

Space Between – Between Spaces: On the Relation between Visitor and Museum

Report on the trip to Berlin by the working groups Museum Culture, Culture Management and Game Studies, July 4th – 6th 2014

Clara Decelis Grewe, Claudia González Marrero, Roger Dale Jones

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An exhibition is more than just objects placed in space; the visit to a museum is more than just looking at objects. Before an actual exhibition can be placed, a space must be found or created, the interior defined. Then the potential visitors must be addressed. Which image of the museum should be created, which story – if there is one – is going to be told to the visitor and how?

For the visitor, the exhibition exists in different states of perception. The first is imaginative, based on the information on the exhibition that reaches him before he visits. The second is the experience of the exhibition itself, consisting of different levels of interactivity and perception. The third state, which links back to the museum's own interests, is the memory of the experience and the visitor's desire to return to the museum and/or recommend it to others. For our look at the relationship between space, visitor, and object we focused on the following aspects: the self-representation of the museums through advertisement, the architecture and the interior design of the museums, the objects' display and the interactivity within an exhibition.

Since their early years, museums have played an important role in the socio-cultural education of the visitor. He was surrounded by an architectural structure that would for instance regulate his movement through and behavior within a set place. Mostly, the objects were placed behind a showcase or hung on the wall; the visitor remained passive. Since the first half of the 20th century there has been a growing tendency to break open this rigid concept of passive visitor. He is now invited to interact with the objects, to make choices, and to use his five senses. These aspects of interactivity and multimediality have become more and more crucial for attracting today's visitors. The places of exhibition have become a linking spot for public, scientific, and economic interests. Curating an exhibition takes place as a dialogue between the curator, the recipients, and the critics. Therefore, the choice of place and objects, as well as its mediation, are crucial.

For our visit to Berlin, we chose a broad variety of museums. Some utilize existing historical structures or create completely new ones for their purpose; others actually present the

architecture itself as the main point of interest, while others do not have an architectural structure at all. How does architecture and interior design influence the exhibition and its possible narratives? In our visit, we looked for different levels of implementation of new media and were interested in the degree to which they are used at different institutions as well as in the challenges that have to be met when a physical or a digital object becomes the focus of an exhibition.

A first glance at the museums – Advertisement & PR

Advertisement and public relations differ greatly concerning coverage levels, creative control, target audience, contacts, collateral events, content, and style. One area of interest was the museums' online presence. With the exception of the GASLATERNEN-OPEN-AIR-MUSEUM, all museums are well advertised on the Internet. Through lots of images, videos, and explanatory texts, they provide a first impression of what the visitor can expect. The COMPUTER GAMES MUSEUM focuses on the topic of playing, showing not only exhibits but also visitors playing them. In the case of the BERLIN UNDERWORLD MUSEUM, the visual design of the museum's webpage lures the visitors into an unknown world. Providing information on their specializations, their own identity and goals is also one of the main tasks of the websites. They offer their messages in different languages, include blogs and links to social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google +.

The BERLIN UNDERWORLD MUSEUM projects a unique side to the history of World War II, the Cold War and the German Democratic Republic. Focusing on the history of Berlin's underground structures within this context, the organization deals with largely uncharted territory and consequently attracts much public attention. They offer guided tours through the different structures, the guides being either informed individuals or actual contemporary witnesses. The Berlin Underworlds Association rented the "Bunker B" in the Gesundbrunnen underground station from the BVG (Berlin Public Transportation Services) and all costs for reconstruction and maintenance have been carried by the association without public support. The museum maintains a broad spectrum of activities, discussing literature on the subject, featuring a travel section and serving as a forum for discussion. Similarly, it holds workgroups and seminars, and requests any relevant documents and objects that might be donated to the exhibition.



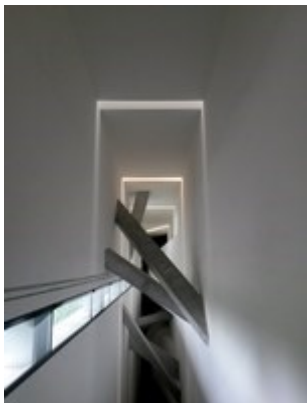
The BOROS COLLECTION is a private collection owned by Christian Boros, a communication agency founder and publisher. The popularity of its owner as well as the recognized name of artists represented in his collection makes the latter appear in several articles on the contemporary art world in Berlin and beyond. The information and pictures on the homepage of the collection create the image of a private environment with a fascinating aura in which the

visitor is immersed. In the last four years, the collection has welcomed more than 120,000 visitors in a total of 7500 separate tours.



