The Museum and the Web: Three Case Studies

The Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture

The Virtual Visit

I looked at the website for the Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture in early December 2004 and visited the museum later in the month. (To visit an archived copy that is the same except for the Smithsonian logo, go to http://web.archive.org/web/20040813030444/http://www.anacostia.si.edu/index.htm.) The Anacostia's website was the only one of the three that directly stated its purpose on the opening page, so I expected a virtual visit that would convey the mission as stated there: to explore "American history, society, and creative expression from an African American perspective." I also anticipated that both virtual and physical space would reflect the original desire (as noted earlier in the section on issues of interpretation) to build "a sort of storefront museum, a drop-in place without the fluted columns and grand staircases, an approachable place with hands-on exhibits." 1

Of the three museums, this is the one that perhaps could benefit most from a website that works as a deeply layered and accessible interface between the public and the physical space. Creating a user-friendly virtual space that served both to educate museum-goers and to attract them to the Anacostia's location off the Mall would satisfy the museum's mission to reach out to the community, as well as to reach beyond the geographical realities of their location, which must compete for visitors with the many DC museums more conveniently located. The website has the potential as well to attract African Americans searching for their roots, amateur historians, and genealogists to the physical space and to the larger task of collecting, displaying, and understanding African American artifacts. Drawing that population into the physical space would boost attendance and help make the Anacostia a vital part of a visit to our nation's capital. An effective website could do all this and stay within a tight budget.

Critical to this scenario, however, is a website that meets the for a well-designed and well-organized presentation. An assessment of the website as a vehicle for addressing and understanding both issues of interpretation and educational content cannot be disentangled from the technical issues of virtual presentation. Every website visitor needs a map to travel through the virtual terrain, and confusing or missing directions diminish the probability of making the trek without getting lost or giving up. In all of the websites, technical difficulties detracted from the experience. This was especially true for the Anacostia's website. The discussion of my experience with the website necessarily focuses on that rocky journey more than on the ideological issues of the virtual presentation because those issues were so hard to get to, given the technical problems I encountered. These difficulties, in essence, conflicted with the museum's desire to create an "approachable" place.

The home page had a clean, uncluttered layout that was graphically pleasing and reflected the straightforwardness I was expecting for a museum with a populist philosophy. Unfortunately, the navigation links were too far to the right on two different browsers and two different computers (one a Mac and one a PC). I had to scroll to the right to find them; they also printed off the page. (While it is not uncommon for navigation systems to print off the page, it is unworkable to have them out of sight all
together.) At the bottom of the home page was a notice in large blue type that announced a call for volunteers, internships, and artifacts. Given how critical the need is for artifacts in African American museums, I decided to visit that section first.

The "Call for Artifacts" page had the same layout as the front page (as, it turned out, did all of the main sections save one) but without the images. Reducing the download time by eliminating unnecessary graphics is a prudent step that reflects the museum's intent to include a range of economic levels in its constituency. Users linking to the Internet via modems rather than high speed (and higher cost) formats such as DSL are often unable to load graphics in a reasonable length of time. A photograph can take several minutes; a Flash movie can be interminable. The site contained no animation and no graphics that did not illustrate a specific exhibit or point. The only segment that used Flash (the "On-Line Academy") offered a version in HTML that worked perfectly and seemed to lose nothing by it. Some sections did contain audio files, and I had difficulty loading these; if the intent is to sidestep technology that requires high-speed and expensive Internet connections, as I had surmised, then printed alternatives should have been offered.

The "Call for Artifacts" section had a navigation bar at the top, so it was no longer off the viewing screen. It did not contain a link back to the home page (that I could find), however, or a back button, so I had to use the browser back button (as mentioned earlier, this is the current trend, although not without a thorough navigation bar). I learned from the section page what kinds of artifacts the museum was collecting and how to donate. A link to an article explaining why materials collections are so important to African American museums would have been educational and added depth to the site.

Clicking on the links in the list of items on the home page took me to sections that used the same menu, and I appreciated the visual consistency. These had no home or back button, however. Taking a cue from my experience with the website for the National Museum of the American Indian, I tried clicking the logo for the Anacostia and was rewarded with a link to the home page.

The "General Information" page included excellent directions (I used them to get to the museum without any trouble). Unfortunately, I lost the right edge of the text when I printed the directions and had to hand-write a few details. (In a check of the website on July 13, 2005, I saw that the webmaster had added a printable version of the directions, thereby solving the problem.)

When I looked at the website in December, the "Highlights" calendar did not extend beyond September's events. (This, the problem with the home page printing too wide, and numerous linking problems had been fixed when I revisited the site in January 2005.)

