Anything goes? – Public programs in transport museums: Audience, artefacts and economics

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To have or to be
A collection is the starting point and the core element of a museum. It is its "raison d'être". The task of preserving the collection is given by the museum itself. Because this task is not evident and not a duty given by society the museum always has to promote its own task. The preservation of the collection has as its aim keeping witnesses of past developments alive as a proof and interpreting device. In a business the collection would be the asset and the tools making the museum run. Because the collection has to be used in a way so that it is not consumed it also is a long term investment.

In a long term perspective the aim of the museum is to collect and to preserve artefacts from the past. In order to assure the long term goal the museum has to prove its usefulness in the present. In this context, the preservation of a collection is an abstract duty. In addition there is no "gain" in the present. Nevertheless, the present benefit of the collection to the public can be assured in different ways. It can be part of an identity, contribute to an entertaining and educative time, and play a role in understanding the present through interpreting the past in order to get a clue where to go in the future.

The museum has to give the collection an interpretative structure. It gives the collection a meaning through questioning and interpreting the artefacts. They do not have an inherent meaning otherwise. In a free interpretation of the words of Erich Fromm it is not enough just to have a collection, but the museum needs to be.1 It has to interpret its collection in order to make sense of the present. If the museum stresses the idea of having a collection and only wants to show what it collected it endangers the long term goal of preserving its collection.

Success
To be something implies having made a series of decisions. For a museum to be something implies having made some judgements about strengths and weaknesses of its institution. It also implies concentrating on some aspects and neglecting others. It seems obvious but in the museum business the decision making process is not easy because the tools for measuring success are lacking. In the real world businesses are judged on their financial success. In the museum world there are budgets to fulfil but they are only tools for running a museum. While a museum needs a balanced budget at the end of the year, it does not need to make a profit. The number of visitor is an important param-

Image 1: The collection is the "raison d'être" of the museum and its asset to develop public programs. The main hall of the Technical Museum, Praha during the renovation of the building and the exhibition. Credit: Elsasser, 2008

eter but not a means in and of itself. The quality of the public programs is difficult to measure such as the impact of the museum on public opinion. In the long term the most important parameter is nevertheless the number of visitors.

An audience which chooses to come to the museum again and again is a sign that the museum meets the needs of the public. The needs of the stakeholders such as public authorities or other financing providers are met when they derive a benefit from a positive image transfer which is transported by public programs of the museum. In that case public authorities in particular can justify the expenses preserving a collection.

Museums need to have a mission of educating people, inspiring and challenging their audience to think about the past as a means of understanding the present, feeling understood and very importantly being confirmed with their knowledge and the interpretation they bring with them when coming to the museum. In today's society with its goal of permanent education and change it is very important that people spend their leisure time in useful ways and having fun while doing so. The museum is able to provide both. It gives the audience a good impression that it has not wasted its time.

The museum network

Various pressure groups try to influence the strategy of museums. There are funding institutions which want to have a "return on investment". In the case of public funding that can be media coverage or exposure at openings of exhibitions. Sponsors also look for contact with possible clients. Different collectors may want their items of interest added to the collection. Other groups want to have their specific stories told. Enthusiasts want to see as many artefacts as possible. Museum and university colleagues may judge the quality and state of the art of the content of the presentation. An appraisal by peers that an exhibition is not sophisticated enough might not be helpful for the career of the project manager of the exhibition.

Image 2: The abstract presentation of remains of prehistoric wheels in the Swiss National Museum Zurich addresses a well educated and interested audience. Credit: Elsasser, 2009

The judgements of all these pressure groups must be carefully analyzed. It has to be distinguished whether colleagues, for example judge as a segment of the audience of the exhibition or they judge as representatives of a lay audience. If their goal is to see their specialist knowledge about the chosen topic reflected and they are not the targeted audience their critique has to be put into perspective. If they judge the content of the exhibition in that case as too simple it might be that the exhibition meets the need of a broad lay audience such as families and school children. Enthusiasts might be satisfied with glass cases full of artefacts or parts of the exhibition structured as study collections.

