



Recent museum approaches and the visitor experience in the context of Parks Canada National Historic Sites renewal in the province of Quebec: portrait of a museum sampling in North America, Europe and Australia



Summary

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SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

The Parks Canada Agency, a federal body responsible for managing National Historic Sites, seeks to renew the museography and educational offer of National Historic Sites in the province of Quebec. New investments will be made in museum exhibits at certain national historic sites. Parks Canada's intention is to meet the expectations and needs of its visitors and potential audiences while providing a memorable visitor experience. In this context, Parks Canada undertook a survey of recent approaches adopted by various museums or historic sites in North America, Europe and elsewhere so as to promote reflection and provide a new generation of experiences to its visitors.

1.1 Purpose of the study

The framework of this study is based on the identification of recent museum approaches and visitor experience proposed by various museums in North America, Europe and Australia. This study also aims to spot current trends in the use and integration of information technologies in museums today. At the same time, the study seeks to uncover innovative strategies used by museums to attract new visitors to their exhibitions, educational programs and cultural activities.

2. MUSEUMS SAMPLED AND SURVEY METHODOLOGY

2.1 Museum institutions targeted by the study

The institutions covered by the study include existing museums, exhibition centres, science centres, national parks and commemorative sites that have undergone renewal in the last six years or where renewal is under way, in North America, Europe or Australia. New museums were also targeted by this study.

2.2 Producing a list of museum institutions

The initial list of about 100 museum institutions was compiled by using the websites of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the American Association of Museums (AAM), the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) and the Société des musées québécois (SMQ). The list was based on the following criteria:

- Exhibition renewal undertaken in the last six years
- Institution expansion completed in the last six years
- New structures (less than six years old) or projects under way
- Institutions that have received awards in the last six years

The geographic area was limited initially to North America (Canada and the United States) and then extended to include Europe and Australia in order to explore the approaches taken in about 100 institutions.

The institutions were then classified according to Parks Canada themes¹ covering human sciences and ethnology, war, memorial sites, sustainable development principles, and integration of technology and new media by visiting each institution's websites. This step also helped round out information related to the originality of what is offered, the thematic pertinence for Parks Canada and the visitor experience provided.

A number of professionals (both inside and outside Parks Canada) were asked to complete the identification of museum institutions, to validate the list and to make the final selection.

Some 47 museum were selected from North America, Europe and Australia. The remaining institutions were kept for information purposes², with the basic information presented in an appendix to the full document.

¹ History, event history, Aboriginal communities, political personalities, women's history, historic sites.

² Information on all the institutions is summed up in an Excel table under the Appendix tab –the list of museum solicited and those in the initial corpus (Full document - French version only).

2.3 Survey canvassing

A questionnaire³ was developed to obtain factual information about each institution as well as information to provide a better understanding of the approaches used for the institution's renewal. The questionnaire was tested and was then sent by e-mail in May 2009 to selected museums.

A specification sheet based on their answers was produced for each institution. The information from individual specification sheet was then used for the overall analysis of the results.

2.4 Respondents to the study

This study expected a response from at least 15 institutions, which would then be followed up by a visit in person of selected institutions. The questionnaire was sent to 47 institutions and 22 responses were received; 14 from North America (Canada and the United States), 7 from Europe and 1 from Australia. Although this corpus is not comprehensive, it nonetheless brings out some lines of thinking based on the strategies and steps taken by each respondent to maximize the visitor experience. This also provides an opportunity to explore the various redesign or expansion experiences of the respondent institutions.

2.5 Limits of the study

The limits of this type of study should be noted. The study is qualitative, based on locating targeted museum institutions. The corpus covers a very limited sample of museums that meets precise criteria as well as Parks Canada interests. The results are not trends per se but we can still point to some interesting leads that can be explored later at greater depth as part of another study or by on-site visits.

Although the institutions generously agreed to collaborate and fill out the questionnaire, some questions could not be dealt with at as great a depth as we had hoped. The degree of exactitude in the responses obtained varies considerably, and the data are either fragmentary or, in contrast, quite complete and detailed. We must also emphasize the difficulties in obtaining details on the theoretical steps underlying the approaches to outreach and education or on renewal and financing operations.

2.6 Typology of museum institutions in the final corpus (respondent institutions)

The corpus of this study consists of a varied sample of institutions that are of interest, bringing together a broad spectrum of types of institutions. These typologies reflect the selection criteria in connection with the renewal of Parks Canada National Historic Sites in Quebec.

War museums:

- Imperial War Museum (IWM), London, United Kingdom
- Canadian War Museum (CWM), Ottawa, Canada
- National Museum of the Marine Corps (NMMC), Virginia, United States
- National World War II Museum (NWWII), New Orleans, Louisiana, United States

Science and technology museums and science and society museums

- Montreal Science Centre (MSC), Canada
- Field Museum, Chicago, United States
- Joggins Fossil Institute (heritage site), Nova Scotia, Canada
- Musée des Confluences, Lyon, France
- Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
- Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), Toronto, Canada

Art, ethnology and history museums and historic site

- Buffalo Bill Museum, Cody, Wyoming, United States
- Chicago History Museum (CHM), Chicago, United States
- Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, United States
- Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum (FDR), New York, United States
- Museum of Anthropology (MOA), Vancouver, Canada

³ The study's questionnaire (bilingual) is available as an appendix to the full document.

