

6. The Interplay of Contexts: The Museum as Gestalt

Ask a museum professional to describe a museum, and most likely he or she will describe the collections, the educational programs, or the institutional history. Ask the visitor, and likely as not he will mention none of these. Instead, visitors will say: "It's a nice place to take children to show them their heritage," or "The museum is a wonderful place to take out-of-town visitors. It's interesting, inexpensive, and fills up a day," or "The museum is a quiet place where I can escape from the work-a-day world."

Most museum curators, designers, directors, and educators would agree that these are reasonable descriptions of a museum. By the same token, museum-goers would not question that museums use their collections to do research or that institutional history is important. But in their fundamental approaches, visitors and museum professionals differ tremendously.

The visitor's perception of the museum is functional because he is a user, not a planner or insider. His view is not limited to an intellectual discipline or to individual exhibits or objects; rather, the visitor's perception is highly contextual, including the personal, physical, and social contexts. The visitor's experience must be seen as a whole, or gestalt.

The Museum as Experience

The museum experience includes feelings of adventure, of awe, of affiliation with loved ones or friends, and of seeing, perhaps touching, and learning about new

things.¹ These feelings tend to coalesce into a single experience perceived as a whole, but a whole much larger than generally recognized, or at least acknowledged, by the museum profession.

The experience starts with the decision to go to the museum. On the day of the visit, preparations have to be made, schedules determined, and suitable clothing and shoes selected. The experience includes the ride to the museum, perhaps finding a parking space, or navigating from the bus or subway stop. It involves locating the entrance and, often, climbing steps. The demeanor of the guards and whether or not the museum is crowded are part of the experience. The experience inside the museum involves the exhibits seen and the items purchased at the gift shop. Conversations with family or friends are important also. Lunch or a snack while at the museum may be part of the experience, as may a dinner table discussion later that night. The museum experience also includes post-visit memories, jogged by related words, events, or souvenirs, and the ways in which these memories influence post-visit experiences.

All of these form a single package in the minds of the visitor. They may be stored in different nooks and crannies of the memory, but they are somehow stored as an interconnected whole. Recollection of a single one of these incidents may be sufficient to allow recall of all of them.

Museum professionals want to know what visitors have learned, but have traditionally used a narrow definition of learning. They examine what visitors have learned from exhibits and labels, for example, which is an important aspect of the museum experience, but only one aspect. Museum professionals have neglected some of the less obvious aspects of the visitor's experience.

Getting to the Museum

Most museum visitors do not live within walking distance of museums, which are often located in downtown sections of cities. Most visitors drive cars or use public transportation; those who live close enough to reach the museum

by foot, bus, or subway are generally not frequent users of the museum.²

Yet it is a rare museum that devotes as much interest and concern to the parking situation as it does to the exhibits. This is unfortunate, because ease of access and availability of parking may determine visitor attendance as much, if not more, than the nature and quality of the museum's collections.³ More than half the visitors to the Philadelphia Zoo rated ease of weekend parking as an important issue.⁴ The same visitors also expressed concern for the safety of their cars.⁵

It is not unusual for a visitor to spend twenty to thirty minutes looking for a parking spot. If it is a metered spot, the coins in hand or the limits of the parking meter may determine the length of the museum visit. Time will become a concern throughout this visitor's stay, and she will construct and adhere to a mental time budget. Often the length of stay has already been determined before the visitor enters the front door.⁶ These constraints, needless to say, have absolutely nothing to do with the visitor's interest, attention span, stamina, or the quality of the museum's exhibits. The ease with which parking is secured, the proximity to the front of the museum, and the amount of time remaining in the time budget all contribute to the visitor's mental state upon entering the museum.

Most museum professionals are aware of the role that "museum fatigue" plays in the experience. Few, however, have seriously considered the fatigue associated with getting to the museum. If a visitor has to drive an hour, then face a long walk after parking, the length and enjoyment of the visit will already be significantly curtailed. Climbing stairs requires twice as much energy as walking on level ground.⁷ Stairs can also hinder access to the museum for the elderly and disabled.