The COMPUTER GAMES MUSEUM shows the first permanent exhibition dedicated solely to interactive digital entertainment culture. It thus secures a considerable audience within a wide age range interested in the field. They rely heavily on visitors 'spreading the word', resulting in a strategy of auto-advertisement. The Computer Games Museum is a non-profit, private institution, self-financed through entrance fees, donations and special offers (like renting its space in the evenings for private events). The museum actively presents the culture and the history of digital games to a wide audience by means of exhibitions, workshops on media competence, events, and publications.

The GASLATERNEN-OPEN-AIR-MUSEUM is part of the Tiergarten park in Berlin and can be accessed at any time. There is no architectural structure that surrounds it and it seems to remain unnoticed by most people who pass by. And so it seems with its presence on the Internet. It is mentioned on the general webpage of the museums of Berlin, which only summarizes its location, the hours it can be accessed, and that entry is free.



The JEWISH MUSEUM is a private foundation with access to a rather large budget. It has a strong identity given the appealing categories that its exhibitions combine. The related allegories and direct stories of the objects – not only about the Holocaust, but also on the two-thousand-year-old German-Jewish history and culture – encompass great importance. In this framework the museum maintains special marketing procedures intended to gain financial support from foundations and personalities with relevant roles in politics, business, culture, and the media. The museum also has educational programs working closely with schools, thereby promoting intercultural competence. The advertised thematic focus is also reflected in the museum's events and conferences.

Outside and Inside Space – the Architecture

There are different types of architecture used by the museums and galleries: one already exists and is being re-used; one was created for the museum and one is in itself the actual point of interest. Depending on the type of building, there are different challenges for the objects' display.

At the BERLIN UNDERWORLD MUSEUM, the architecture of the bunker and tunnel systems are the objects of focus. By walking through the structures, the visitor is able to perceive dark,

cold, and sometimes airless places, but the architecture remains mostly silent about its own purpose and historical meaning. To understand it in its entirety, a guided tour is necessary to direct the visitor's attention to the important details (fluorescent paint, doors, signs, etc.). The objects displayed (i.e. propaganda, gasmasks, munitions, beds, toilets) tell a story of their own, but most importantly, they form the key to understanding the architecture; they open room for imagination and allow visitors to see the bigger picture of the architecture's historical meaning.

The JEWISH MUSEUM covers two sorts of architecture; meaning that on one hand it is the mantle for the exhibition and on the other hand it is an object of interest itself due to its artistic complexity. It consists of a 17th century building, the former superior court of justice, and a modern building from 1999, the so called Libeskind Bau. The old building has three wings and its courtyard has an outer wall and roof with a glass and steel structure which, in its design, creates an interplay between the old and the new building. The latter was designed by Daniel Libeskind, opened in 1999, and has been used for exhibitions since 2001. It has a zigzag shaped floor plan, its walls and floors are often inclined, and its walls are constantly cut through with concrete baulks and empty spaces. The architecture is capable of establishing a narrative, confronting the visitor with an environment that escapes common world perception and creates a feeling of insecurity and irritation. It must be said that the building's ability to narrate reaches its potential mainly through the visitor's knowledge about the Holocaust. The architecture becomes a subtext that accompanies the entire exhibition, but that through its tones of white, grey, and black stays unobtrusive and which through open space of light and air also gives the visitor time to breathe and relax. The different sections of the exhibition inside this large structure are organized by microarchitecture consistent of modular elements which emulate building structures and which can be adapted to the displayed objects in or outside the display cases.