- National Constitution Center (NCC), Philadelphia, United States
- Tate Modern (TM), London, United Kingdom

Theme museums

- DDR Museum, Berlin, Germany
- German Emigration Center, Bermerhaven, Germany
- Musée historique de Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland
- International Museum of the Reformation (IMR), Geneva, Switzerland
- Workers Art and Heritage Centre, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

2.7 Institutional profiles of the corpus

Most of the respondent institutions are large or medium-sized ones, apart from one small one. Their economic data⁴ indicate the substantial variability of the respondent institutions as well as their financial capacities devoted to renewing or expanding their services.

The discrepancies in annual budgets are also considerable, with most of them reaching millions of dollars, apart from two institutions (CA\$500,000 or less)⁵.

Obviously, the budgets devoted to renewing exhibitions, expanding museums or erecting new buildings are also considerable. The budgets range from CA\$3.6 million to \$28 million, while another institution devotes CA\$10,000 per year to renewing its equipment. As regards building expansion or construction, the known budgets of five respondent institutions range on average from CA\$134 million to CA\$323 million, while a sixth devoted CA\$5.5 million to renewal or expansion. The operating costs of museum space were not provided by most respondents.

Although the information remains fragmentary, financial support comes from two major sources: 57% coming from the public sector and 37% coming from private funds.

The information gathered shows that the institutions vary greatly in the number of departments (between two and 30), of full-time employees (between two and 2,830) and of part-time employees (between one and 490). Only three institutions mentioned to us that they rely on volunteers (between 19 and 977 volunteers).

Attendance levels⁶ also vary substantially from one institution to another, ranging from nearly five million down to 22 000 visitors per year.

3. TOWARD A NEW GENERATION OF MUSEUMS

The corpus of the study consists of museums and sites at various stages of their life cycles. For greater coherence, museums were split into 3 categories: recently created institutions, those that have renewed their exhibitions or conducted expansion work, and those that expect to renew their exhibitions in the relatively near future.

3.1 New structures

The corpus includes eight new institutions built recently or with work under way. To this first group we have added a ninth institution, the Canadian War Museum, which relocated to a brand new custom-designed building and which took advantage of this move to review its entire presentation approach.

1. Musée des Confluences (opening planned for 2013)
2. National World War II Museum (2000; phase 2: 2009)
3. Joggins Fossil Institute (heritage site) (opened in 2008)
4. National Museum of the Marine Corps (opened in 2006)
5. DDR Museum (opened in 2006)
6. International Museum of the Reformation (opened in 2005)

⁴ For reasons of confidentiality, an order of magnitude (from bottom to top range) and an average of the data provided are presented as a rough guide.

⁵ We note that data for two of the institutions are not available.

⁶ For reasons of confidentiality of information, only an average and an order of magnitude have been provided.

7. German Emigration Center (opened in 2005)
8. Canadian War Museum (opened in 2005)
9. National Constitution Center (opened in 2003)

3.2 Major exhibition renewals and expansions

This second group brings together institutions that have renewed their exhibitions or expanded their infrastructure to increase or improve both their museum offering and the visitor experience.

1. Tate Modern (expansion project under way)
2. Imperial War Museum (2008 and under way; Churchill [2005])
3. Museum of Anthropology (2007-2010 – expansion project under way)
4. Museum Victoria (2004 – under way)
5. Montreal Science Centre (2007)
6. Royal Ontario Museum (2002 to 2007)
7. Chicago History Museum (2006)
8. Colonial Williamsburg (historic site) (2006)
9. Field Museum (≈ 2005)
10. Workers Art and Heritage Centre (≈ 2005)

Museums see expansion of their institutions as a way of offering more services that are better adapted to the diversity of their clients. It also provides a suitable occasion to redesign some offerings based on the changing needs of their audiences. Renewal results in a level of dynamism and openness to audiences.

3.3 Renewal projects

Three museums are planning renewals over the next few years, but these are still in too embryonic for them to be able to describe their projects for the moment. This applies to the three following institutions:

1. Musée historique de Lausanne (renewal planned for about 2011)
2. Buffalo Bill Museum (renewal planned for about 2011)
3. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum (renewal planned for about 2013)

These museums have been unable to inform us as to what they are planning to do. The Buffalo Bill Museum simply refers to the run-down state of their exhibits they wish to renew. The FDR Presidential Library and Museum is currently working on a redesign of its permanent exhibition and is planning to establish an immersion environment by using interactive audiovisual programming in keeping with new trends in museology. It appears that the introduction of new technologies is a central component in the redesigns of the Buffalo Bill Museum and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum. This is identified as indispensable strategy to reach their audiences.

