

Section 5



The Museum Environment

5.1 Why is environment important?

Adult learning in a museum can be the result of participation in structured educational activities or projects. It can also happen informally during a museum visit, as a result of free interaction between individual visitors, objects, artworks or artefacts, and the museum space itself. Adults learn much on their own and this means that museums, as places of informal and individual learning, should strive to offer their visitors the best possible conditions to support this learning process. The museum environment plays an important role in promoting understanding of the works, effectiveness in raising the intellectual curiosity of the users and involving them in a unique experience, rich in cultural and emotional values. Visitors who feel physically comfortable, welcomed and orientated in museum spaces will enjoy their visit more and learn more as a result.

The relevance of this subject led the European Museum Forum to devote its 2005 Workshop to this theme, the conclusions of which can be read on:



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under "reports".

The importance of the environment to learning is also recognised in the UK Museums Libraries and Archive Council's best practice framework for access and education, "Inspiring Learning for All", where it refers to 'Places - Creating an inspiring and learning environment that supports learning.'

5.2 Some elements to be considered

The environment in European museums has evolved quite significantly in the last three decades, due to a number of factors including:

- The adoption of new materials and new technical devices which have proved essential in improving exhibition design (for example, polycarbonates instead of glass; plastic materials instead of wood).
- Improved conservation techniques which have a direct impact on exhibition design.

- The use of multimedia and new technologies.

- The recognition of the importance of teamwork in exhibition development.

- Changing public and institutional views and expectations of what a museum should provide for its visitors.

Based on research conducted by the European Museum Forum, which, since 1977 has inspected more than 1600 museums to assess innovation for its European Museum of the Year Award, here are some elements which illustrate the evolution of the museum environment in recent years, with a specific focus on exhibition and display techniques. These are not meant to be definitive because all museums are different. However, they should provide food for thought and discussion when considering the museum environment and its impact on learning.

Wharf

Photo: The German Emigration Centre, Bremerhaven

THE PHYSICAL COMFORT OF VISITORS

It is often said that museum visitors vote with their feet, quite literally. Visiting a museum may well be exciting and involving, but in physical terms, it is often tiring. Giving focussed attention to paintings or exhibits, together with a lot of listening, walking, moving around and standing, makes for a heady mix of concentrated intellectual and physical tension that is not part of most people's everyday behaviour. Despite all efforts to make an exhibition interesting, or to assemble the most important masterpieces together in one gallery, the average visitor feels exhausted by the experience within about two hours. A welcoming museum tries to minimise this effect by creating restful areas including benches, chairs, and other opportunities to take a breather, despite the familiar limitations of design restrictions, space, fire and safety regulations.

The National Museum of Iceland recently introduced two interesting innovations: a bench equipped with a telephone receiver for listening to a recorded text fixed at one of the two extremities so that visitors can easily

turn 180° and focus on elements on display in different areas of the room.

In the same museum visitors can make use of a room equipped with a bed complete with pillow, sheets and blankets, to be used by museum-goers if they feel tired, although the museum is not very large.

VISITORS' ORIENTATION

Museum and gallery orientation and signage caters for a wide variety of age, social, national, cultural and other special interest groups, and relies on a mix of audio, visual and digital aids to capture their attention. In addition, increasing museum awareness about how to welcome different learners, each with his or her own combination of learning needs, interests and styles, requires different kinds of communication existing side by side. If the implications are well understood, and done well, the results are unobtrusive but helpful and effective. If they are done badly, the proliferation of numbers, colours, codes and keywords can make the use of competing narrative, symbols and audio information seem over-complicated and counter-productive.

Similarly, an over-directed route march through the museum can actually prevent visitors discovering the treasures along the journey in their own way and at their own pace.

THE CO-EXISTENCE OF OLD AND NEW

Trying to make a museum a welcoming, communicative and learning-friendly place sometimes remains as wishful thinking, because of the restrictions and limitations imposed by the building and also by the presence of old facilities and equipment which might be regarded as museum pieces themselves.

For example, old showcases which display materials in a strictly taxonomic order are seen as testimonies of the museological approach of the 18th-19th centuries.

Changing the museum environment for a temporary exhibition can be more successful, because it presents the opportunity to view the environment afresh and to design a space especially to complement the works.

Care needs to be taken when renovating parts of existing exhibits



HERSENCHEMIE ANN
 In de jaren 1850 ontdekten de Franse
 meer toegankelijk middelen die psychische
 onderzochten. Dit leidde tot een
 schap en een nieuw gebied in het
 De middelen, zo bleek uit recente
 hersenchemie. Het ontdekte het
 transmissie. De hersenen vormen
 zenuwcellen, die met elkaar
 de neurotransmitters
 Bij een aantal psychiatrische
 of onderactieve van deze
 hebben recht te zetten, te
 de hersenchemie

through “add-ons” or the addition of new elements to existing ones. Due consideration must be given to the new environment which is being created.

This process can result in clashes between the old and the new, which may be aesthetically disturbing, or just simply misleading, because the old element neutralises the innovative drive of the new one. For example, why leave an old showcase crammed with objects and captions next to a well-designed computer unit with touch screen, digital images and sounds, which can much more effectively give information about the artefacts?

SCREENS

Visual communication has moved with the times. First cinema screens were installed in the larger museums, then televisions, videos and DVDs. The widespread use of computers, made resource-rich by increasingly sophisticated digital technology, is now an important information and education tool in the museum.

Screens connected to DVDs and computers provide considerable opportunities for communication,

although their impact on visitors is not always predictable. Information screens, such as touch screens, whereby visitors can negotiate their way through icons to sources of information, or narrative screens, whereby different stories are relayed, provide both individual and group learning opportunities. They can be supplemented by video projectors that turn entire walls into large talking surfaces.

The Imperial War Museum in Manchester, for example, has used screens to great effect, projecting images into entire rooms in ways that immerse visitors in a drama of sight and sound through which they can walk. This is achieved using a simple slide projector rather than anything more sophisticated, illustrating the importance of selecting the right tool – old or new – for the job.

LIFE-SIZED MODELS

Life-sized models have a long history, especially in natural history museums. They went out of fashion for a while when more minimalist approaches to exhibition design became more common but they are currently experiencing a revival. Life-sized

models attract visitors' curiosity and may provide a sense of authenticity to the museum experience, despite the competition from more technically sophisticated forms of virtual reality. Their strength lies in the fact that they are three dimensional, tangible and big. They can be used to introduce a human element into displays of habitat, machinery and transportation, or to demonstrate how objects were used and experienced in the past.

Models can be realistic, or evocative, or metaphysical - depending on the theme and purpose of the exhibition. Their use is a matter of taste, choice, resources, the technical ability of the designer and the philosophy of the museum. Realistic models are very expensive, but cheap versions produce a cheap effect and can damage the credibility of the museum or the display. Metaphysical models are often more effective than realistic ones if they are able to suggest a special artistic or poetic dimension to an exhibition. But if they are either cheap or too intellectual they do not work well.



INTRIGUING PRESENCES

Among the technological innovations introduced in the museum's space, a special role is played by devices that are hard to categorise but which include machines with human-like behaviour and which represent "intriguing presences" for visitors. These interventions may look like human beings or animals (animatronics), interacting with visitors in the most realistic way, and even engaging them in conversation if operated at distance by a skilled operator. They may retain the appearance of industrial artefacts, like the robots which welcome you at the Museum of Communication in Berlin playing football among themselves or with the visitors. These devices are successfully replacing "talking heads" which were always a difficult to use technology, popular in the early 1990s, and consisting of projecting an image of a real person (a protagonist of history, for example) onto a model face.

Avatars have a different role: they are conceived as substitutes for guides, accompanying visitors in the museum tour in different ways according to the technology adopted or the philosophy of the project. Virtual avatars are

nowadays becoming more popular and seem to be the future of this application, particularly for integration with the Internet.

5.3 Creating a learning-friendly environment

Here are a few things to think about:

- Consult with audiences to create an environment that suits their needs. This may include opening times of the museum, entry areas, seating and other rest areas, signage, disability access, and the types of interpretation or learning resources provided. There are many ways to consult: by establishing a group of audience advisors, by interviewing or surveying existing audiences, by going outside of the museum to ask people who don't attend what would entice them to try it out, or by speaking with common-interest users, such as visitors with physical disabilities.
- Assess the museum entrance and entrance hall as if you were a first-time visitor. Are the spaces inviting, is the entrance clearly marked, can even the inexperienced visitor find his or her way easily, are there seats?
- Adding signposting and other information for different visitors groups can be confusing. Look at all the signs and symbols from a visitor's point of view. Are there too many or not enough? Are there other solutions?
- Use multimedia wisely and inventively: the most modern and sophisticated is not always the best or most effective. First ask yourself, what is the purpose? Then devise the best solutions for your resources.
- Life-sized models can be an asset for a presentation. But good models are expensive whereas cheap, badly made, models can spoil their effect. Models should be in keeping with the rest of the exhibition both in content and design.
- Pay attention to the physical comfort of your visitors: create enough rest areas, or provide free, portable seats for visitors to carry. Benches can also be combined with information: headsets, screens, written information. But be aware of what is adequate to promote learning and what is too much and overwhelming.