Microarchitecture plays an important role for the COMPUTER GAMES MUSEUM. Here, the museum's collection moved into an old building that had its entire architecture already set. The floor plan is narrow and has small rooms annexed to the main one, which makes it a difficult space to use. The solution was to create almost cubic or rectangular structures formed by cubes in white and grey as well as green, blue, or yellow tones (the latter depending on the displayed topic). The cubes are positioned in different levels of height and depth, some having information boards hung upon them and others containing display cases with video game consoles or other objects of interest. These structures, which invite the visitor to walk around them and which guide him through the exhibition, appear to be composed of cubic bricks that can be easily replaced at any time, allowing the displayed objects to be exchanged. This, however, is merely an illusion. The highlight of the exhibition is the recently created arcade room which is set in one of the small annexed rooms. Its design, with halogen lamps, glass, metal, mirrors, and even fake water spots on the ceiling together with the dim light creates a perfect environment for the exhibited arcade games and an atmosphere that invites the visitor to stay and play. It is here that the architecture, the objects, and the visitor become a union through which the displayed objects can be totally understood.

The BOROS COLLECTION is housed in a World War II bunker which has kept its original front, but has been adapted to the collector's needs on the inside. Some rooms, like the small foyer, have been painted white, giving them the appearance of a clean and neat place. The collectors own some art works which are too big for the low ceilings of the different levels, so several ceilings had to be removed. Some of the rooms have been left with graffiti from the 1990s' rave parties and dark rooms. There are also other remains from past times, like the old ventilation system. Through this, a balance is created between the bunker's history and its actual use as a private gallery. The entire appearance of the place is cold and impersonal, neutral enough for the contemporary art. At the same time, however, it leaves enough traces of its long and changing history open to be read by those who are looking for it.

The GASLATERNEN-OPEN-AIR-MUSEUM lacks architecture, but not a constitutive environment. There are paths through the Tiergarten park which mark the directions that should be taken by the visitors, and the numbered information boards hanging on the lanterns even mark an order. And yet, since the objects are placed in their natural environment, the entire place is not really perceived as an exhibition space. This points out that museums always create an artificial environment that can sometimes be very useful to understand a complex interrelation of objects and their meaning, but which at the same time can actually achieve the contrary and disable the comprehension of the objects' actual nature.

Museums and Interactivity

Interactivity is not only a catch phrase in advertising, it also marks a turn in media and media consumption. This turn denotes a shift from the passive consumption of broadcast media to an active, even personalized interaction with media products. Museums and other cultural institutions have not ignored this interactive turn, as the high culture sanctioned by museums has long stood in competition with popular culture for the engagement, education, and of course patronage of the people. This section focuses on interactivity in museums visited. Quiring et al. present two basic types of interactivity in their research on the concept – that between a user and a system (here a museum or exhibit) and that between users connected by a system (Quiring et al. "Interaktivität – ten years after." *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft* 54, 2006). While all systems allow for varying degrees of interactivity (and the greater the degree of interactivity between user and system is, the greater is the chance for emergent properties and behaviors to arise), only systems that connect users allow for the negotiation of meaning. The section below addresses the interactivity of three museums visited in Berlin, considering both the different types and degrees of interactivity. Furthermore, examples of interactivity that lead to negotiation of meaning will be provided.

User-System Interactivity is by far the most common form of interactivity that museums utilize because it is simple to create and manage. Furthermore, because the system does not change in user-system interaction, museums' claim to authority is not called into question. There are two common methods whereby museums provide user-system interactivity: through

computer programs or through objects and spaces that utilize multiple senses. The JEWISH MUSEUM Berlin, for instance, has several computer stations with learning programs for visitors to explore, and the COMPUTER GAMES MUSEUM has many video and computer games (and game-like programs) for visitors to interact with. While interaction with computer programs provides a complex form of interactivity, interactivity that relies on multiple senses can also offer powerful engagement.