3.4 Sustainable development

The Brundtland report published in 1987 defined the development policy needed to avoid compromising the situation of future generations. At that time, museums raised the issue of sustainable development either in their exhibitions or in their educational activities. Some museums have gradually taken up these issues in their various operations and have revised the very concept of exhibitions and of human and financial resources management⁷ from a sustainable development standpoint. As such, the principles of sustainable development remain an emerging phenomenon in the museum sector, with considerable variations between institutions and rules that are still in flux. Science museums naturally have a lead over other types of museums, although this is changing, with art and history museums joining their ranks. The most noteworthy changes involve buildings and renovation projects, with the gradual implementation of sustainable development standards and certifications for museums in recent years.

⁷ Catherine Ballé, Permanence et changement : un enjeu des musées contemporains, *Musées*, Les enjeux du développement durable, Société des musées québécois, vol. 27, 2008, pp. 10-15.

4. THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Statistical studies⁸ indicate that museum attendance levels have been climbing in the last few years. The growing interest in museums and strong cultural competition are creating pressure and encouraging museums to improve the visitor experience or at least to define it. For them, this means responding adequately to public expectations and anticipating them at every level. Museums have tended to become increasingly open to the various communities that see museums as an instrument of their social commitment and expression.

Bringing in new technologies has become indispensable for most of them in reaching young people. For *screenagers*, young people under 35, reality is entirely associated with screen culture, multitasking and zapping, to the point that they seek to have all their senses engaged at a museum. In addition, their culture is more oriented to sound, visuals and actions than to words or letters⁹. Some museum specialists say “visiting a museum based on simply observing objects accompanied by texts is going to disappear. Visitors will expect interactivity and expression”¹⁰, and institutions will have to respond to this. The social experience formed by a museum must satisfy the expectations of these young people without excluding other audiences and must adapt to emerging social and cultural practices.

The visitor experience as understood by institutions and expressed in their responses revolves around two non-exclusive angles of the museum visiting and exhibition visiting cycles.

- The **museum visiting cycle** consists of an holistic approach to the different services provided by the museum. For these institutions, the visitor experience is seen as a whole that includes the institution image, the reception, food and drink, the shop, the signage, ease of access and the website in addition to the exhibition. Each of these services has a direct impact on the visitor experience and is carefully scrutinized to optimize the institution’s impression on visitors.
- The **exhibition visiting cycle** relies on the quality of the exhibition’s content. The responses provided show that the visitor experience depends on the exhibition. Exhibitions are a central component of the visitor experience, with every element converging to contribute to a change following a visit. The exhibition is generally a place of informal learning, offering a cognitive, didactic, memorable or emotional experience.

We note that some respondents wish to improve and vary the quality of the visitor experience. Accordingly, museums use a client-centered approach to meet visitor’s needs from the point of view of learning and entertainment. Many approaches are explored, and include: processes centred on debate, citizen involvement, social inclusion and intergenerational pairings.

1. REFLECTION AND DEBATE

Some museum institutions seek to play a social role for their visitors, and they define themselves as public spaces devoted to reflection and debate. In this context, institutions face the dual challenge of continuing to be pertinent and engaging for audiences and to be known as dynamic, living places.

2. CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

Some institutions provide an experience relying on social commitment¹¹ and position themselves as “idea-museums” while echoing audience expectations. For these museums, visits must be engaging, and visitors must take actions and decisions that have an effect on the course of the visit or on the activity. Visits then focus on something to be experienced that requires additional effort but that is also fun and entertaining.

3. SOCIAL INCLUSION/EXCLUSION

For others, a museum’s social role is based on participation by local or cultural communities in museum projects. Other museum institutions rely on guided tours or theatre presentation to raise social issues.

⁸ Direction des musées de France and Observation de la culture et des communications du Québec.

⁹ Marie Émond and Katy Tari, Expo, techno, jeunes publics : un langage en exploration au musée de la civilisation, *Musées, Présence des technologies*, vol. 26, 2007, p. 66.

¹⁰ Benoît Légaré, Pression et expression citoyennes, *Musées, Présence des technologies*, vol. 26, 2007, p. 25.

¹¹ “Idea-museum” presentation, Gail Dexter-Lord, PowerPoint presentation, CMA convention, 2004.

4. INTERGENERATIONAL PAIRINGS

Intergenerational pairing is another way of promoting sharing of knowledge and experiences between different generations.

5. EXHIBITIONS' INTERPRETIVE STRATEGY

Museums rely on many interpretive means depending on their resources, and none of them uses a single form. We should note that the respondent institutions are mostly large or medium-sized, with significant budgets that enable them to develop a broad range of interpretive and public education products.