The most difficult part of an analysis is the question of why an exhibition does not attract the part of the public which does not visit museums, or why it does not meet the needs of the people who are intimidated by museums or simply find them boring. In Switzerland audience research tells us that 75% of the audience has post secondary school education compared to 25% of the Swiss population as a whole. This means that Swiss museums mainly address well educated people. Nearly two thirds of the population never visit museums.

Thus it might be easier to address these non museum goers rather than competing with other museums for the existing well educated museum audience. It might not be possible to attract a whole society but certainly another third of the population could be a reasonable prospective new audience. These results are based on a 2002 study. It can be assumed that these results are also correct for museums on the European continent and more or less also in the Anglo-Saxon countries, too.2

Analysis of the potential of a museum – to meet someone's needs

Not every museum can attract as many visitors as the National Railway Museum in York or the Swiss Transport Museum in Lucerne. Many factors influence the potential of a museum to attract visitors. These include the quality of the collection, the appeal of the topics to be addressed, especially their national importance and the degree to which the main focus of the museum and its collection appeal to a broad audience. A museum of ignition plugs does have the same audience potential as an automobile museum.

Image 3: The Shinkansen Express shown in the National Railway Museum, York is well known to a broad public. Most of people would have heard of the Japanese high speed train but would not have seen it yet. Credit: Elsasser, 2007

Another aspect to take in account is the location of the museum. A museum in a large city or tourism centre has greater potential than in a little town far away from possible visitors. The Swiss transport museum in Lucerne is situated in one of the most important tourist centres in Switzerland. Within a one or two hour drive 2.5 million people live. They account for more than 80% of the visitors of the museum. Another important aspect to take in account is the financial potential including how the museum is currently funded and what kinds of new resources can be activated.

Depending on the interplay of factors the result can range from a concentration on research, preservation and conservation which addresses a very specialist scientific community, to providing a meeting point for enthusiasts, a forum for the discussion of mobility matters or an education and family venue for a broad audience. It is important to take a decision and not try to be everything to everybody. The decision will have an impact on the image of the museum and how it is perceived within society. Concentration means building the institution on its strength and carefully developing the opportunities which are offered.

Interaction with the public

We can now turn to the question of how to appeal to a broad audience because this holds the largest potential for attracting new visitors. By asking questions about an artefact's production, use, ultimate disposal at the end of its life cycle and finally its meaning we can reach conclusions about how it may be presented in an exhibition. The integration of artefacts follows certain possibilities. Especially in the field of transportation many objects possess an iconic image of their own. The first locomotive of a country is often known to everybody. It is depicted school textbooks and many well illustrated popular books. Often this image is also transmitted from one generation to another. Such an object has to be shown because the visitors expect to see it. Standing in front of such an object reveals many feelings. It might remind what people read about it or what their grand-parents explained to them.

The object also serves as a bridge between the present and the past of the individual visitor. The visitors become connected with the general knowledge of a society. They become part of an identity of a society. The exhibition "happens" in the imagination of the people. Only little interpretation needed. The object is a thought or speech prompt. Visitors who often come with friends or family members will take the opportunity talking about the object or the ancillary material shown with it. The imagined exhibition is very emotional and the results are not in the control of the museum. The thoughts are more about affirmation. It

Image 4: Exhibition with little investment can be emotional and convey past experiences. The author in a third class coach in the Danish Railway Museum in Odense. Credit: Elsasser, 2008

makes the visitor feel knowledgeable. He feels connected with the competence and the knowledge of the museum.

In a second step the museum can start challenging this knowledge. Artefacts which do not have a known image of their own require an introduction and interpretation to assist in "reading" and understanding them. Showing artefacts such as scale models, uniforms or spare parts in glass cases are important additions to the subject and reflect the competence of the museum. Never-the-less, the successful display of artefacts in this way presupposes significant previous knowledge in order to appreciate their value and putting them in a historical context. In addition, such presentations lack an emotional approach.