Along with the rise in social consciousness of the last few decades has come awareness of the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, messages museums convey to the public in their physical and social contexts. For some, a museum that sits upon Olympian heights, surrounded by Greek

statuary and a seeming infinity of stairs, reaffirms the concept of museums as places of worship and reverence. In such a setting, the museum appears appropriately austere and classical. To others, such museums convey an aura of colonialism and élitism (R. Sullivan, personal communication, 1991). Accordingly, they do not perceive these institutions as welcoming environments. As one working-class person said, reflecting on childhood visits to an art museum, "I used to like those trips to the museum. You got a taste of what it's like to be rich . . ." When asked why he didn't still go to the art museum, he said, "It's not for me, for us . . . this place. It's for people with money, or people who are going to get money later on—the college kids."⁸

The presence or absence of stairs is not the only way museums reinforce messages of who "belongs." Having mounted the stairs, the first official the visitor is likely to encounter in any museum is a guard. Those who feel comfortable in museums will be at ease in the presence of guards, but for those who feel out of place or insecure, guards can and do create anxieties. One individual expressed it this way: "Even the guards in the museum, they come around the corner and they stare at you. My father said he wanted to go up to one of them and tell him to get away, because we weren't going to steal anything, and the more he treated us as if we were there to cause trouble, the more my dad wanted to go and punch him in the nose. But we left the room where he was stationed, and finally we got to another part of the museum out of his reach. Then Dad took us near and said we really shouldn't be angry at the guard, because he was just taking orders, and trying to keep the museum the way the people who own it want him to. When my sister asked who those people are, Dad said he didn't know."⁹

Every museum visitor is affected by museum guards, no matter how experienced the visitor or how much a part of the establishment the guards seem to be. Guards come in all shapes and sizes, in all forms of dress, and in a variety of dispositions. Without saying a word, guards communicate

to the visitor the nature of the institution. For example, young, alert, military-style guards put the visitor on notice that this is a place where security is important. A quick glance up at revolving video cameras confirms this suspicion. Visitors to such a museum may never feel totally relaxed. They may look around to see who is watching them before sitting; they may become extremely vigilant of their children to make sure they don't touch exhibits. Inexperienced visitors will be particularly cautious about their behavior.

How a guard is dressed is not the only impression he conveys. How he responds in word and gesture to the visitor during those first few minutes of the visit is critical. In many institutions, the guard will take or inspect the visitor's admission ticket or inspect parcels and instruct the visitor to check items at the cloak room. Even if such interactions do not occur, many people will approach the guard to ask general questions. The tenor of the visit can be influenced by the demeanor of the guard. In many cases, encounters with the guards are the fine tuning on the behavior-setting dial. The visitor's expectations are either reinforced or modified by these embodiments of the museum establishment. Like all first impressions, these shape attitudes that will be long-lasting and difficult to change.

Inside the Museum

Once past the guard, the visitor finds himself in the museum itself. Many museums are large, imposing buildings with high vaulted ceilings, large indoor pathways, and numerous rooms that may be hidden from the visitor at first glance. The architecture, objects, atmosphere, sights, and sounds all differ significantly from those visitors are used to finding in other settings. This is not necessarily good or bad, but it is important; it means that many visitors may feel intimidated in a museum. Modern shopping malls, by contrast, are designed to be of moderate, rather than extreme, novelty, because places of moderate novelty have been found to be exciting rather than intimidating.¹⁰ Museum environments arouse curiosity, but also anxiety. As we noted

in Chapter 5, the uniqueness of the setting can inspire attentiveness to the exhibits, or it can promote affiliation to the exclusion of the exhibits, depending on the visitor's previous experiences and the museum's ability to relate to them.¹¹ Moreover, Americans have come to expect a high level of cleanliness and upkeep; in one study of visitor satisfaction, well-maintained facilities and clean, well-dressed guards were the highest rated public concerns.¹² It is difficult to generalize about the effect of museum architecture on visitors; much depends upon the specific size and design features of the museum.¹³ However, even the smallest, most human-scale museum is by definition novel and thus capable of engendering feelings of anxiety.