An exhibition is a central form of interpretation, with a great variety of means used to convey messages. The interpretive strategy of an exhibition often includes pedagogical activities, talks, debates, guided tours, a website and the Web 2.0. Each mean targets specific client groups and is designed to engage visitors and to offer varied learning opportunities adapted to their needs. What emerges is a coherent interpretive strategy with an increasingly tight meshing between exhibitions, the various means of communication, and the educational activities all converging around a central topic but reaching extended audiences.

Although none of the museums state which learning theory they subscribe to, it emerges clearly that they take account of their audiences' varied learning styles. This is reflected in the choices of their exhibitions' interpretive media and in the educational and cultural activities offered.

5.1 Favoured or recurring themes

Analysis shows that social issues constitute the most prevalent themes both in theme museums and in collection-based museums. Social issues are rich and filled with meaning for visitors. They encompass a set of sub-themes that provide for explorations of current affairs or of topics with a contemporary resonance that are likely to draw audiences. Depending on an institution's mission, social issues are raised from historical, economic or sociological perspectives.

Some themes are developed to foster reflection or debate, sometimes enabling more sensitive or painful subjects to be raised, relying on the institutional social role that some audiences expect.

- Immigration (or emigration) is a primary theme explored by some institutions (9) or brought up secondarily. This is a powerful and forceful theme for some communities, evoking a local or regional reality and bringing out the causes and impact of immigration and the tensions it has generated in terms of exclusion.
- The theme of women is very rarely an exhibition topic in itself at the respondent institutions. Rather, it may be integrated in the content of exhibitions and presents this perspective in a specific area in the exhibitions.
- As may be expected, the theme of Natives or Aboriginals is almost inevitable among most respondent institutions (other than science and technology museums) in North America and Australia. The place given to this topic varies, however. The cases of the Bunjilaka centre in the Museum Victoria and of the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver are two inspiring examples of collaboration with Aboriginal communities.

The themes of environment, biodiversity and geology tend to come up more often in science museums and clearly have a less significant presence in other institutions. Political personalities rarely come up except at commemorative museums such as the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Colonial Williamsburg and the National Constitution Center.

We have formed two groups of respondents based on the primary focuses of the interpretive approach: the chronological approach, on the one hand, and the thematic approach, on the other hand.

1. Chronological approach (event-related)

The permanent exhibitions at war museums are set around a chronological approach that explores many points of view (Colonial Williamsburg, the National Constitution Center, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, the German Emigration Center, the Buffalo Bill Museum and the International Museum of the Reformation).

2. Thematic approach

The thematic approach used by museums offers the opportunity to raise a variety of topics. The primary challenge lies in renewing themes¹² in a way that interest their visitors to draw them to the museum and then to satisfy them (Imperial War Museum, Museum Victoria, the Tate Modern, the Museum of Anthropology, the Montreal Science Centre, the Chicago Historical Museum, the Royal Ontario Museum).

5.2 Museographic approaches to exhibitions

Museographic approaches generally reflect the visitor experience that each institution wants to offer to their visitors, whether it centres on the message, on the presentation of its collections, or on hands-on activities.

1. IMMERSION APPROACH

The immersion approach refers to the reconstitution of an environment, a space in which visitors may wander or relive an experience as it was felt¹³.

This is found at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, famous for its immersion exhibitions and its historical reconstitutions of war scenes, and at the German Emigration Center, which offers an emigration experience. Interactivity is central to the future Musée des Confluences, to the point that it has developed partnerships to explore new interactive routes integrated in the path visitors are to take at the new museum.

2. SCIENTIFIC/TAXONOMIC APPROACH

The taxonomic approach refers to an arrangement of items based on a classification linked to scientific knowledge or a particular discipline, with their layout in a distribution by series (type, species, etc.). Since the Tate Modern is an art museum, traditional art display is the approach most often used there, although this may vary from one exhibition to the next. The ROM relies on the quality of the collections presented and scientific thinking is viewed as a priority. The presence of touch screens (e-labelling) enables visitors to seek additional information and interpretations on the items. Other institutions such as the Musée de Lausanne, the International Museum of the Reformation, the Field Museum or the Joggins Fossils Institute also present exhibitions where scientific knowledge and an information classification structure remain prevalent.

3. CRITICAL APPROACH

Critical museology refers to new presentation approaches for ethnological items that challenge the traditional didactic presentation by specialists. Instead, it advocates collaborating with cultural groups who then take part in the entire process of producing an exhibition. Accordingly, the museum does not present itself as a specialist or holder of knowledge but rather as a facilitator among the communities it seeks to represent. In this context, critical museology as practised by the Museum of Anthropology is associated with collaborative practices that forms the basis of exhibition selection and development criteria.

4. DEMONSTRATIVE OR INTERACTIVE APPROACH

This refers to the use of hands-on activities throughout the exhibition. This approach is seen as an effort that encourages the understanding of a concept and the acquisition of knowledge. This may involve the manipulation of objects, interactive items or social games. The National Constitution Center offers an experience using multimedia presentations that emphasize people and their ideas. The DDR Museum seeks to stir reflection and debate, providing varied experiences inspired by historical events. The Montreal Science Centre, in redesigning its exhibitions, opted for a broad integration of information technologies that reach a teenaged client base. The Musée des Confluences is setting out to provide various types of exhibition museography aimed at contemplation, knowledge and experimentation.

