→ The Audience-Centered Museum

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Was macht ein besucherorientiertes Museum aus? In den späten 1960er Jahren bahnte sich in Amerika eine gesellschaftliche Entwicklung an, die die Privilegien und Machtansprüche aller Institutionen in Frage stellte und auch vor den Museen nicht Halt machte. Museen mussten erkennen, dass – mit wenigen Ausnahmen – ihre Besucher eine kleine Gruppe weißer, gut gebildeter und wohlhabender Personen waren. Sie machten sich mit großer Entschlossenheit daran dies zu ändern, ohne zu wissen, welche Revolution dieses Vorgehen im Museumsalltag auslösen würde.

Museumsfachleute bemerkten schnell, dass sie mehr über ihre derzeitigen und zukünftigen Besucher wissen mussten. Das Feld der Zielgruppenforschung war geboren. Museumspädagogen untersuchten die Gründe, warum Besucher kamen, was sie erwarteten und was sie lernten. Das Ergebnis war schockierend und enttäuschend; die Besucher erwarben nicht die Kenntnisse, die die Aussteller geplant und erwartet hatten. So entstand für Pädagogen das neue Tätigkeitsfeld der Ausstellungsplanung. Sie wandten ihre Sachkenntnis über Besucherverhalten und Lerntheorien an, um Ausstellungen zu konzipieren, die besucherorientiert waren. Gelegentlich fanden hitzige Diskussionen über die Rolle, die Wissenschaft und Sammlungen in den Besucher-orietierten Museeum spielen sollten, statt. Das Aufgabenfeld der Besucherforschung und seine Auswirkung auf Ausstellungen, Erziehung, Budgets und Institution werden am Beispiel der Minnesota Historical Society dargestellt.

I am delighted to be here in Bonn speaking before you today. I have had the pleasure in recent years of meeting and working with several of your colleagues from the Badisches Landesmuseum in Karlsruhe, Gabrielle Kindler and Doris Moyrer. My purpose today is to report what we have learned at the Minnesota Historical Society from our audience research and how this knowledge has influenced our professional practice. I approach this task with humility and more than a little nervousness. There is no shortage of cultural resources or professional expertise in Germany. In fact, I saw my first interactive exhibit at the Deutsches Museum in Munich 30 years ago. It has not been a direct route from that experience to the present, though I have been a museum educator for the past 20 years. My museum career has coincided with a period of intense audience research and a growing recognition of the importance of centering our work on the public's interests and preferences. I hope that at least part of what I have to say will be useful to you.

I prepared my remarks with several assumptions in mind. I assume that museum professionals, regardless of the size, location, audience, or collec-

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tions focus of their museums, share certain goals. We all want to provide high quality exhibitions and programs based on our missions and collections; maintain rigorous standards of scholarship and collections management; provide a positive educational experience for our audience; and, attract sufficient funding to allow us to perform our work with reasonable ease. The big differences within the profession are in how we define terms like positive educational experience, high quality, sufficient funding, in how we prioritize those goals and in the strategies we use to reach them.

I will begin by giving you a short introduction to my institution, the Minnesota Historical Society, in the expectation that this will make my subsequent remarks easier to understand.

The Minnesota Historical Society was founded 154 years ago in 1849. That is very early by Minnesota standards, very recent by yours. The Minnesota Historical Society is an educational institution that receives about 60 % of its funding from the State of Minnesota. We are a private non-profit organization with a governing council elected by the membership, not a government agency. It is one of the largest historical organizations in the United States. Private, non-profit status means that we do not have to pay taxes on our income and that individuals and corporations receive tax deductions for money they give us.

Grand Opening in 1992 of the Minnesota History Center, in Saint Paul, Minnesota Historical Society

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At the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul, the Society serves a large and diverse audience through public programs, exhibitions, publications, a public research library, historical and archaeological collections and a statewide historic preservation office. The Society also manages a statewide network of 30 historic sites, 25 of which are open to the public. Some of the most popular sites are Fort Snelling, the James J. Hill House, The Split Rock Lighthouse, Northwest Company Fur Post, Mill City Museum, and the Oliver Kelley Farm. The Society's total budget in 2002 was $ 41,130,000, of which 60 % came from the state, 22 % from government grants, 12 % from donations, and 6 % from earned revenue. Over 900,000 people visited the History Center and Historic Sites last year, of which 270,000 were school children. Our website had almost three million visits; our membership is over 17,000; and volunteers donated the equivalent in time of 18 full time staff.

Now I will turn to the subject of the Audience-Centered Museum.

