

Hackney Museum

Desperately seeking sanctuary

Working with asylum seekers and refugees can open up museums to diverse communities as well as challenging negative public perceptions, says Sylvia Arthur

Saranda is a typical teenage girl. She listens to Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake, watches EastEnders and reads Harry Potter. Like half of all Liverpoolians, she supports Liverpool Football Club (although she also has a thing for their great rivals, Manchester United). Just like your average 13-year-old she's bright and contradictory with a naturally active, enquiring, mind.

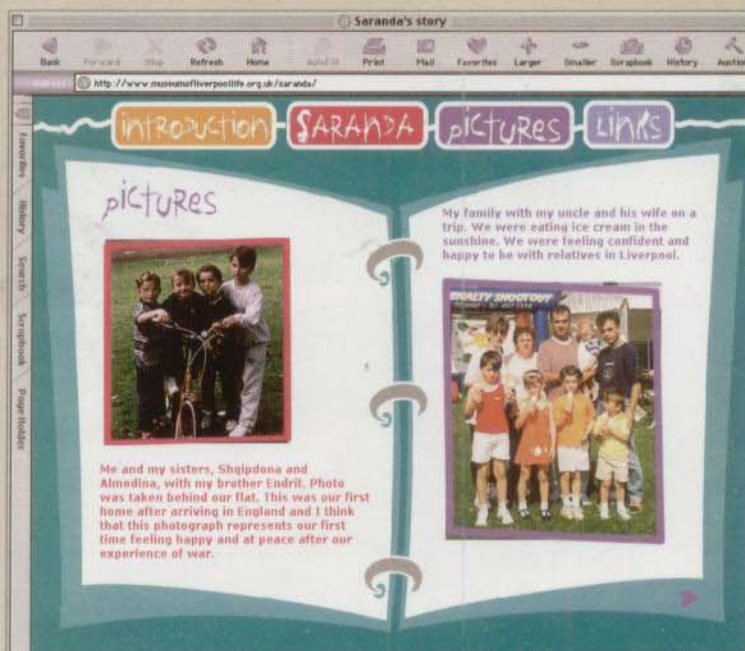
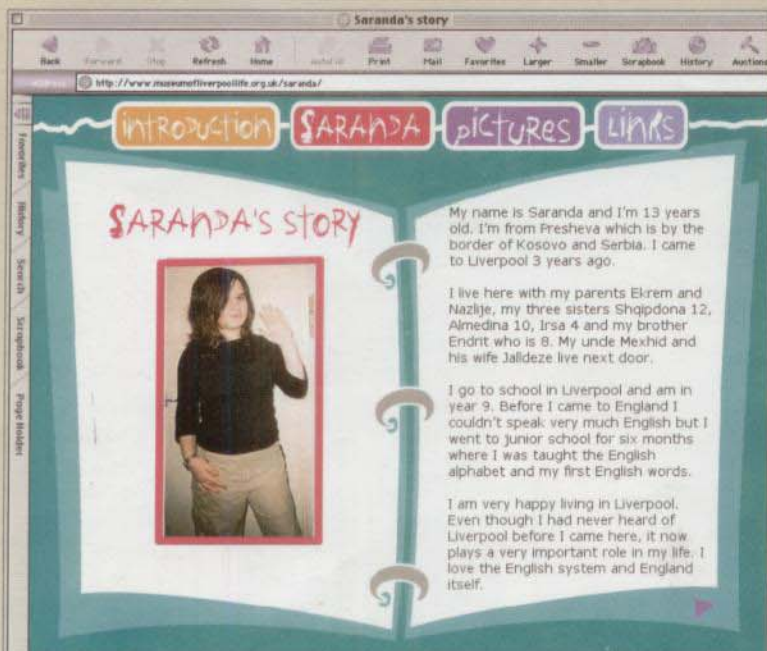
But Saranda is no ordinary young girl. As a

refugee from Kosovo, she fled her homeland four years ago at the height of civil war and sought safe haven in the UK, first in Leeds and then finally settling in Liverpool, which she now calls home. 'Many people would like to know what my family and I have been through,' she writes in her online journal, which has been developed with the National Museums Liverpool (NML). 'No matter how many stories you hear or read you wouldn't have the faintest idea of how we felt having

to leave our country and what we've been through before we came to England.'

The art of visual expression has been Saranda's medium for communicating her complex experiences. With help from the NML, Saranda has been able to tell her story in a way she feels comfortable with. Using a combination of words and images, Saranda's life is illustrated in an unashamedly simple manner that is intentionally accessible to children and adults, making it an effective ►

Home truths: the Hackney Museum represents its multicultural borough by showing that the area has been built on people moving to the area from abroad



'The power of museums to mediate between culturally diverse groups cannot be underestimated'

insight into her existence. The website is available in both Albanian and English.

Saranda's Story is part of a project by the Museum of Liverpool Life to chronicle the lives of 800 of the city's culturally diverse residents. Funded for three years by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the Celebrating Diversity outreach programme aims to take museums to the community by collaborating with local groups. The Electronic Outreach strand of the project, of which Saranda's Story is a part, offers people the opportunity to develop 'e-exhibitions' on the NML website. 'Saranda approached the National Museums Liverpool in 2002 asking for our help to publish a book about her experiences as a young Kosovan refugee,' says Kate Johnson, the e-communities officer at the NML. 'We were unable to help her with that project but we offered her the opportunity to create a website that focussed on her life in Liverpool since leaving Kosovo in 1999.'

Over the past ten years, British society has changed dramatically. International migration because of conflict and political instability has had an impact around the world, with public services in host countries having to adapt to accommodate the needs of their new populations.