¹² Theme exhibitions are generally of a set length (several months) and constitute temporary exhibitions.

¹³ Raymond Montpetit, 1996.

5.3 Exhibition communications approaches

A number of museums maintain a traditional (though not exclusively) communications approach, in the sense that their exhibitions present content (objects, texts, images, videos) structured around a narrative or taxonomic line.

1. FIRST VOICES APPROACH

This interpretive approach relies on accounts focusing on human behaviour, without passing judgment. Visitors make their own analyses based on their personal experience without an interpretation being imposed on them. This approach seeks to reach visitors in a way that gets them to identify with the stories being told and to be personally affected. It can also become part of a broader story, and the spatial arrangement of the content can be structured according to the desired narrative logic.

We note that war museums favour the use of First Voices because of the theme itself, which evokes painful experiences. Thus, the Imperial War Museum, the Canadian War Museum, the National World War II Museum and the National Museum of the Marine Corps use testimony from actors or victims. The Chicago History Museum favours the First Voices approach by using testimony from the people of Chicago, an approach that visitors find pertinent and effective. The Musée de Lausanne will be presenting a travelling exhibition on stolen childhoods, with views and testimony from children who were placed in Switzerland from 1920 to 1960. Museum Victoria relies on immersion experiences in its exhibitions, with theatrical presentations, testimony or activities with educators. The Immigration Museum, the Bunjilaka and the Community Gallery are examples of the museum platforms that enable communities to express their viewpoints based on their own experiences. The National Constitution Center uses a narrative approach to reveal the actions taken by millions of individuals contributed to forging the U.S. Constitution and then making it evolve.

2. HANDS-ON APPROACH

The Hands-on approach is a cognitive approach focused on acquiring knowledge through hands-on activities, reflection and the effort required to understand while offering an entertaining experience. At the DDR Museum, the dissemination of history relies on discovery and exploration conducted by visitors. In this sense, the exhibition does not centre around the objects, which take a place that is secondary to the message and the reflection the Museum seeks to stir. The Montreal Science Centre favours self-discovery and the discovery of scientific notions through an array of amusing, surprising and intelligent experiences in the various exhibitions.

3. PERSONAL INTERPRETIVE VISIT APPROACH

Personal interpretive visits are another approach that is well rooted in many institutions. It encompasses guided tours and theatrical presentations. This interpretive technique allows more sensitive topics to be raised, playing on provocation or feeding debates. It is also an opportunity to urge visitors to express their viewpoints and to interact with groups.

Colonial Williamsburg centres the entire experience on personal interpretive visits. They focus primarily on personal interpretive visits in the houses and other buildings. They facilitate the discovery of various aspects of political and day-to-day life in 18th-century Williamsburg. Since 2007, Colonial Williamsburg has offered a new activity, *Revolutionary City*, a living, theatrical family activity that breaks down the frontiers of traditional historic reconstitution experiences.

Other institutions, such as the Canadian War Museum, the Museum of Anthropology and the Musée de Lausanne, offer guided tours to their exhibitions.

6. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES AND INTERACTIVITY

During the last few years we have witnessed a transformation in how knowledge is transmitted and the relationship with knowledge. Museums have not escaped this trend, and it may be observed that all new institutions and exhibition renewal projects bring in technology in one way or another. Information technologies thus become indispensable in the respondent institutions, although how they are integrated or exploited can vary widely. The technological turn of the respondent institutions is applied in two main areas, namely in exhibitions and on the Internet.

6.1 Integration of technologies in exhibitions and at the museum

Museographic and interpretive approaches are avenues to exploit information technologies in exhibitions with, for example, interactive hands-on activities or collective games. In addition to these integrations, other recent examples show a transformation of the relationship between museums and information technologies as instruments of communication.

Among the most active respondent institutions, we note that the highly innovative Tate Modern enhances visits to exhibitions through the use of personal digital assistant (PDA). Another type of pocket guide, the SMART Guide (Student Multimedia Art Research Tool), is a multimedia tool intended for students and young people. The Royal Ontario Museum has brought in the principle of e-labelling on touch screens in certain rooms to replace traditional printed labels, and it expects this to become standard in all the exhibition halls. The future Musée des Confluences, in partnership with a multimedia experimentation centre in Rhône department, is studying and experimenting with new cultural mediation devices using information technologies to offer visitors as distinctive an experience as possible.

6.2 Internet resources

The many varieties of resources offered on museums' websites reflect the technology explosion in museums. This allows for real breakthroughs in terms of offer and helps optimize an institution's visibility, its popularity and its ability to reach new visitors. We note that organizational websites are indispensable for all respondents.