Some museums make it easy for visitors to know where they are and where they are going, and some museums make it difficult. All visitors want to know where they are and where they are going, and if they do not know when they enter the museum, they will invariably spend the first few minutes trying to find out.¹⁴ For many visitors, the first questions are: "How much does the ticket cost?" "Where are the restrooms?" "Where do we start?" and "What time does the museum close?"¹⁵

Almost all museums provide maps, but many visitors find them only marginally useful. A map's usefulness may be limited by poor design or visitors' inability to translate a two-dimensional display into three-dimensional reality.¹⁶ Organizations like Disneyland have redesigned their maps using perspective to simulate the third dimension. Most people navigate better by landmarks than they do by Cartesian coordinates.¹⁷ Maps that have landmarks drawn in relief so that they more closely resemble what the visitor actually sees facilitate orientation. Eventually, with or without guidance, the visitor will venture off into the museum; however, if he does not feel secure from the start, insecurity will diminish the visit and he will not be caught up by the experience because he is worried that he's missing something important or that he's going to get lost.¹⁸

Most museums have an information desk, more often than not staffed by volunteers. Like guards, volunteers

provide additional social context for visitors upon arrival and, like guards, they indicate by their attire, demeanor, and attitude whether the visitor is welcome or not. Along with guards, information desk volunteers may be the only museum staff that visitors encounter. Museum professionals should be alert to whether or not their volunteers are representative of the attitudes and knowledge the museum wishes to communicate.

Restrooms One of the questions most frequently asked of museum staff is: "Where are the restrooms?"¹⁹ Museum staff may find it annoying, but it is not a trivial question for visitors. The museum that has only one set of restrooms, and those by the front door, invites visitors to leave early. Use of the restrooms is one of the most predictable events of a museum visit.

How do the restrooms enhance or diminish the visitor's experience? Are they easy to find? Are they clean and operational? Are both the men's and women's bathrooms designed to accommodate children and infants? If not, what message does this convey to the family visitor? In a study at the Philadelphia Zoo, two of the highest rated visitor concerns were "easy-to-find restrooms" and "clean restrooms."²⁰

Smells can create strong, lasting memories.²¹ If the smells of the restroom (or any other part of the museum) are particularly strong or unusual, they may become part of the memories visitors take home with them. The next time a visitor smells a comparable smell, good or bad, she will probably recall the museum visit.

Almost all visitors use the restrooms; museums can use this as an opportunity to exhibit the ideas or themes of the museum. The bathrooms at the National Museum of American History, for example, provide information on the history of toilets, a display so intriguing that it once led one of the authors by mistake into the restroom of the opposite sex!

Virtually every museum has a gift shop; many also have food services. One institution determined that 41 percent of all its visitors purchased souvenirs and 75 percent bought

refreshments.²² Museum professional staff tend to see the gift shop and eatery as revenue generators at best and necessary evils at worst. Normally, an administrator separate from the professional side of the museum oversees the operation of these establishments. Direct management is frequently subcontracted to firms not associated with the institution, and managers are rarely consulted when "content" decisions of the museum are made.

In rating the museum experience, the average visitor deems the quality of the gift shop and food service to be as important, if not more important, as the quality of the artifacts or exhibition design.²³ Moreover, many visitors do not discriminate clearly between the time they spend viewing objects and the time they spend in the gift shop. For visitors, walking around exhibit halls, visiting the gift shop, and eating at the food service are all part and parcel of the same event—the museum experience.

Many museum professionals do not understand this. If they did, more gift shop managers would be required to spend time talking to curators and educators, and vice versa. The U.S. Department of the Treasury, on the other hand, seems to understand the relationship between museum exhibitions and gift shops; the Internal Revenue Service requires a museum to sell only items that bear some educational relationship to its collections if it is to maintain its tax-exempt status as an educational institution.²⁴

Most visitors make a connection between museum collections and gift selections and purchase items that will be suitable reminders of their museum experience. Souvenirs have unfortunately fallen into low esteem through indiscriminate proliferation of cheap objects. Yet a copy of an Egyptian relic or a postcard of a famous painting, which some may scorn as a "cheap imitation," may be the best device available to the visitor to evoke memories of his museum visit. In our research on what visitors recollect of their visits, we have found that many people distinctly remembered museum souvenirs they had purchased as many as twenty or more years earlier;²⁵ many still had the souvenir in their possession. Museum staff should recognize that

souvenir purchasing can be a powerful part of the museum experience, and can help the visitor recall an exhibit or program long after leaving the museum.

