

WHAT MAKES MUSEUMS SPECIAL?

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Museums and galleries at their best can:

Tell us who we are, where we have come from and where we might be going. In so doing they show us the routes that reconnect us to our roots. They do this through storytelling; a story that fits us, our community, our city, our country, our cultures and even our worlds into a bigger human and natural history showing us connections, bridges and threads that can enrich our understanding. Museums and galleries confront us with some things that are familiar and comforting and at other times they challenge us to look afresh to see the world in a new way or to experience things that require imagination to grasp. A local history exhibition is an example of one, a contemporary art show of another and the recent Aztec exhibition is an instance of the latter.

Some museums too allow us to contribute our personal stories in an act of co-creation so that we feel we have become a shaper, maker and creator of the resulting museum.

By triggering imagination museums entice us to explore so providing opportunities for testing out, for chance encounter, for discovery and also inventing things afresh. At their core museums and galleries are involved in an exchange of ideas where we as the visitor come to grips with displays. In effect we converse either with ourselves or more publicly about what our culture or those of others is so we think about what we value and what our values are. The recent Madame de Pompadour – Images of Mistress exhibition at the National Gallery is an example as is the Bodyworks exhibition presented in a non-museum space.

By placing us, the visitor, at the crossroads of what has gone before with what could be and what others have thought museums become platforms for dialogue, discourse and debate revealing the multi-layered textures that make up any society. In these processes of creating, questioning and anchoring identity, of imagining and re-imagining and of discovery the object or artefact, ideally real, is the catalyst. Objects especially when placed well in context and interpreted with subtle focus spark the exploratory trigger in our minds and of course technique and technology can help. Context is key for those not in the know. Only so are the fragments of significance put

into a shape, pattern or theme so enabling us to generate some wider meaning. Museum professionals help guide us through this endeavour.

When all these elements come together well we have a deeper experience – and the word experience is now a mantra of our age. An experience that has breadth – in that it broadens horizons; that has depth – in that it brings out the significant and encapsulates as clear insight previously scattered or unconnected thoughts; on occasion these even feel like personal revelations; and lastly experience becomes deep when it has height or uplift – in that it generates aspiration through inspiration. A thin experience, by contrast, feels as if it operates in a shallow register. What is offered is too pre-chewed or pre-digested leaving little room for co-creating or participating even if that participation is a conversation with ourselves. Sometimes too experiences feel like a spectacle that can rest like a sediment in our memory when communication devices are chosen well and aptly applied. The entrance at New Zealand's national museum Te Papa in Wellington induces such a sense and at a more reduced level the experience of the Wildwalk in @Bristol.

So a museum comes alive when it activates its resources, assets or riches. Objects lying dormant, especially for the uninitiated, rarely speak for themselves and so are unable to show their relevance. This highlights the need for interpretation. What objects a museum has is one thing and how it communicates another. The caring curatorial role expands using knowledge to explain, to edit and select, to interpret and even to act as an impresario by helping us put the pieces together in a way that impacts on museum guests.

In fact the museum communicates with every fibre of its being – its artefacts, its setting and the way it projects to the outside world. What it feels like and looks like sends out innumerable messages and its values are especially etched into its physical fabric as well as its programming. Thus our older museums often speak more to a former age; an age of deference where the expert told the inexperienced what to know and how to know it and where you – the humble citizen – were to be elevated by the museum experience. And the physical elevations themselves spoke in a more grandiose style, often going back to a classical age with their Corinthian columns, reflecting a different kind of confidence and attitude. Yet good contemporary design has often helped museums to combine old structure to new ways of engaging an audience – see the airy staircase in the National Portrait Gallery or the Great Court in the British Museum. Today we attempt to live in a more transparent and democratic age. Consequently more buildings reflect a greater lightness of touch in the materials they use – glass, light-weight steel or tented structures, or in the way audiences are invited in. Again the best of the old and the new can communicate iconically so that we grasp the totality of what a museum is about in an instant. At times this might induce a sense of drama as does the Eden Centre or Holocaust Museum at others a more sedate, yet slowly penetrating feeling of revelation as does the Imperial War Museum North in Salford and some even achieve this through clutter or sensory overload as does the Soane Museum. There is not one rule for all. Indeed this could never be the case. The sheer diversity of museums and galleries is immense. Think of any subject, personality or specialism and there is likely to be a museum for it. From the Gulasch Museum in Vienna to the Mechanical Toy Museum in Northleach and at the extreme there are too the many 'museums of me' - our personal collections or more weighty

subjects like war or peace or science. Yet each in their own way can be a centre of excellence, but rarely are these possibilities completely exploited either in educational terms or more broadly to give advice in emerging crises or even for commercial gain.