The major institutions offer a significant mass of information on their websites related to collections or exhibitions. Whether for virtual exhibitions, supplements to exhibitions, research projects, pedagogical activities, or exploration of exhibition halls, these institutions seek means that are readily available and accessible in all its forms to meet multiple needs. The development of the various tools available on the Internet contributes to the diffusion of information and increases their outreach to communities.

1. TOWARDS A GREATER ACCESS TO THE COLLECTIONS

Some museums attach great importance to their collections and are developing various tools to increase their accessibility to audiences inside or outside the museum. Among the 22 respondent institutions, nine offer a database accessible on line with varying presentation particulars, while a tenth institution plans to launch its database in January 2010. The other institutions that manage collections provide access to collections and research on site or by written request.

2. E-LEARNING OR OUTREACHING

Content is largely communicated via E-learning tools available on respondents' institutional websites. They enable visitors to prepare for their visits while familiarizing themselves with the offer. These tools also enable classes to be prepared and, in some cases, provide training adapted to teacher's needs.

The school clientele represents about 16% of their visitation. Museums devote a lot of resources and effort to this portion of their visitation. Seventeen respondent institutions offer pedagogical resources on their websites. These resources vary considerably in scope, ranging from a few short fact sheets to very elaborate and numerous resources, even extending to more complex projects.

6.3 Toward social networking

The Web 2.0 or online social networking sites are platforms that allow users to interact with the content.

Museums are turning more and more to this type of interaction. Sites of this generation tend to focus more on visitors and content than on form. Museums are more and more turning to the social web to disseminate content. A quick look at the websites of some respondents reveals how far some of them have gone in this direction.

The Web 2.0 encompasses a set of applications such as RSS feed used to communicate news on the Internet through professional or semi-professional blogs. Facebook and Twitter also come to mind. Podcasting is a means of sending files (audio, video or other) on the Internet, relying on two types of players: distributors, who publish these files on the Internet, and users, who seek files (audio or video) on their own based on their interests.

Blogs are clearly more widespread; 17 respondent institutions have official Facebook pages and 11 have blogs on Twitter. We note that some institutions have also joined other social network websites such as MySpace, Delicious and Digg. The ROM offers enrolment in more than 50 blogs and the creation of WordPress-type personal pages. Colonial Williamsburg, with an educational goal of raising citizen awareness, has created its own online discussion forum, *icitizenforum.com*, bringing together “citizens” who talk about current affairs and civic issues.

This trend toward using an exchange relationship between museums and visitors is also taking shape in other types of initiatives aimed at feeding exhibition content or enhancing the visitor experience with the collections. A number of projects such as *Creative Spaces* on the Imperial War Museum website¹⁴ put collections and videos from nine United Kingdom national museums in a network. The National World War II Museum has also created resources for students and offers them as Web 2.0 activities. The online projects *WWII in My Backyard* and the podcast *This Date in WWII* help students understand the impact of the Second World War in their regions¹⁵. *The Exchange*¹⁶ section of the National Constitution Center website offers a series of exchanges and discussions on current constitutional issues. This is a forum in which high school students discover their power as citizens and the operation of democracy.

The case of the Tate Modern: an all-compassing offer

- In the course of this study, the team singled out this major art institution, which is also recognized for its innovations in the use and application of information technologies¹⁷. This is the most exemplary case in our corpus. The Tate General has a very dynamic media department, Tate Media, a division created in 2006 to reflect technological developments in the last few years. This department’s strategy is to create and issue content that is complementary to the exhibitions. It engages in audiovisual productions, offering original content that helps draw both previous and new visitors by providing an experience related to art and to the Tate. This strategy enables the Tate Modern to gain an audience that would not be reached otherwise. Tate Media has created a *BT Tate Player* section, the *BT Series*, *TateShots*, *i-Map Creative Access* and the *How We Are Now* projects¹⁸.

7. AUDIENCES

7.1 Evaluating audiences

Over all, most of the respondent institutions (18/22) conduct evaluations of their audiences as well as market studies. Museums know their audiences well and segment them into cohorts, for which they develop an offer adapted to each of the target groups. Interpretive activities both inside and outside the museums tend to confirm this observation, and museums are adding means and steps to get closer to their audiences through the choice of themes that interest them.

7.2 Activities and clienteles

We note that the overall offer, whether dynamic, experimental or inclusive, has a multiplying effect, in keeping with the intention of making museums a public place for everyone. To reach a broader range of visitors, institutions also offer activities with no direct links to their mission but that are likely to attract people – activities such as fashion shows, birthday parties, concerts, festivals, film competitions or dance shows.

The respondent institutions all offer an array of activities that, over all, reflect their dynamism and their concern with reaching as many client groups as possible. A quick survey of their websites showed the wealth and diversity of their offer. The following breakdown into clienteles groups presents only a few examples of the offer targeted to each clientele.

1. YOUTHS AND SCHOOL CLIENT GROUPS

Youths, including school groups (primary, high school, college levels), are the choice client group. It is the group that appears to be the best targeted among all the institutions and for which a variety of tools and activities are offered.

