they represent? What stories should they tell?

In terms of the area of the City that the new museum is located, it's also a great opportunity for cultural regeneration. The old general market building has been derelict for some time. By transforming this extraordinary heritage space, we've been able to save the building from commercial development in the form that is familiar with office buildings and give it to the people of London. I want Londoners to feel that they belong here, that it's their space. The new museum will be a 'museum wrapped in a high street' with space for independent businesses, restaurants, and cafes. The museum itself will be like a marketplace: you'll be able to walk straight through it on your way to work, you'll be able to walk your dog through it—or stay and watch performances, see community-curated exhibitions, or delve into the deep history of London. It will truly be a new type of museum, built for the times in which we live. And we have a train running through our Past Time Galleries.

CJLPA: Do you think museums will be important in keeping city centres thriving and lively after COVID-19?

SA: Museums have a huge role to play post-COVID in enlivening city centres as well, of course, as being part of the cultural infrastructure alongside libraries, parks, galleries, and other social spaces. We may find that after the pandemic the pace of change in city centres has increased dramatically. That might be because people choose to work from home more often, or because retail businesses that have struggled during COVID do not survive. Museums don't just give people a reason to visit their city, but it also gives space to reflect, consider, and explore. Museums are trusted places and the flow back after lockdown to our museums and galleries shows that people want to visit.

The City of London, where we are based, has felt the effect of the pandemic very harshly. Footfall has plummeted and will take some time to recover. That is why the City of London Corporation have put culture front and centre of their COVID recovery plans,

announcing a Culture and Commerce Taskforce, as well as investing in major cultural infrastructure including the Barbican and of course the new Museum of London.

CJLPA: You will have opened on 19 May 2021 with the exhibition ‘Dub London: Bassline of a City’. Could you tell us about the exhibition and how it fits into bigger plans for the Museum?

SA: From its roots in Jamaican reggae to how it shaped communities over the last 50 years, our new display explores not only dub music, but also the cultural and social impact it has had on the identity of London and its people.

Dub has had a far-reaching impact across the music industry and the history of the capital. It has influenced multiple genres from drum and bass, garage, and hip-hop to even mainstream pop, and played an important role in the early days of the city’s punk scene with bands such as The Clash and The Slits drawing on its unique sound. The story of dub culture in London is a fascinating one and one that hasn’t been told this widely in a museum setting before. Through getting out into the places and speaking to the people who have been instrumental in the dub scene, we’ve been able to hear stories of how London was central for the emergence of dub in the UK. Even though most of this music originated in the Caribbean and Jamaica, London quickly became important to dub reggae: dub record labels were started in London, and dub music was produced in London and exported to the rest of the world. With London still being home to one of the largest collections of dub reggae record shops outside of Kingston, Jamaica, this display will be a unique and impressive way to tell the story of how dub culture has shaped the identity of the capital and us as Londoners.

The museum is passionate about connecting to Londoners, cutting across multiple scenes, times, and genres. Our past experiences with ‘Punk London’, ‘The Clash: London Calling’, and now ‘Dub London: Bassline of a City’, show us the music runs through London’s veins and is crucial to a Londoner’s identity. It’s a theme we’re exploring for our new Museum of London in West Smithfield.

CJLPA: The Museum recently produced a wide-ranging report on the experiences of Generation Z Londoners. Did this inform your plans for the Museum?

SA: Absolutely. We worked with the Partnership for Young London on the largest survey of Gen Z Londoners of its kind. Over 3,000 young Londoners took part, and told us what mattered to them, about their concerns and hopes for the future. I want young Londoners to play an active role in the creation of the new museum and to see their experiences reflected in its displays and ongoing programming. Young people told us that they didn’t always feel welcome in cultural institutions. I want the new museum to make young Londoners feel comfortable, valued, and inspired. This research will help us place young people front and centre of the new museum and will inform our plans as they develop.

CJLPA: What prompted the move to West Smithfield, away from the current Brutalist site on London Wall?

SA: The current site at London Wall is simply too small for our ambitions to reach every schoolchild in the capital and tell the stories of London and Londoners past, present, and future—no longer a museum fit for twenty-first-century London. It’s also very a tricky location, with access via highwalks and no ground-

level entrances. In fact, it would be fair to say we are invisible behind the walls of the roundabout that shields us. The new museum at West Smithfield will be situated at one end of the City’s Culture Mile and is directly opposite the new Crossrail station in Farringdon. We like to say that the new site is two stops from Paris! Situated within beautiful, historic market buildings designed by the inimitable Sir Horace Jones, they’re the perfect new home for a museum for London: not shiny new buildings or a grand old palace, but very special market structures grounded in the working and trading history of the city. We are aiming to attract two million visitors in the first year, compared to our current footfall of around 800,000, and the project will be a key part of London’s post-COVID recovery.

