

# Arts vs Accountancy



Can commerce influence the culture projects it sponsors? **Professor Anette Mikes** of the University of Lausanne found an object lesson in plans to turn Charlie Chaplin's Swiss home into a museum

**M**ost arts and culture organisations and entrepreneurs are pragmatic, recognising the need to reach out to business in order to boost funding. Yet despite the long tradition of patronage, there is still a degree of unease and suspicion about the influence of commerce on art. The art world's approach has long been that of Wilhelmina Fernandez's character in Jean-Jacques Beineix's film, *Divya*: "Non, non, c'est au commerce de s'adapter à l'art. Et non pas à l'art de s'adapter au commerce." ("It's up to commerce to adapt itself to art and not up to art to adapt itself to commerce.")

But is the view that artistic and cultural integrity are compromised by association with profit and popular entertainment really justified? That's a question that will resonate particu-

larly strongly in the UK, where Brexit is likely to have a significant adverse impact on arts funding.

The opportunity to explore this question presented itself a couple of years ago in the shape of a museum under construction near Lausanne that was supposed to become Chaplin's World, an entertainment experience in Charlie Chaplin's old home. I was struck by the artistic heritage inherent in the project, but even more by the volume of financial and business jargon that filled the pages of its website. One day, over coffee, I showed the website to my colleague and professor of marketing, Felicitas Morhart. For both of us, it was the obvious tension between commerce and cultural integrity that caught our interest.

So out of curiosity we started to look into Chaplin's World more deeply, to explore whether this financial focus would ultimately erode the project's authenticity. Conventional wisdom suggested it would. But we found otherwise.

Exiled from the United States in 1952 amid a wave of anti-communist hysteria, Charlie Chaplin settled in Switzerland at the Manoir de Ban at Corsier-sur-Vevey, where he lived until his death in 1977.

Philippe Meylan, an architect, and Yves Durand, a designer, are huge Chaplin fans. In 2000, they approached

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the Chaplin family with a plan to purchase the Manoir de Ban and create a "nice museum". The family agreed on condition that it honour the memory of their father. Meylan and Durand envisaged a museum that would "document the artist's ideas and ideals". It would provide an authentic Chaplin experience and feature items personally associated with him.

When Chaplin's World opened 16 years later in 2016 it had clearly evolved far beyond its original vision. Yet, the various stakeholders that had become involved during its development were still confident that Chaplin's artistic and cultural legacy was being celebrated in a suitably authentic way.

We followed the project for two years, carrying out 15 interviews, making multiple visits to Vevey and reviewing over 1,000 pages of internal documents. What we discovered was that an unlikely ingredient – accounting – played a key role in reshaping the creative vision in a way that allowed stakeholders to resolve differing perspectives on how to authentically reflect Chaplin's persona.

Accounting acted as a catalyst because stakeholders used it as a tool to persuade others. It was also used to bring in new stakeholders at key moments, notably Grévin (part of the Compagnie des Alpes leisure group) and investment firm Genii, in order to deliver the vision as it evolved. Accounting also helped shape views about the type of consumer experience and authenticity that was appropriate.

Used as a common language, accounting practices provided a shared "context of interaction" through which differing perspectives could be discussed and reconciled, leading to new strategies. Visitor numbers, for example, became a mutually-agreed measure of success, increasing from an initial point estimate of 200,000 per an-



num to a later range estimate of 250,000–320,000. How to attract those visitors – the type of experience Chaplin's World would deliver – also evolved from an initial concept of a niche high-culture museum to one of a popular culture leisure park. By the time Grévin agreed to invest in the project, the budget, initially set at 20 million Swiss francs had grown to around 55 million, reflecting the ambitious scope of a world-class leisure and cultural entertainment concept.

This evolution followed a benchmarking study that included comparisons with Graceland, Elvis Presley's former home, which suggested the need to diversify the experience, add revenue streams and create a "museum-plus-park". KPMG's business plan drew on accounting techniques such as net present values, accounting amortisation and expenses capitalisation. The firm's detailed projections also suggested adding corporate entertainment as an additional revenue stream.

We identified several important principles that enable accounting

**Manoir de Ban, the property on the bank of Lake Geneva, where Charlie Chaplin spent the last 25 years of his life, now part of the Chaplin's World museum.** Photo credit: lulu and isabelle/Shutterstock.com

practices to become an effective means of creating synergy between very differing stakeholders and that can be applied more widely.

First, expert partners should be chosen with complementary, rather than competing skills. Second, once an expert makes a decision and it has been discussed, other stakeholders should commit to it, agreeing to differ if necessary. Third, elements of accounting practice should be considered and used as an objective, quantitative language to develop a common narrative about the project.

Accounting practices also increased the project's credibility, which helped in raising funds. Durand him-

self became more persuasive to potential stakeholders as he steadily accumulated considerable knowledge of accounting and other financial practices.

Chaplin's World has received positive reviews since opening and appears to have successfully captured Chaplin's own mix of populist appeal and high culture, doing justice to his memory as intended.

Our study is instructive to anyone at work on an arts and culture project. It demonstrates how accounting practices, when used wisely, can help reconcile perceived conflicts between art and business, bringing stakeholders together without compromising authenticity. In the right circumstances, bean counting and artistic integrity can be compatible.

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