¹⁴ <http://iwm.nmolp.org/creativespaces/>.

¹⁵ <http://www.nationalww2museum.org/education/projects/podcasts-and-webpages.html>.

¹⁶ http://constitutioncenter.org/ncc_edu_National_Student_Programs.aspx.

¹⁷ A presentation at the congress of the Société des musées québécois helped make this institution’s activities in implementing information technologies better known.

¹⁸ See the full document for more detailed information.

School activities are found at all the institutions (22), many of which (17) have also developed educational kits. We note that some (9) are providing training for teachers, enabling them to prepare for a museum visit or to familiarize themselves with the content of the exhibitions. Although less common, because of the related costs, some museums (9) provide educational activities in the classroom, sending educators on site to more remote communities, while only two museums provide school classes at the museum itself.

A breakdown of the products provided shows that nearly all the respondent institutions offer activities for their school clients. They have developed diversified resources that help maximize the museum experience, learning, and skill development, in particular a highly varied range of educational kits, each more original than the next, that will be presented here only in very partial form.

Resources for teachers

Some museums provide specialized training for teachers to prepare them for school visits or for teaching specific themes. This applies, for instance, to the National Museum of the Marine Corps and the National World War II Museum, which offer workshops at the museum or by videoconference. Colonial Williamsburg offers other educational approaches such as workshops for teachers, technology camps and interactive teaching programs, as well as pre- and post-visit visitor studies that meet criteria of excellence (standards of learning) in the teaching of history. The National Constitution Center provides continuing education for teachers who wish to teach American history. An online learning program is also offered, in partnership with Arcadia University, for teacher training.

Outside activities

Many institutions offer activities outside museum walls, especially during the summer, an additional offering that helps draw youths or children to the museum. A number of summer camps are offered, notably the Buffalo Bill Historical Center (including the Buffalo Bill Museum) provides summer camps with educators for youths in the area, enabling them to go on hikes, observe butterflies, and undergo experiences from the time of western colonization.

2. FAMILIES

Families are the second group for which museums target a range of educational and cultural activities. Families go to museums mostly on weekends and holidays, and museums (12) develop activities specially designed for them at the museum. Among the activities listed are guided or personalized tours, creation or experimentation activities (with hands-on aspects) that involve the entire family. Some of the emerging offerings are:

- Intergenerational activities involving visitors from several generations talking and discovering together through sharing their experiences and real life, focusing on a particular theme (war, immigration, racism, social exclusion).
- Interactive performances with visitors taking part in the action, through exchanges of ideas and discussions.

3. ADULTS

Adults, by and large, form the natural client groups of museums, which offer them targeted activities such as talks and museum activities for special interest groups (SIGs), evening activities or cultural trips.

Other programs target precise groups such as the blind or veterans (Imperial War Museum) or provide learning programs for elderly people placed in institutions (Museum Victoria).

7.3 Original initiatives by the corpus to attract new visitors

Some museums are deploying new strategies to attract potential visitors who are not in the habit of going to the institution or who have never gone there. Analysis of the corpus reveals that certain respondents target, in particular:

- less educated audiences, from poorer neighbourhoods, who have not developed an interest in or a habit of going to cultural institutions;
- audiences that have communities of interests around a topic related to one or more of the museum institution's themes;
- young people for whom the institutions offer the chance to undergo a unique experience;
- members of ethnic communities who do not identify with the museum;
- aboriginal or ethnic communities. Collaborative efforts with these communities involve adapting the museum's role in developing exhibitions. The groups suggest themes and become involved in the research, design, scripting and production of exhibitions. This results in projects that come from the communities involved and that are likely to attract their peers.

Some respondents mention projects with a lasting effect that are developed over the medium or long term, ranging from a few months to three or four years, or even longer. They require a long overall process of familiarization with these new client groups.

8. CONCLUSION

A crossroads of learning and citizen expression

The analysis of the information provided by the museum institutions who participated in this study enabled us to find a certain number of inspiring leads that will nurture reflection about the museum's role and place in our society today.

8.1. The museum as a place for questioning

- The study reveals the desire to strengthen or update the institution's pertinence to their audiences or communities during the renewal process. For them, this is a way of continuing their growth and build attendance while watching for new trends and listening to their visitors' needs.

8.2. The museum as a social actor

- On the whole, interpretive products and educational programs offered by respondent institutions emphasize the place of the Museum in the society.
- As social actors, museums are necessarily reaching out to their existing and potential audiences, with ethnic communities and special interest groups among them.
- Although interpretive approaches vary from one institution to the next, as do museographic approaches, most institutions are moving toward raising citizens' awareness in society as well as remaining relevant to their audiences. This is another dimension of the social role some institutions have taken on. They aim for each individual "to go from a personal and individual awareness to a collective level"¹⁹ regarding major societal issues, whether political, social or environmental.