The "On-Line Academy" section is "part of the museum's recommitment to identify, study, preserve, and collect African American materials." I tried several times between mid-December and early January to get deeper in this section and had too many problems with links to continue. I finally succeeded and was rewarded for my perseverance with the most genuinely educational portion of the whole site. Its subsections included "Artifacts," "Scholars," "Collectors," "Preservers," and "Learn More." A link to "Acknowledgements" was included and provided credentials for the site.

The "Artifacts" section explained what "material culture" is. It also gave examples with extensive, informative details that contextualized and provided a story and background relevant to each piece. The artifacts ranged from one of Frederick Douglass's
visiting cards to an autobiographical manuscript. As is suitable for the museum's constituency, the website offered both a Flash and a non-Flash version. This section was so useful and so well done that I wish its contents and its merits had been made clear on the home page; it succeeded in conveying information in a manner that supported a populist ideology in both content and virtual presentation. (To view the page, visit http://anacostia.si.edu/Online_Academy/Academy/academy.htm; click on "Artifacts" at the top of the Anacostia website page.)

The "Scholars" section featured interviews of African American scholars. Two of these, Maisha Washington and Gail Sylvia Lowe, had several layers of text overlapping in the navigation section and were illegible. I also could not get the video clips to play. I clicked the RealAudio download to reload the program, hoping that I could get it to work. The link took me to a page with an array of products that I scrolled through to find the free download, but it took so long that I gave up. A link to a printed transcript of the interviews would have helped anyone whose computer had insufficient memory to run video files.

The subsection "Collectors" contained the material I had hoped to find when I linked to the "Call for Artifacts!!" on the home page. A link to this page would support the drive for artifacts. It includes interviews of individuals and families discussing their collections, the importance of African American history and of preserving that history. "Preservers" gave tips for preservation, with detailed explanations via video clips that I could not see. "Learn More" provided links to sources and further reading and collecting. All in all, it was a section useful to anyone interested in history and material culture, not just African Americans or those with related artifacts. After reading all the materials in the "On-Line Academy," I was so deep into the section that I would really have appreciated a navigation tool that would at least have taken me to the Academy's front page. In sixteen clicks I was there.

Choosing from the main menu again, I selected "Anacostia History." This section used a different layout, replacing the design elements with a group of links under the heading, "Research Your Community." (The section is meant as an educational activity in exploring a community and recording the investigation.) The main area of the page introduced the topic and explained that vocabulary words were in red type; the site did not have an accompanying glossary, nor did words link to a pop-up definition. The instructions indicate that viewers (students) should look them up. Each subsection was linked to a printable page with questions and sections for answers and photographs. The low-technology, low-cost approach of this section made it feasible for a school project, but it could have been far more interesting.

After looking through the various links, I was again stuck and had to back-click with the browser (later I found that a different Anacostia Museum logo was a link). Once back to a page with primary links, I explored "African American Resources," which included reading lists and archives, as well as links to websites at the Smithsonian Institution, which dramatically broadened the educational and research materials available to the viewer. These took me out of the Anacostia site, and I never came across the museum menu that I had found previously. Some of the Smithsonian's online exhibits, linked from the Anacostia site, were unavailable or illegible.

The online version for "All the Stories are True: African American Writers Speak" had numerous loading and navigational problems, but the content was as thoroughly
presented as in the show itself, which I subsequently saw. From the website, I gleaned that I would see this exhibit, one of paintings by William Smith, and an exhibit entitled, "Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats" that I was particularly excited to see.

The Physical Visit

While the museum is ideally located for a community museum and cultural center, it is not ideally located to represent one of the nation's primary historical museums, the Smithsonian Institution, or one of our predominant cultures. It would undoubtedly get far more visitors if located on the National Mall, although it might not preserve its function as a community museum if there. I also wonder how it will fare once the Smithsonian Institution builds a national African American museum on the Mall. (For more information about the community of Anacostia and related issues, visit http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/ANACOSTIA/title.html "Crossing the River: Anacostia.")

The building itself was attractive but unpretentious. Inside, it was comfortable but not fancy; nor was it spacious. Aesthetically it matched the website. My immediate sense was that I was in a public space rather than a "sacred space," which was in keeping with the museum's ideological intent. A middle-aged African American woman at the desk seemed surprised that I wanted to see the exhibits. She did not mention the hat exhibit, so I asked where it could be found. She explained that it was a travelling exhibit; not only had it not opened there the preceding day, as I had read on the website, but it would not show there at all.

My first impression as I walked into the exhibition area was that the museum must be drastically underfunded compared to the architecturally provocative U. S. Holocaust Memorial and Museum and to the architecturally stunning National Museum of the American Indian. While the museum may be styled to be an unintimidating, community space (in which it certainly succeeds), the exhibits themselves nevertheless seemed drastically--deliberately?--low budget.