5.4 A case study

The importance of the environment is even more evident in those museums which are located in old buildings, palaces, historic houses, or which include monuments or sites of industrial heritage as part of their collections, such as in the following example. Guided tours, when designed in an innovative and involving way for the visitors, are one way to approach these very special artefacts.

Museu da Água, Lisbon

The mission of the Museu da Água is to encourage visitors to be more aware of protecting the environment and of the values inherent in Lisbon's historical, documental, monumental and cultural heritage. The museum invites a wide variety of visitors to explore these concerns through educational, animation and cultural activities.

The museum focuses on:

- Creating and supporting a dynamic programme, with initiatives that meet the interests of a wide variety of visitors and compete with the spread of other leisure activities.

- Attracting new audiences and educating wider, more demanding and better-informed visitors, by establishing with them a close and lasting relationship.
- Contributing to environmental education, through programmes aimed at both children and adults.
- Creating forums for reflection, dialogue and discussion of themes such as the environment, water, the historical heritage, the Baroque and related study fields.
- Adjusting the museum's role to the challenges posed by social change to become more actively engaged with the concerns of contemporary society.

Themed visits and cultural walks take place related to the Museum's permanent and, where possible, temporary exhibitions. These may also include other parts of the Museum, for example the Aqueduct. These themed visits for organised groups try to meet a diverse range of interests and needs. Visitors discuss and learn, according to the route and the theme chosen by the learners. Visits can take place in Portuguese or another language, and are held throughout the year. In many

cases, development of the theme and visit involve another partner working closely with museum staff.

Themes

- **The Baroque: The Queen refreshes herself.** This walk focuses on an aspect of the social history of the Aqueduct and the spirit of the Baroque by recreating a journey undertaken by the Royal Family, the Court, and the common people through the Águas Livres Aqueduct as they travelled from Mafra to Queluz.
- **Geology: Geo-Aqueduct.** The springs of the Aqueduct and the Hydra-geology of the Carenque-Caneças region, are the subject of this visit. A geological approach to the Aqueduct, the Mãe de Água das Amoreiras and the Geology of Lisbon is pursued. These visits are organised in partnership with the Geology Department of the Faculdade de Ciências of the Universidade de Lisboa.



- **Symbolism: The Paths of Water.** In collaboration with Quinta da Regaleira and Palácio de Queluz, the visitors are invited to experience the element water in its three dimensions: as an esoteric symbol, in Quinta da Regaleira, as “divertissement” in the gardens of Palácio de Queluz and, as a moral value at the springs of the Águas Livres Aqueduct.
- **Change through time: From the Patriarcal to the Chafariz do Vinho.** The Water Museum in collaboration with the Chafariz do Vinho has renewed the journey that takes visitors through the underground galleries from the Patriarcal (Príncipe Real) to the Chafariz do Vinho (Praça da Alegria). The Chafariz do Vinho has been refurbished and adapted to its new function as a wine tasting venue.
- **Ecology and Cultural Heritage: From the Aqueduct to the Palácio Marquês de Fronteira.** Walking across the majestic Águas Livres Aqueduct, over the Alcântara Valley, visitors contemplate a panoramic view of Lisbon before entering the Monsanto Natural Park, one of Lisbon’s last havens. Just before the journey comes to an end the visitors are invited to appreciate the Church of S. Domingos de Benfica and the Palácio Marquês de Fronteira.
- **Aesthetics: Paths of Light.** This visit explores the aesthetic qualities of the Águas Livres Aqueduct, focusing on contrasts: heat and cool, light and shade, water and air.
- **History: Lisbon, the Aqueduct and the Earthquake.** This visit recreates the route taken by Jácome Ratton, a French trader living in Portugal in 1755, through the streets of the city to the safety of Alto da Cotovia, today know as Garden of Príncipe Real. The route also includes a stop at the Águas Livres Aqueduct where he saw, “on his feet”, the destruction of the city of Lisbon on 1 November 1755.

(Over page) From the catalogue of the exhibition Gli occhi del pubblico (Bologna, IBC-CLUEB, 2006)

Photo: Isabella Balena