MUSEUMS IN TRANSITION:
FROM PASSIVE VIEWING TO PARTICIPATORY LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The change from formal, user-passive treasure houses to informal, interactive experience-rich settings is reflected in the image and contents of contemporary museums of all types. It is expressed in their physical environment as well as the social and organizational ones.

The paper describes the phenomenon of the change via the discussion of one design principle, named "Visible Backstage". It is one in a mosaic of principles for planning and design of the new museum. These principles respond to user needs and museums’ issues, including the pressures towards relevancy and greater impact which prompted, in part, the new image.

SUMMARY

"I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand."

This phrase from the Boston Children's Museum brochure reflects a new direction in museum programs. Through activity-based experiences, visitors are involved and hopefully fascinated. Combined with thoughtful, interactive displays, the museum experience is designed to be more meaningful.

Consider the traditional museum: a grand staircase with lions on both sides and immense columns at the entry; a cool and quiet, orderly interior; a place of retreat.

Then imagine a Victorian attic of strange objects, half-open trunks brimming with clothes of the period to be tried on; a computer game; and a bigger than life-size walk-through human heart. Walk around the corner and step into a prehistoric middle-eastern homestead, complete with cooking wares and food to be tasted.

Historically, museums have been the treasure houses and preservers of high culture and their image has reflected this mission. Passive viewing of objects in glass cases and displays hanging on walls were the focus and essence of the museum experience.

Recently many museums have been modifying their image, goals, and activities to accommodate experiential opportunities for learning. Although children’s museums were quicker to adopt the new image, the trend is not their exclusive domain: it is universal and effective in all kinds and types.
A recent project by the authors identifies twenty design principles which respond to user and museum-process issues. Several, such as "Activity Core", relate directly to users' participation in various ways—from less engaging viewing of displays, to paper and pencil activities to intensive hands-on, social role-playing with collections nestled in authentic environments.

Another, less prevailing concept which has a profound impact on the transforming image of the museum is the "Visible Backstage".


"VISIBLE BACKSTAGE" AS A BEHAVIORAL CONCEPT:

Goffman described the division of social establishments into "front" and "back" regions. The front is where the "performers" and "audience" meet. The back is where the performers retire to relax and prepare. It allows for the concealment of props and activities which might reveal too much about the performance out front. It sustains some social reality through mystification.

However, a "visible backstage" seeks a more authentic reality. It removes false fronts at the expense of demystification for a good cause: there should be fascination and surprises, but no formal mystery and distance between viewer and the museum contents.

Another value and phenomenon associated with a visible backstage is described by Simmel as the fascination of the modern society with the work environment, particularly when it is different from a person's everyday experiences and is coupled with romantic authenticity, e.g. factories without walls in the streets of Istanbul, or construction sites on Main Street of downtown, observed through peepholes in the perimeter wall.

VISIBLE BACKSTAGE IN MUSEUMS:

Traditionally, museums have been introverted. Most of the support services and basic museum processes such as conservation and display design were performed behind closed doors.

Contemporary museums need to radiate a dynamic image. One way to impress the public is to display a host of fascinating activities. An inherent vitality exists in the hidden work and process chambers.

It is desirable to communicate to the public some basic information about the processes of the museum. Display design and development can be as interesting, educational and as important as the final product; so why not let the process become a display in its own right?

Finally, there is a need to demystify technology, science, and art, to make it look accessible and not just the domain of the specialist. For example, The Exploratorium in San Francisco is based upon the fundamental belief that science and technology should be understood by all through displays and activities that are simple and honest. In addition to the
interactive displays made of basic and rough materials, the making of them happens on the public floor. This reinforces the message that the visitor can do it too.

Several examples illustrate the various ways in which the concept of "visible backstage" can be applied in the museum context.

* Transparency:

Separating the backstage activity from the public by a glass wall provides a fishbowl or peephole arrangement that is easy and relatively inexpensive to arrange. At the Ontario Science Center in Toronto, the boiler room and heating plant are glass enclosed, mechanized, and broadly displayed as part of the general exhibition.

* Going on Front Stage:

Treating a service function as a display in its own right is a bold strategy that brings the backstage into full view. The Exploratorium in San Francisco places the exhibit workshops near the front door, in the midst of it all. An island made of machines, materials and human activity sets a mood that affects the overall ambience of the museum. Thus a service function becomes a full partner in the display area.

The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco placed a substantial conservation project in two prominent galleries of the De Young Building. The conservators worked on fourteen foot long murals behind large plexiglass windows. This project lasted many months, and was an integral part of the floor's exhibit.

* Controlled Access into "Forbidden Zones":

Spaces dedicated to a singular service function such as storage can be utilized by the public by providing accessibility, light, and keeping sensible order in the placement and organization of objects.

The Louvre in Paris has opened a storage floor for study and public viewing of paintings. What is typically a "no man's land" was transformed into an activity zone. The naturally lit storage rooms on the top floor are used to display study collections of paintings that would otherwise collect dust in the lonely basement.

* Service Connected to Exhibits:

If a curator's office and work space is near the exhibit area, the possibility of interaction with visitors is increased and, at least, exposure to the public view is greater.

The Boston Children's Museum has several curators' offices distributed throughout the building, rather than centralized in the conventional "administration" zone. This spatial organization allows the public a partial view into the offices, and provides opportunities for questioning and consultation with the curators right where they are needed.
CONCLUSION:

A selected aspect of the museum environment was used to illustrate the nature of its transition and change. "Visible backstage" does not replace all the positive aspects of the old, traditional museum -- it comes as an additional, new, and invigorating dimension which contributes to a more productive museum experience.

REFERENCES:

