

The History of Transportation in Museums

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The article concentrates on the ways of presentation and the content of exhibitions in transport museums. The discussion concentrates on museum presentations in Europe and North America. These two themes will be correlated with the attempt by transport museums to interest different audiences.

In general, transport museums are mostly popular museums which appeal to a broader audience than the usual history or art museum which concentrated and still concentrate on an elitist audience with a university degree.¹ Transport museums often show artefacts of mobility within the realm of the life experiences of their audiences and about a matter of everybody's concern. Most transport museums concentrate on the history of mobility in the age of industrialization. The artefacts, by their presence, evoke memories. The personal and emotional exhibition happens in the brain of the visitors. Besides telling a progressive history of success, these museums are important mediums talking about history. Many attempts have been made to enhance the importance of transport museums, but there is still a lot to do.



Image 1: Before the first travel on the Rigi a Catholic priest is blessing the restored passenger car. Running historical vehicles are a great attraction for a broad public. Credit: Elsasser

The collections of transport museums represent a very tiny part of the total number of saved historical artefacts. For example, in the railway field in Switzerland enthusiasts are in charge of about 150 steam locomotives, yet the Swiss Transport Museum in Lucerne the national railway interpretation site, preserves and shows not more than ten. In the preservation of old cars, motorcycles and bicycles the modal split between enthusiasts and museums is even more weighted on the side of the enthusiasts. The enthusiast collectors shape by the sheer numbers of vehicles the perception of transport history in the public mind. They keep alive the nostalgic perception and are also promoters of the interest in transport history. The enthusiasts as private collectors or operators of museum transport companies or transport museums have a bottom up approach. It is not the official view of culture which in Europe is especially heavily financed by the government and shaped by university graduates. By their emotional approach enthusiasts frequently determine what is seen to be important to keep for future generations. In the past, they often collected artefacts which are the core collection of today's professional museums.²

The enthusiasts' approach is about running the engines which is very attractive from an emotional standpoint. They get a lot of attention whereas the museum is seen as a place of "dead" material. The two perspectives on transport history complete each other. The enthusiasts keep alive the implicit knowledge of how to make a vehicle run and in so doing are also promoting an interest in transport history. Museums have the ability to talk about the historical context of bygone times and are able to put the historical development of transport in perspective with respect to current questions.

The museums' approach has also changed in the way of presenting their stories. A study collection of unique vehicles is no longer attractive enough to reach a broad public. It can't compete with a steam locomotive under steam and offers little entertainment for an audience used to the emotional approach of theme parks. The enthusiasts and private collections with their deep knowledge about the technology of mobility and their close connection to a broad audience prevent the professional museum world from monopolizing the history of mobility and interpreting it from the ivory tower. Enthusiasts strengthen the notion that history is about hiding from the hardship of the present situation. Museums have to go beyond this mouse trap.

There are different developments in the museum of the different mode of transportation. Because railways are the oldest industrial means of transportation the collections of these museums started the earliest. Many of them have a history of more than one hundred years. There is quite a distance between their origins and today which means they can be more flexible about interpreting the past. In addition they can count on the revival of public transport which makes it interesting to look into the past and be inspired by history. The domination of public transport until World War II is proof that the modal split wasn't always as it is today.

Transport by automobile and aircraft are more disputed. There the connotation is more ambivalent. Everybody is relying on them, but everybody knows about their negative impacts. A critical approach of the development of road transport in an exhibition might easily be seen as a critical comment about visitors who mostly came to the museum by car. It is not wise to bite the hand which feeds you! A broad public going to museums doesn't want to be faced with such critical messages. They want to have a good time and be affirmed in their present behaviour. Only a little challenge will be accepted.

Museums do have choices however. If a museum creates, for example, a conventional exhibition about car pollution it might have a good response on TV, in the newspapers and among professional curator colleagues. The exhibition would be visited by members of the Green party, but the general public may not like to be confronted by its own environmental misbehaviour. The museum may experience financial difficulties in obtaining the funds for such an exhibit and possibly experience lower revenues from admissions. The other possibility is to find an approach which tells the story about the importance of the automobile which also includes talking about the future of transport. An approach affirming the importance of the automobile and asking questions about the future of mobility is more likely to be funded by major companies and visited by a broad public. This is the case, among others, with the



Image 2: The Fardier, the first vehicle of the world driven by steam in the Musée d'Arts et Métiers in Paris is an attraction because most people know the object and are enticed into seeing it in reality. Credit: Elsasser

Verkehrszentrum of the Deutsche Museum in Munich.³

In addition, transport museums themselves need to think about how they advance issues about the sustainable development of mobility with their own audiences. The museum itself has to be a model in the use of energy. It has to do all that it can to encourage visitors to use public transport when visiting the museum.