Do museums actually need a building to project their essence? Sometimes yes and sometimes no. A group of artefacts presented with thought can work in most settings. This is important as we need to let the core of what a museum is – their objects – spread their tentacles into as many crevices as possible. Museums and galleries need both to attract people in as well as reach out as for many there remains a fear of crossing the threshold. On the other hand when the building, the artefacts and the setting chime in unison each reinforcing the other there is a power – a power that makes the sum of the parts feel more than each element. The Louisiana Museum near Copenhagen is perhaps one of the best examples where the art, the architecture and the setting each enrich the other in an escalating way. The same can be said for the Imperial War Museum North where the building is an intrinsic part of the overall message. In its own way too the permanent Epstein exhibition at Walsall Art Gallery fits its container – if the exhibits were elsewhere there would still be impact, but not quite at the same level. This places strong responsibility on the architect to avoid pure urban showmanship so as to project in built form what the collection represents.

The challenge for museums and galleries is to harness their physical assets – artefacts, pictures or documents – with their imaginative resources and these must lie with those who work in museums. More and more we need to become good storytellers. Indeed the vast network of museums suggest there are many stories still to be told and they can be told in many ways. Each may have something original to say - many grounded deeply in their locality whilst others may stretch horizons far more widely. But like a lattice work the overall network represents an under-considered strength showing distinctiveness, diversity and difference.

When we take an eagle eye view we see there is a special 'museumness' about museums:

- A place of anchorage, which is why so often in a world that speeds ahead of us we see museums as refuges or places of reflection
- A place of connection so enabling understanding of our pasts and possible futures
- A place of possibility by letting us scour the resources of the past and memories to stimulate us to twist them to the contemporary condition
- A place of inspiration to remind us of the visions, ideals and aspirations we have made for ourselves and continue to make
- A place of learning ...as when these things come together we know more about ourselves, our surroundings, what things work or don't work and how things could be made better

Yet to harness this multi-faceted potential there needs to be renewed clarity, confidence and commitment. Clarity in knowing what one is and clarity in cutting through the information clutter. Confidence to believe in the simplicity of the museum's mission. And committed to be strategically principled about the big aims, yet tactically flexible to communicate these according to emerging needs and desires.

A museum like many institutions has key ingredients – a setting, stuff or objects and people who work there. So what is the difference say between a museum and a shop, a school or a sports centre? We need to know. Like in a museum we can look at things in a shop, we can browse, a quintessential part of the museum experience. The key differences seem to be in motivation, purpose and display. A shop is focused on buying – an instant gratification whereas in a museum the gratification may take time and its results may be unexpected. In a shop the display is orchestrated so you are more likely to buy, whereas in a museum it is so that you understand. A shop tends to pre-chew its offer. What you see is what you get. In a museum you communicate with what you see, you have a dialogue – often intensely personal - and its use value is more complex especially when confronting the new. In a museum you have a sense of legacy, of where things come from, whereas in most shops you are constrained by fashion. Although an antique shop at its best can feel museum-like. In sum a museum is an antidote to consumerism.

A sports centre is also a centre of engagement and a particular setting. You test yourself, you seek to improve, but does it help you understand your surroundings or contexts. In contrast to museums it does not trigger all the registers of intelligence focusing largely on the physical so neglecting the spiritual or cultural.

Conscious or unconscious learning lies at the heart of museums, but even more so in schools. What's the difference? A school is timetabled, more strictly ordered and structured often in a linear fashion, you get assessed, it is explicit what its targets are. It teaches you in an instructional mode. Museums are freer. You the museum guest manage yourself, you can take time, you can be there when you choose. It is an antidote to formal learning. Crucially the insights of recent learning theory with their emphasis on harnessing multiple intelligences, their focus on self-regulation, the lightly guided giving of direction and possibilities of reflection fit like a glove to what museums can offer.

And let's not forget expertise especially when appropriately applied, used with discretion and an open mind. Many of the new museums are containers without content – the expertise to tell the story is lacking. That is why the Imperial War Museum works and others to remain nameless do not. Yet to interpret well what a museum can offer requires good orchestration and pacing devices so that visitors can enter at different levels and go deeper as desired. It may be that a curator does not have all these skills, but in a team they may be available.