When addressing a broad audience it is not enough to showing popular artefacts such as famous aircraft or objects in glass cases. The exhibition does need a story line. It piques curiosity, advances the story and requires a highlight. The story may have a happy ending or be open ended with the affirmation that society will, as the challenges in history, accept it and find a solution. The exhibition also needs not only content highlights but also on the level of presentation. The most important aspect of the story to tell has to be restaged. This highlight can be a show or an architectural object which raises emotions. It needs something to impress people in a positive sense and to make them talk about it back home or on Monday during the coffee break at work.

Image 5: The three "lands" in the Dutch Railway Museum in Utrecht each tell each an emotional and intriguing story about railways. Credit: Elsasser, 2009

There are several possibilities for reaching this goal. In the main exhibition space in the Imperial War Museum

Image 6: The hands-on in the Science Museum in Boston about the flight of birds make children physically understand the complex movements of a bird flight. Credit: Elsasser, 2007

North in Manchester many weapons are shown in classic static display. The important artefacts are on public display. Every hour the light darkens in the main exhibition space and one of the big picture shows begins. During 10 to 20 minutes the objects with their history are put in perspective. The show wants to immerse people in the action of warfare, raise questions and inspire discussions.

Another possibility is the way the Dutch Railway Museum in Utrecht offers different exhibitions to the public. In the great hall they present a study collection with the most important historical rolling stock of the Netherlands. This collection is the back bone of the museum. The presentation of these artefacts satisfies the needs of the enthusiasts and affirms the broad public of the competence of the museum. In between the locomotives and coaches children can experience aspects of railway technology, logistics and life with the help of hands-on interactives. As a main aspect of its education and entertainment offering the museum offers three environments in which visitors immerse themselves in a particular story such as the “Great Discovery” where it is explained how railways came to the Netherlands. The walk or drive through the each environment takes five to fifteen minutes.

In addition, the museum organizes many evening dinners between the historical locomotives. The dinners in the unique ambiance partly finances the expenses of the museum and is part of a marketing campaign. With the dinners the museum engages with people who may not be visitors. Beside all these activities the museum organizes temporary exhibitions, special school programs in order to communicate and to offer new attractions. All these efforts make possible for the museum in Utrecht to live with little public sector subsidies. This is only possible by satisfying the needs of a broad public which feels comfortable in the museum and makes return visits.

Anything goes if it serves the long term goal of preserving the collection and satisfies the needs of the public.

Artefacts have to play an important role in exhibitions. The collection is an inspiration for the stories that can be told. The choice of the stories to be told has an influence on

Image 7: The main presentation of a museum might also be the architecture of the museum building such as the Porsche Museum, Stuttgart. It is as landmark and a public relations tool. Credit: Elsasser, 2009

the exhibition media. But it is not always the artefacts which are the best media to tell a story. The “detour” with events which must be profitable, shows or other emotional exhibitions may be more effective to inspire audiences to think about the past. The positive memory of the public of the museum and the idea going back for a return visits serve to secure the future of the museum and its collection.

Footnotes

1 Erich Fromm (March 23, 1900 – March 18, 1980) was an internationally renowned **social psychologist**, psychoanalyst, **humanistic philosopher** and **democratic socialist**. He was associated with what became known as the **Frankfurt School** of **critical theory** (Wikipedia)

2 Kilian T. Elsasser. Vielfältige, gut besuchte Schweizer Museumslandschaft – Anstrengungen für den Einbezug breiter Bevölkerungsteile nötig. Neue Zürcher Zeitung vom 14. Mai 2008 and Arlette Mottaz Baran. Publikum und Museen in der Schweiz – Emblematische Vorstellungen und soziales Ritual. Bern, 2006.