For instance, the JEWISH MUSEUM has a room filled with metal plates in the form of unidentifiable faces (or masks). The plates lie on the floor and visitors are encouraged to walk over the faces, which in turn create an eerie sound that can be heard through large parts of the museum. These faces represent the nameless victims of genocide, and ironically, in order for these victims to be heard, they must be walked upon. In this way, the exhibit relies on the interaction between the visitor and the faces, and the sound as well as the discomfort (physical and symbolic) that the interaction produces. In the BERLIN UNDERWORLD MUSEUM, on the other hand, visitors interact largely with the space itself and rely on multiple senses for the creation of the exhibit. In the World War II bunker, visitors sense the claustrophobia, smell the damp concrete and dust, feel the cool air of

the underground, and hear the silence provided by the thick walls and by the subterranean setting. While simply seeing, feeling, hearing, and smelling within the space of the bunker do not represent interactivity, in this museum the space does interact with the visitors. For instance, the cool air quickly turns warm and sticky when filled with a mass of visitors, and the smell of dust and concrete quickly mixes with the smell of the crowd. Breathing becomes more difficult as oxygen levels decrease, and the feeling of claustrophobia increases as visitors fill the empty rooms. The way the bunker interacts with the visitors provides a good impression of the wartime era and the experiences of people during the firebombing of Berlin. Like the face exhibit at the JEWISH MUSEUM, it effectively provides an emotional and immersive response that is difficult for purely visual interactive exhibits to achieve.

User-system-user interactivity is far less common than the former. And due to the various practical and power-relationship reasons on the part of the museum, negotiation of meaning through interaction with a system is mostly limited to the visitors as users. For instance, the JEWISH MUSEUM contains the Tree of Wishes. Visitors are encouraged to write a wish down on a red piece of paper and tie it onto the tree. While the tree allows certain actions on the

part of the visitor, it does not fundamentally change as a system. However, it does take on meaning to other visitors as they see the other wishes. Another museum that allows for user-user interactivity is the COMPUTER GAMES MUSEUM in Berlin. This museum encourages visitors to play with many of the game-exhibits. While much digital gameplay occurs between a user and a system, and thus does not allow a negotiation of meaning, many games still allow for varying degrees of meaning negotiation. First, gameplay in the museum takes place in a highly social setting. That means that the exhibit is not so much the game itself, but rather the interaction between the visitors and the game. Thus, even though only one person may be playing the game-exhibit, there can still be a negotiated meaning between visitors (note that the same can be said for the faces exhibit at the JEWISH MUSEUM as well as for the BERLIN UNDERWORLD MUSEUM). Another example from the COMPUTER GAMES MUSEUM is the Painstation. This is a digital pong game played by two competing players. In order to activate the game, both players must hold their right hand on a button. Through the area around the button, pain as a punishment for mistakes is delivered to the players' hands in the form of an electric shock, heat, or a whip to the hand with a rubber strip. As soon as the hand releases the button, the game terminates and that player loses. In this game-exhibit, players communicate with each other directly through the game as well as outside the game as they discuss their anticipation and experience of pain. In this way, Painstation mediates a type of negotiation of meaning that is highly reliant on the game itself, the competition it encourages, and the fear of pain it instills (it is also fun to play and quickly leads to player bonding – one of the messages the museum has on the cultural function of play and games).

This brief look at interactivity in museums raises some interesting questions on the future of museums. The first question concerns the use of digital programs that 1) will extend beyond the screens of computers into the space of the museum, incorporating different senses, and 2) that will incorporate artificial intelligence that increasingly offers the semblance of the negotiation of meaning with visitors. The second question concerns the interaction between visitors as mediated by the museum and its content (i.e. its system). Just as the internet has shifted to user generated content, so too might museums focus more and more on what visitors have to offer, and less on the rigid structures and hierarchy of the museum as cultural authorities.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of the museum excursion to Berlin was to examine the museum experience in terms of what information museums provide about themselves through online advertisement, in terms of the exterior and interior architecture of space, the presentation of museal objects as well as the level of interactivity available. The results of this excursion and analysis reveal both diversity and certain patterns. The authors feel that this discussion raises some important questions for future research on museums, especially in light of this report's descriptive scope. First, what exactly encourages visitors to return and to recommend museums to others? Which factor of the museum is important for this: the type and degree of interactivity, the interior and/or exterior design and the story it tells in relation

to its contained objects, or the presence of advertisement in other media, especially online? Second, in light of possible answers to the aforementioned question, how might advertisement strategies develop to more effectively attract both new and returning visitors? And finally, how will museums in the future balance the increasing trend (and degree) of interactivity with its authoritative role and with its need to tell coherent stories about people, the past, cultural trends, and art?