In the 1980s Museums like the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento and the National Railway Museum in York started broadening their approach. They no longer presented only the technology of railways. The Sacramento museum also told the story of the Chinese workers building railroads. York presented as a central theme the use of the railway as a means of transportation. A ground breaking departure from the norm was the railway exhibition in the German Museum of Technology in Berlin which incorporated the history of the transportation of Jews to concentration camps in World War II. It emphasized the use of technology as a responsibility of mankind.⁴

In the last fifteen years several developments can be observed. In 2001 the National Railway Museum in York integrated a Japanese Bullet Train into its exhibition. The museum deliberately abandoned a pure domestic focus.⁵ The National Railway Museum also opened "the Works" an exhibition space where visitors can see the work being done in a restoration shop. Such an exhibition space does have a certain importance for promoting the work which has to be done behind the curtain of the public area of a museum. Similarly, in 1997 the Swiss Transport Museum in Lucerne opened the new Railway hall and the Gotthard tunnel ex-

hibition telling the social and economic history of the building of an Alpine tunnel in the 19th century. The visitors drive into a tunnel where they can relive the fate of the Italian tunnel workers who suffered harsh conditions of work.⁶ The concept of the exhibition covers different content for specific audiences; the show “edutains” the broad public and the study collection of locomotives satisfies the needs of the enthusiasts.⁷ There is little interpretation because the enthusiasts make up their own stories in their minds.

This concept was developed further by the Musée National de Chemin de Fer, Mulhouse. The museum has devoted one hall to the interpretation of the French history of railways. They chose about 20 vehicles and tell a story about this history with film, manikins, sound and light. As an example the museum presents a tilted steam locomotive as a sign of the resistance during World War II where partisans destroyed railway tracks to preventing the German army from keeping supplies moving. They also address the transportation of Jews to concentration camps. The exhibition story line keeps a strictly national approach. The story neglects any mention of French collaboration.⁸

At the Dutch Railway Museum in Utrecht, besides the study collection four different thematic shows are offered. One is about bringing English railway technology to the Netherlands, while another one is about travelling within the Netherlands and abroad. These exhibitions contributed to a 100% increase in the number of visitors.⁹

A more traditional approach is found in “America on the move” a recent presentation of the National Museum of American History in Washington. It is one of the first exhibitions telling a story of mobility in which all relevant means of transportation are shown in the same place. The exhibition interprets how the changing modes of transportation are connected with American history.¹⁰

Aviation museums are still very hesitant to leave the field of aeronautical technology. Exhibition halls are often study collections with artefacts hanging from the roof. In 2003 the Swiss Transport Museum in Lucerne added hands-on interactive to allow visitors to experience the phenomenon of flight.¹¹ Nevertheless the fascination of flight is kept in the foreground. One reason might be that aircraft are often used in warfare. The pilots are still presented as knights of the air. Their impact isn’t addressed.¹²

An ambivalent and analogous development can be seen in automobile museums, especially in Germany. In the recent past several company museum such as the Autostadt in Wolfsburg and the Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart have been built. The car companies invested hundreds of millions of Euro to present their company history. One the one hand it is intriguing that a museum is worthwhile investing so much money, one the other hand the museum is used to tell a one-sided story enhancing the fame of car companies.

Shipping museums concentrate on preserving and showing ships. Often there is little interpretation about

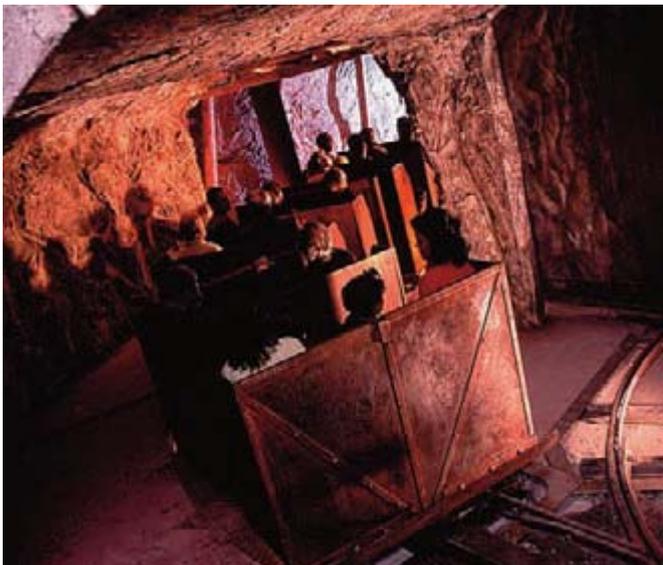


Image 3: The Gotthard tunnel exhibition in the Swiss Museum of Transport includes social and economic history. The show makes the visitors relive the building of the tunnel in the 19th century. Credit: Swiss Transport Museum



Image 4: The exhibition “On the Move” in the Museum of American History is one of the first exhibitions to include all modes of transport in one presentation. Credit: Elsasser

the life on a ship and the impact of maritime transport on economies and social fabric. Nevertheless there are some outstanding examples where this is done such as the German Emigration Centre in Bremerhaven. It talks about emigration to the United States of America. The museum won the European Museum of the Year Award in 2007¹³. The exhibition revives the feeling when millions of Europeans felt compelled to depart for the United States. There is also an archive where visitors can search for ancestors who left Germany. Unfortunately the incorporation of this part of history isn't an initiative of the National Maritime Museum Bremerhaven. It needed a new museum which left out the established museum in the same city which now sits on its important artefacts leaving the interesting and important stories to its competitor. Another example is the Liverpool Slavery Museum talking about the slave trade with which English traders made a fortune at the expense of Africa.¹⁴

In conclusion, transport museums will have to concentrate on telling stories relating to the present. Artefacts will be important platforms for telling these stories but they aren't the means to do so by themselves. In words of the psychoanalyst and philosopher Erich Fromm, museums should concentrate more on being relevant than just having artefacts. For transport museums they have to concentrate on relating today's questions of mobility to historical developments. The role of the museum is not about giving an-



Image 5: The Canada Aviation Museum in Ottawa in the course of renewal. The new exhibition will include interpretation nodes which put the important aviation collection into an historical context. Credit Elsasser.

swers about the future but, through telling stories about the past, inspiring how future developments can be shaped. Within this framework museums don't have to stop promoting their long term duty of collecting. They have to do it by being relevant to today's society and not by showing artefacts and telling stories about museum work.



Image 6: The Mercedes Company Museum in Stuttgart shows the development of its cars and puts them in an historical context. Credit: Elsasser

The critical review which understands the exhibition as a special means of transporting the history of mobility is an important way of developing the field.¹⁵ There is a starting tradition of reviewing exhibitions especially in the journals “Technology and Culture” and the “Journal of Transport History”. This trend needs to be developed further, because there are no established methods of reviewing exhibitions and museums in general or transport museums in particular such as there are for film, theatres plays and books. More thought needs to be given about how to write about the content of an exhibition, the way of interpretation, the potential of the institution within its environment, the collection and the audience to be addressed. An important element of such reviews would also be the effect of the exhibition on the understanding of transport history from a broad perspective. This could be a real opportunity to strengthen the role of transport museums in society.

Footnotes

- ¹ Arlette Mottaz Baran. *Publikum und Museen in der Schweiz – Emblematische Vorstellungen und soziales Ritual*. Bern, 2006
- ² Angela Jannelli, „Wilde Museen“ – Erkenntnisformen und Gedächtnisarten in Ausstellungen, in: Hengartner, Thomas,

- Moser, Johannes (Hg.): *Grenzen und Differenzen. Zur Macht sozialer und kultureller Grenzziehungen*. Leipzig, 2006.
- ³ Kilian T. Elsasser. Ein Museum für den mobilen Menschen. *Tages-Anzeiger*, 23. Februar 2007
- ⁴ Alfred Gottwaldt. *Züge, Loks und Leute. Eisenbahngeschichte in 33 Stationen*. 1990. Berlin
- ⁵ <http://www.nrm.org.uk/exhibitions/shinkansen/start.asp>
- ⁶ Colin Divall and Andrew Scott. *Making Histories in Transport Museums*. London, 2001. 100
- ⁷ Kilian T. Elsasser. ‚Technology assessment and edutainment‘, in Rob Shorland-Ball (ed.). *Common roots – separate branches: Railway History and Preservation*. York, 1994. 159–65.
- ⁸ Marie-Noëlle Polino. *Cité du train, the French national railway museum*. « *The Journal of Transport History*. Vol 29, Number 1, March 2008. 137-140
- ⁹ *Spoorwegmuseum Utrecht, Annual report, 2005*
- ¹⁰ Robert Casey. *America on the Move. At the National Museum of American History. Technology and Culture*. Vol 45, Number 45, October 2004. 812-816
- ¹¹ <http://www.verkehrshaus.ch/index.cfm?dom=1&rub=8>
- ¹² Otto Mayr. ‚The Enola Gay fiasco: history, politics and the museum‘ *Technology and Culture*, 39 (1998). 462-473
- ¹³ Kilian T. Elsasser, *Impulse für die Schweizer Museumslandschaft – Auswahlkriterien des Europäischen Museumsforums*. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* vom 22. Mai 2007
- ¹⁴ <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/slavery/europe/liverpool.aspx>
- ¹⁵ Colin Divall. *Transport museums: another kind of historiography*. *Journal of Transport History*. Vol 24. Issue 2, September 2003. 259-265



Image 7: The German Emigration Museum in Bremerhaven, the European Museum of the Year 2007, tells the story of European Emigration in an emotional way Credit: German Emigration Museum, Bremerhaven