But the question of whether museums and other cultural institutions have a duty to be representative of all communities in society, particularly newer ones, remains contentious. The UK is home to thousands of refugees and asylum seekers. Many have been integrated into cities around the country within already diverse communities. As a result, museums have had to cater for an increasingly diverse audience. Budget cuts

and limited resources have placed curators under further pressure.

The financial situation was improved in June when the government announced grants totalling £2.5m for 11 national museums to create partnerships with regional museums to deliver educational programmes and community projects. This was a clear recognition of the increasingly important role cultural institutions can, and should, play in bringing communities together.

At the time the jointly-funded grants from the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) were announced, the arts minister, Estelle Morris, said: 'It is so important that everyone, no matter where they live or what their background, can enjoy and experience their cultural heritage.'

Among the projects to benefit from the grants was the Engaging Refugees and Asylum Seekers project, which was awarded £90,000 to 'develop practices to engage refugees and asylum seekers in museum events and activities'. The collaborating institutions — the Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, the Leicester City Museums Service and the Salford Museum and Art Gallery in partnership with the NML — are all in cities that have a sizeable number of refugees and asylum seekers and a large indigenous ethnic minority population.

Many of the museums that have received DCMS funding, such as Sunderland, are currently recruiting staff to help them deliver exhibitions and engage with refugees and asylum seekers. In Liverpool, Saranda's story will form the starting point for other activities. 'Saranda's website is the main project

Above: two web pages written by Kosovan refugee Saranda for the Museum of Liverpool Life

we have undertaken since the DCMS award,' says Johnson. 'We've had family fun days involving all the local communities but we will be doing a lot more with the funding.'

The power of museums to mediate between culturally diverse groups cannot be underestimated. Abstract or representational images can overcome language barriers and convey experiences with an intimate precision that words can't capture, fostering mutual understanding and respect.

'Refugees and asylum seekers are by definition uprooted from their homelands and have usually left behind the material manifestations of their identity and belonging,' says Nick Merriman, the chairman of the International Council of Museums in the UK. 'Museums can potentially help them to heal and form a bridge between them and the rest of the community.'

Claire Adler is the community education manager at the Hackney Museum, which charts the history of migration and settlement to the east London borough. She says: 'We are putting the current anxiety about the number of asylum seekers and refugees within the historical context that shows that Hackney and London have been built around a long history of people moving to the area.'

'In the build-up to the second Iraq war we became increasingly concerned about the negative media coverage concerning the issue of asylum seekers and immigrants,' Adler continues. 'So we put on a small display called Safe Haven about one Kurdish family's experience of fleeing Turkey to escape persecution and their experience of claiming asylum in Britain. This provoked a response from the public with many more people recording their own experiences of moving to Hackney on the response cards by the display.'

In areas such as London, Liverpool and

(Solo) Mary
 Name
 Age 33
 Address 3. para. house

Affix
 stamp
 here

My Story....

I moved to London at the
 age of 15 from Africa.
 There was war here.
 I had to learn to read and
 write because we were to
 go to learn in Africa!

Hackney Museum
 Technology and
 Learning Centre
 1 Reading Lane
 Hackney
 London E8 1GQ



Left: a comment card filled out by a visitor to the Hackney Museum in east London

Below: a sculpture produced at the Hackney Museum by Mohamed, who arrived in the borough from Sierra Leone, where he had been traumatised by war

negative public perceptions. 'Existing collections can be used as a way of engaging people in activities of reminiscence and creativity which signal interest and concern from an otherwise often uninterested community,' says Merriman.

Adler agrees: 'Museums need to find ways to engage asylum seekers and refugees in ways that are not tokenistic and have longevity. It is impossible for museums to represent their communities unless the communities themselves are involved. Museum staff should work with local groups to ensure their displays are relevant to the communities they wish to attract.'

Museums are in a unique position to provide an environment where refugees and asylum seekers can share their past experiences, express their hopes for the future and inspire others.

As Saranda says in her online diary: 'If the worst came to the worst and we had to go back, one thing they don't know is that they can take me out of Liverpool but they cannot take Liverpool out of me. I feel that I have been through a lot for three-and-a-half years. I would love to be a British citizen but I feel that I already am. I hope you agree.' ■

► Links:

www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk

www.hackney.gov.uk

www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

Leicester where there has been a sizeable ethnic minority community for a some time, local museums are accustomed to putting on exhibitions that cater for their visitors' unique cultural needs. Yet developing new ways of engaging ostracised communities requires an acknowledgement of the fact that conventional means of representation may need to be adapted to be more accessible. Alternative means of expression, such as performance and storytelling, are in the oral tradition of many of these groups.

These examples show how museums can become more accessible to their diverse and changing audiences and assist in changing

'Museums should be accessible to all communities, even relatively transient ones. For refugees and asylum seekers, museums could be safe, welcoming and neutral spaces' — Nick Merriman, ICoM UK



Hackney Museum

'Museums should be inclusive of all of the communities they serve,' Merriman says. 'This could be particularly important for refugees and asylum seekers where museums could be safe, welcoming and neutral spaces. This doesn't mean that every single group should be represented in the permanent collections, but more that the kinds of services provided by the museum should be accessible and engaging to all communities, even relatively transient ones.'

So do museums have a duty to represent the history of refugees? Adler thinks they do: 'For local authority museums such as Hackney it is essential that we try to make the museum as relevant as possible to the local communities who pay for the museum through their taxes.'

But it is possible for museums to cater for a variety of communities without alienating their core audience?

The Bolton Museum used Refugee Week in June 2003 to highlight the lives of its refugee population. It held an exhibition called Strangers in a Strange Land: Asylum Seekers in Bolton, which gave four local asylum seekers the opportunity to tell their stories of life in Bolton. This in turn allowed the indigenous population to view their city through the eyes of a stranger.

Colours of Islam, a collaboration between