8.3. Visitors' desire for museums to be relevant and current

- One predominant change that has been observed is that museums are now being perceived as spaces for reflection and debate. A number of museum institutions raise current issues or matters of general interest that affect people in their day-to-day lives. Visitors are then encouraged to express their views and to debate these topics, transforming the museum into a public space and agora. In this way, institutions respond to the pressures of raising sensitive topics that concern their audiences and that emerge as factors of attraction for the museum.
- The themes that recur most often deal with immigration, exclusion and social issues, in short, issues of public interest that concern us all.

8.4. An offer adapted to each audience

Museums know their audiences well and segment them into cohorts, for which they develop an offer adapted to each of the target groups, who are youths, school groups, families, adults or potential visitors. A variety of tools, products and activities are offered and developed in order to reach out as many clienteles as possible. Moreover, a majority of institutions conduct evaluations of their audiences as well as market studies.

8.4. Integration of ethnic and Aboriginal communities' knowledge

- Some museums may go as far as developing collaborative projects. They provide Aboriginal communities and ethnic communities with programs that help them acquire skills and tools to express themselves in an exhibition's language.

¹⁹ Response sheet from the Montreal Science Centre.

- Many examples of initiatives are targeted to a variety of audiences that are already museum-goers. The interpretive products, educational programs and activities provided are clearly segmented for youths (youths, primary, high school and college school groups), families (adults and children) and adults of various age groups. In some cases, intergenerational programs promote the transfer of knowledge and experience, facilitate communication and exchanges between different generations.
- In the last few years, we have witnessed a transformation in the transmission and relationship of knowledge. Museums have not escaped this trend, and it can be seen that all the new institutions and renewed exhibition projects are bringing in technology in some form or other. Information technologies are now indispensable in the respondent institutions, although forms of integration or operation vary broadly.
- A number of respondent institutions have adopted the First Voices approach, which is especially effective in touching visitors by offering different perspectives.

8.5. Questioning and the will to see things differently

- Personal interpretive visits are well established in museums and allow more sensitive topics to be raised, playing on provocation or nurturing debate.
- Interactive interpretive approaches at some museums seek to arouse reflection through provocation or to interest visitors in the planet's plight and to find solutions through exchanges and teamwork.
- With the many experiences offered at a museum, visitors are no longer passive actors but citizens who are encouraged to look at themselves and at others, to question preconceived notions and to revise their perceptions. They become actors taking part in an experience, whether physical or virtual that empowers them as individuals.

8.6. Seeking new audiences and communities

- Long-term projects include projects that aim to build bridges and attract new audiences. They require time to get to know these new audiences and to understand their needs and their interests to develop projects that are likely to attract them and build their loyalty. The result is a form of recognition for these client groups, helping to strengthen the museum's social and cohesive role.

8.7. Going on the public stage

- On the whole, what is striking is the proliferation of the interpretive media offered by the respondent museum institutions and their presence in public space.
- Museums are no longer limited to their physical space. A museum is an experience that can take place inside and outside its walls; it is a living, dynamic space, focused on reflection, raising of awareness, personal fulfilment and, of course, entertainment.
- It aims to be a space for learning, for fun, for self-expression and self-affirmation, for contact with others and constructive involvement in major social issues

8.8. Proliferation of interpretive media

- The convergence of the full range of interpretive media, educational programs and activities are platforms for expression, exchanges and appropriation of institutional knowledge and form the ingredients of the visitor experience.
- Museum institutions stand out in their ability to offer access to unique resources (collections) or to very high value added (experts, artists). Some respondent institutions aim to offer better access to their resources while promoting appropriation of knowledge by visitors.
- Museums no longer position themselves as the sole possessors of knowledge, and they are working hard to integrate various communities' knowledge in the exhibition process, like choosing topics, developing exhibitions and interpretive products for targeted clients.

- Another remarkable phenomenon we are seeing is the concentration of interpretive media, educational programs and activities focussed on visitor participation, and greater museum accessibility are all geared to reach a maximum of audiences to meet expectations and also to cater to their needs.
- The large scale projects and those that focus on citizen involvement generally come from institutions that enjoy significant financial and human resources. They require patience and careful planning to effectively use resources committed to a long-term process.

8.10. Toward social networking

- The Web 2.0 or social Web on the Internet are platforms that allow users to interact with the content. Internet use by museums is turning increasingly to this type of interaction.
- The Internet and Web 2.0 space is suited to a dialogue between the museum and the visitor-Internet user. A number of institutions are more and more turning to different platforms available on the social web to disseminate content. This trend toward using an exchange relationship between museums and visitors is also taking shape. This exchange relationship reaches out audiences, especially youths and students, by exploring and making use of their communication platforms.

These inspiring opportunities for reflection are surely likely to nurture reflection by Parks Canada as it renews the museography and educational offer of national historic sites in Quebec. This study may, at least in part, respond to some of Parks Canada's concerns for offering stimulating and inviting experiences for visitors, whether inside or outside boundaries.

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