CJLPA: The new site has an interesting plan centred around different types of ‘Time’. Could you tell us about this, and how it came to be?

SA: The ground floor of the General Market, ‘Our Time’, will be a hub for London events. With gatherings ranging from festivals, markets, and performances to talks and discussions about urgent local matters, it will become a new space for Londoners and visitors to the city to come together. Even when no event is on, it will simply be a new, welcoming space to meet friends or just spend time amid displays and activities which explore London’s lived experience—the London of our own living memories.

Beneath the General Market, ‘Past Time’ will be a spectacular underground space, home to the rich historical galleries of the museum. Here we will showcase the unrivalled breadth of our London Collection, made up of some seven million items. Content will range from skeletons to dresses, vehicles to art and photography, and include the exquisite jewellery of the Cheapside Hoard in the Goldsmiths’ Gallery. There will be theatrical, sensory, and interactive displays, full of 10,000 years of human drama.

A live train line runs alongside this space, which was once a huge goods depot for the Great Northern Railway. At the far end, in the old salt store, visitors will be able to watch the trains rumble by as passengers peer in—a visceral reminder of the connectedness of these buildings to the city in which we are rooted.

CJLPA: You have spoken well on how you want the new Museum to tell the stories of a wider range of Londoners. What role do you see for the more traditional elements, like the Tudor and Roman collections?

SA: Before London, there was Londinium. Our Roman story is crucial in telling the story of our city and its people with, as we know, remnants still around today. These iconic London ‘moments’, including the Romans, the Great Fire, and the Suffragettes form the foundation of our museum and city alike. These core pieces of the narrative will be told in full in our new museum galleries, in a space we’re currently calling ‘Past Time’. They’re also key curriculum topics and, with our vision to reach every school child in London, will form vital elements of our learning programmes. In essence we will be illuminating London across time in a way that is both familiar and very, very different. We can’t tell the story of London and miss out the Great Fire, but we can draw out new narratives, new voices, new insights that come from looking at London from the perspective of 2021.

CJLPA: How will you be growing your permanent collections?

SA: We are actively collecting in three ways, adding to our collections through archaeological finds thus building an ever more comprehensive London Archaeological Archive. Secondly, we are adding to our collections through contemporary collecting programmes such as ‘Collecting the Pandemic’. When a compelling reason to record a moment that is happening now becomes apparent, we get collecting. The last time we undertook such a large-scale contemporary collecting programme was during the war, when we collected what people were wearing—particularly clothes that were designated as utility wear. Finally, we continue to collect historic objects in the traditional ways from donations to purchase. Some examples of these would be Daphne Hardy Henrion’s Festival of Britain sculpture and Pierre Prévost’s 1815 *Panorama of London*, which came up for sale in 2018. These objects become part of the London Collection, which is more than seven million items strong.

CJLPA: You have plans to use digital technology to get people around the world thinking about important cultural issues. What exactly do these plans entail?

SA: Being truly 24/7, live-streaming data from London, broadcasting from the Museum, just to name a few activities. But it would be fair to say that this, as for every other cultural organisation, has become a more significant focus. Watch this (digital) space!

CJLPA: How important do you consider it to see the Museum’s collections in person versus digitally?

SA: More than ever, the last year has shown us that we cannot be complacent and rely on physical visits alone (although we can’t wait to welcome back our much-missed visitors!). How we’ve developed our digital offer has been nothing short of incredible and we must continue to build on this progress. We have seen the appetite is there. From our Great Fire livestreams beaming directly to thousands of school children in summer last year, through to our digitising former exhibitions such as ‘Disease X’ and turning our blockbuster exhibition ‘The Cheapside Hoard’ into the ‘Tweetside Hoard’—just some of examples of our recent digital work—we have a great foundation to build on. The story of London and Londoners isn’t confined to within the M25; it transcends borders and has national and international appeal as one of the greatest cities in the world, so we have an obligation, as well as a passion, to share our content as far as possible. We’re thinking hard about how to apply this mentality to the new Museum of London where we have the opportunity to shape our digital presence, both physically within the buildings but also online, from the ground up. We’re adding to our collections all the time; most recently we’ve acquired a host of COVID-related objects to make sure this unreal time is captured—we’ve collected people’s experiences of Ramadan in lockdown, the sounds of London’s silent streets during the pandemic, posters, flyers from protests, and much more.

Our role also extends beyond our collections and our ‘stuff’. Museums are increasingly becoming spaces for important debate, relearning, and exploration of hard-hitting subjects that affect us all. Of course, our role will always be rooted in history, but we have a voice and must use it.

Joseph Court is an Archaeology graduate from Trinity College, Cambridge, who placed first each year and specialised in the ancient Near East. He is interested in the very new as well as the very old: tech law and policy, Wikipedia editing, and film. He is Managing Editor of *CJLPA*.