If economic rather than educational priorities dominate the gift shop, its strength as an educational tool can be severely compromised. Any good business manager knows that the shop must contain at least some low-priced souvenirs. But the museum risks hurting its image if low prices mean selling poor reproductions or items only marginally related to the message the museum wishes to convey.

The museum that wishes to communicate accurate information to the public and facilitate positive memories must do so in the gift shop as well as in the galleries. Properly presented, the gift shop may be one of the best educational tools a museum possesses. Adherence to high standards in purchasing, even of low-cost items, can augment the educational agenda of the institution.

Some museums actively hawk wares outside an exhibition, sometimes at both the entrance and exit of a special exhibition. In extreme cases, visitors are forced to walk through a maze of gift items and self-guide audio tapes, complete with sales-pitching staffers, to gain access to the gallery. The impression that may result is that the museum arranged this exhibition to sell catalogues, calendars, and audio tapes rather than for educational or aesthetic purposes.

Gift shop items can be sold in ways that make the shop an extension of the exhibits. Some museums are experimenting with small shops scattered around the museum and related in theme to nearby exhibits. Not only may they be serving an educational function, but they may help visitors to prolong their visits by providing a place to relax and unwind from museum fatigue.

Food Food services also send messages to the public. What is the quality of the food? Is it expensive? Are the facilities clean and inviting? One can also imagine ways that museums could offer food related to the content of the exhibits. If the museum has a special exhibition on the French Impressionists, it could offer French food specials. The idea is to use

the restaurant as a revenue generator, a public service, and an educational vehicle for the museum. During festivals or special events, museums often serve food related to exhibits, and it is always well received. The subject of museum food deserves further study. Like other steps in enhancing museum effectiveness, however, it requires advance planning and coordination among all museum staff.

Visitors' Attitudes

One of the most prevalent and unalterable attitudes museum visitors share is a belief in the value of preserving society's treasures. People think of museums as places where treasures, both physical and intellectual, are preserved and displayed for the public good. The visitor, upon entering a museum, in large part because of the expectation that great and important things are contained there, finds it awe-inspiring. In some museums, it is an awe of objects; in others, of the ideas presented. Museums are places where people can see and learn about things outside of their everyday lives—precious things; unusual things; things of great historical, cultural, or scientific import; things that inspire reverence. Graburn has described this reverential feeling as "the visitor's need for a personal experience with something higher, more sacred, and out-of-the-ordinary than home and work are able to supply."²⁶

Watching visitors in many types of museums clearly reveals that most display a sense of awe. They speak in hushed tones, quietly wait their turn to look at exhibited objects, and respect the rights of others to have a turn. The museum experience can be as much an emotional as an intellectual experience. Visitors describe museums, and their collections, as "inspiring," "uplifting," "majestic," and "special."²⁷ For most visitors, feelings of reverence are subconscious. Some visitors, however, are able to articulate their reverential feelings. For example, one frequent museum visitor stated: "It's the creative spirit that you're seeing when you go to an art museum, or it's the recognition of history and achievement when you go to a history museum."²⁸

For most visitors feelings of awe exist before the visit, are enhanced during the visit, and persist after the visit. They exist for the museum as a whole, rather than any particular exhibit or object, though certain exhibits or objects reinforce these feelings more than others. Most museums go out of their way to ensure that visitors not only enjoy and learn from their visit, but also leave with an appreciation of the intellectual and aesthetic significance of the things represented in the museum.

Researchers often find that visitors have great difficulty analyzing distinct aspects of their visit, even well-educated, savvy visitors. In one study at an art museum, visitors had great difficulty discussing the relationship between a traditional exhibit and the hourly live performances associated with it. It was clear from reading the texts of interviews with visitors that they had experienced the exhibit and performances as a whole.²⁹ When the researcher tried to rate the two components separately, many visitors seemed surprised by the question and were unable to do so.

Consistent evidence that visitors perceive their museum experiences as a gestalt was what led us to develop the Interactive Experience Model.³⁰ Although some visitors remember specific information on content, if questioned, most people's memories are consistently interconnected and contextually bound. The larger issue, whether these memories represent learning, is the subject of the next chapter.