Many long-term museum professionals are terrified or angered by the prospect of giving non-museum people a voice in their work. They claim that the public does not have the knowledge or the skills to make decisions about the work of professionals. What will happen to scholarship? What about the curators' expertise? If we ask people what they want, will we have to give it to them? Will we have to lower the intellectual level of our exhibits and programs? These arguments reflect an inaccurate understanding of what the audience-centered museum is or can be. In truth, the audience-centered museum requires more professional expertise, not less. In addition to being scholars and curators, we must also be psychologists who specialize in human behavior.

What is an audience-centered museum?

Virtually all museums in the United States conduct audience research, even if it is only a satisfaction survey as visitors leave an exhibition or program. To be truly audience-centered, a museum must make its audience a partner in planning and decision-making. At an audience-centered museum we set clear criteria for measuring the success of any exhibit or program. At the Minnesota History Center we want to attract large audiences, so an exhibit or program that fails to do this cannot be called a success, no matter how much we and other museum professionals like it. We have also experienced major decreases in our funding recently, forcing us to look for ways to increase donations and earned income. Both government and private funders want to fund institutions that reach a large, broad audience. In addition, larger audiences spend more money in our stores, parking lots, restaurants, and for admission.

At an audience-centered museum we recognize that people visit muse-

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ums voluntarily. They can choose not to visit our museums, not to spend much time in our exhibits, not to come to our programs and not to read our exhibit texts or brochures. In short, they have the power to withhold from us something we want – their presence and their attention. If we want them we have to attract and satisfy them. At my museum we recognize that we must compete for the public's time and attention with other leisure-time attractions and that we must provide experiences that are stimulating and enjoyable, as well as educational.

It follows naturally that we are committed to an ongoing conversation with our museum's audience, listening as well as speaking. We do this informally by observing and talking to visitors, and through more formal methods like surveys, testing and focus groups. At the Minnesota Historical Society we routinely conduct visitor surveys before, during, and after we create an exhibition and we test prototype exhibit components during development. We also survey the audiences at public programs and during school group visits. When funding allows or when a proposed project is very important, we conduct focus groups to get more in-depth information from the public. We even require all of those who develop exhibitions to spend time in the exhibits when visitors are present.

Does this mean that we let our audience tell us how to do our work? Absolutely not! It means simply that we have more information on what makes exhibits and programs more successful in our audience's eyes. How we use that information is part of our professional judgment. Knowing about our audience broadens our perspective, so that we are not just listening to people like ourselves.

We start planning exhibitions and programs by asking »What kind of experience do we want to provide for our visitors?« not »What do we want to say about our collections?« Knowledge of our audience adds another dimension to our scholarship and expertise as we plan and develop. We are open to experimenting with interpretive strategies that are more interactive than traditional exhibits and programs as we seek to enrich our visitors' experiences.

Of course, not everyone at my museum, or any museum in the United States, is equally comfortable with this approach. Those who are used to having sole discretion over exhibition development are sometimes unhappy when they must share their authority. People who are uncomfortable with change or have a narrow view of the museum's public dimension heartily dislike this trend. In the United States, collections curators and content scholars are often the most sceptical, as they fear, with some justification, that the role of scholarship and expertise will be diminished.

In many cases, museum educators have led the process toward becoming visitor-centered. Usually they have had the most direct experience with their museum's visitors, and want to serve visitors more effectively. Most museum

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directors and managers have approved of this change in emphasis because they are under increasing pressure to attract more visitors and generate more income. They believe they must focus on the public's needs and preferences to do so. And, in fact, more and more often, museum governing boards are hiring business people as directors rather than curators and scholars. They look to increasing visitation as a way to increase the museum's resources and prestige.

What have we learned from more than 15 years of listening to our audience and studying them?

Learning about the past is consistently the first reason people give for visiting history museums and historic sites – to understand how we got where we are today. This is considered more important to most visitors than the social component of the visit. But they want it to be stimulating and enjoyable on their own terms, not like school. This is of course good news for museums, because virtually all museums and the people who work in them agree that learning or education is one of the most important, if not the most important, purposes of museums. This means that we do not have to become something else in order to give visitors what they want. We may need to change how we do our work and how we promote it to the public. We may borrow some ideas from amusement parks and entertainment venues, but we do not need to give up our emphasis on learning in order to build larger audiences. In fact, there are very few museums that have the resources to compete successfully with Disneyland or Hollywood, even if they wanted to.

In the United States, when museums first started studying the visitor experience we got some surprising and unwelcome news: Our visitors were not learning what we thought we were teaching. These studies began with simple observation of visitors. What we saw was enormously revealing. Almost all of our visitors had very short attention spans, spending less than 10 % of the time necessary to read and digest an exhibit's message. They spent as little as 15 or 20 minutes in large exhibits and they seemed to tire of the entire museum after 30 or 45 minutes. In further studies, even when visitors knew they would be tested on an exhibit's content, they were unable to answer more than a few questions about the exhibition.

For the most part museums had been approaching the content to be learned in the same way schools do. We arranged objects in a structured, hierarchical way dictated by the logic of an academic discipline, and then added lots of text to explain and elaborate on what the objects were all about. A small, well-educated audience enjoyed this approach immensely. But the broad general public did not, partially because they rarely visited museums after their school field trips were over, remembering them as boring and static.

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There is a very important difference in museums and schools and it has to do with the motivation to learn. Learning in museums results from intrinsic motivation – a personal desire to learn what is being presented. Schools, on the other hand, have numerous external motivators to add to the student's intrinsic motivation – punishment, humiliation, withholding of credentials and so forth.

This insight marked a major turning point in audience research, because it required us to find out what people are learning in museums and how we can enhance that.

What does the research show about how and what people learn in museums?

First, people learn by finding personal meaning in new experiences, by connecting something new to something they already know and care about. Emotional responses to that experience can enhance or detract from learning. At the Minnesota History Museum we have a multimedia show called »Home Place Minnesota.« It evokes an intense emotional response in adult visitors by using music and sound effects, photographs, poetry, museum objects, and literature to explore the concept of home. Our research shows that visitors who see Home Place actually learn more from their museum visit and find it more personally meaningful than those who do not. The people who stay away from museums generally do not find the museum experience personally meaningful and they describe it as dull, lifeless, boring.

Second, adult visitors want to have considerable control over their museum experience – how long they will stay, what they will see. Monumental buildings intimidate them and unfamiliar settings make them uncomfortable, so they want really clear directions and friendly, non-judgmental people to greet them and answer questions. A major study conducted by a consortium of art museums in the United States held focus groups with visitors who never visit art museums. They paid them to visit and then interviewed them. One of the most common responses among these novice visitors was, »I felt stupid. I didn't know where to go or what to do and there was no one to ask. They should glue yellow footsteps to the floor, so you know where to walk.«

Most important, research has shown that people are the key. Visitors connect with historical topics through identification with the people of the past. They are more interested in ordinary people and everyday life, than with the famous people and events. Visitors want to understand and feel what the past was like for people like themselves. They also value the social component of a museum visit and report enjoying themselves more and learning more if their museum visit includes a live program or interaction with a live person.

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Mill City Museum, Minnesota Historical Society

Mill City Museum is built within the ruins of a historic flour mill on the banks of the Mississippi River. This new museum (opened in September, 2003) tells the story of how the flour milling industry fueled the growth of Minnesota.

Most visitors value objects as a way to connect to and understand the people of the past, not for their intrinsic properties. I expect this could be different in art museums, though even there, novice visitors prefer art that depicts realistic subjects that they can recognize. They really like authentic historic sites and immersive environments for their ability to »transport them to another time.« Repeatedly, visitors report that the emotional and social aspects of their experience are closely connected to the intellectual aspects.

Finally, visitors expect museums to provide multiple points of view, to limit their »official voice« and let visitors draw their own conclusions. A recent study showed that museums are one of the most trusted sources of information by the American public. This trust is based on the premise that museums are impartial and balanced in their presentation of evidence.

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What factors enhance learning in a museum?

Because people want to learn, anything that enhances learning leads to greater satisfaction and repeat visitation. The following factors have been shown to enhance learning in museum exhibitions:

- Comfort, both physical and psychological,
- Advance organizers, allowing visitors to make choices and begin to process new information,
- Immediate feedback, something that reinforces new knowledge and makes visitors feel more competent,
- Anything that attracts and holds attention, allowing visitors to focus,
- Logical, transparent organization, layering of information,
- Appropriate amount and level of information,
- Variety of presentation, using text, computer, video, audio, objects, participation, interactives,
- Addition of films, programs, restaurant and rest areas.

If visitors do not learn a lot of factual content, what do they learn?

I have already implied that only the most motivated visitors will spend the time and effort to learn detailed factual or technical information. So what do our visitors learn? They learn

- to generalize and reorganize knowledge they already have,
- to understand complex concepts and relationships,
- to add knowledge to what they already know,
- to synthesize disparate facts, ideas and feelings.

A very important study conducted with visitors in the months after their actual visit found that learning from the museum does not end when the visit ends. Visitors continue to process and add information to the concepts that they began while at the museum.

In addition, museums can have an enormous impact on visitors by

- increasing tolerance and comfort with cultural differences,
- stimulating interest, curiosity, and motivation,
- solidifying and adding legitimacy to cultural and ethic identity,
- making ideas and content accessible,and
- demonstrating that learning can be fun.

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The conclusion that I have reached after years of experience in audience research is this: A museum experience should be like a theater performance, not like a school lecture.

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