Two stacks of books, armchairs, and a signed statement about the exhibit were the only elements in the first room. The curator's notes said, "With the highlighting of several writers, this exhibit hopes to encourage a new generation of authors to step forward and claim their own space."

Before I turned into the room housing that exhibit, I stepped into another area exhibiting paintings by Kadir Nelson (it may have been part of the same exhibit). I had not seen notice of this on the website, which missed a wonderful opportunity by not at least advertising it. The mixed media paintings were luminous and expressive; they had to be seen in person to witness the textures, scale, mix of materials, and emotional qualities. A collection of children's books by African American authors and illustrators was arranged by a chair for reading (the docent said to feel free to sit and read). One of these was Will Smith's Just the Two of Us, illustrated by Nelson; the original painting was on the wall. To look at the book, read the words, see the painting, and hear (in my head) Smith's song of the same name was a marvelous experience--again, one inaccessible through a computer screen. The website could have echoed the experience, however, by layering visuals, text, and audio (or, a song sheet in place of the audio; many viewers would automatically hear the song mentally, as I did).
The main exhibit for "All the Stories Are True" was located in a large room partitioned into sections, one for each author. The sections displayed a few artifacts in cases, one or more copies of the author's work, and supportive materials ranging from posters to poetry to a quilt. Videotapes of the authors, speaking about their work or reading from it, were available for each writer. The room was somewhat dark, windowless, and quiet except for a fan and whatever video I turned on. The docent found me to say she was leaving, and then—as mentioned earlier—I was alone except for one guard. I felt as if I were in a library rather than in a museum, but I appreciated the solitude after how difficult it had been to read the materials in the other two museums. In a crowd, I would not have been able to read Delores Kendrick's powerful poem, "Epoch," or Edwidge Danticat's insightful comments about writing, and have time to listen carefully to the authors' interviews. As it was, I took a couple of hours to "visit" the authors. The exhibit was not elaborate, but it conveyed that the voices were valid ones, worth listening to. The whole approach fit the museum's ideology.

The exhibit of paintings by William Smith was located in a hall, and a "Gallery for African American Artists" housed a sculpture by Floyd Roberts made of found objects. The sculpture invited close scrutiny because it was made of a crazy mix of materials (clay, buttons, nails, etc.). Since it was situated in an alcove, however, the sculpture was only viewable from one side and missed out on one advantage of seeing it in real space.

I saw nothing about the museum's artifact collection, its community involvement, educational materials, or the traveling hat exhibit ("Crowns"); these may have been mentioned in handouts I did not receive. Overall, the website fulfilled its position as an educational resource and liaison between museum and community at least as well, and perhaps better, than the museum itself did. In this sense, the physical and virtual spaces were conceptually the most closely meshed of the three museums.

The Follow-up Web Visit

When I returned home, I checked the website immediately. The exhibit information for "Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats" made no mention whatsoever of its showing anywhere but at the Anacostia. When I rechecked the website in January, there was no mention of the exhibit at all, traveling or otherwise. The site does not have a search feature, so I could not determine whether it was located elsewhere in the hierarchy.

In general, I did not learn more by revisiting the website until a return "trip" in mid-January, when I was able to gain access to the "Collections" section, as mentioned previously. However, I greatly appreciated being able to reread so much of the material for the "All the Stories Are True" exhibit, as I could only absorb but so much at the time. Doing so helped me retain more of what I had learned initially.

Both the virtual and the physical museum experiences reflect the museum's philosophy to involve the community in a populist approach to learning about African American culture in the past as well as the present. Neither space is overwhelming or intimidating; they are "regular" spaces clearly open to all. Problems with navigation, accuracy, and typos on the website were of more concern than philosophical issues, because they could deter all but the most determined of visitors.

The differences between visiting the real-time and virtual museums were negligible, and this, too, seems in keeping with the museum's mission. The paintings were best seen
in person to enjoy their full presence. In addition, seeing the words of multiple African American authors one right after another did affirm their place in American literature and culture, perhaps in a way that reading about each author one at a time might not have. An exhibit that focused more on material objects and history would undoubtedly demonstrate a greater advantage to the physical visit.

Recommendations

The museum received an average of 2,013 physical visitors a month and 13,128 virtual visitors a month in 2004.\(^2\) The location, away from the Mall and in a lower income neighborhood, obviously influences the number of physical visitors the museum gets, especially compared to the museums on the Mall. Because of this, it seems all the more important to use the website to its fullest, as well as to correct the technical and editing problems. Focusing on the artifact-collecting element of the museum would provide a natural path for developing a more complex, more innovative, and further-reaching website that does not compromise— but rather acts upon—the museum's goals.

First of all, given the shortage of artifacts for African American communities, digitizing collections and putting them online would provide scholars and interested persons with a magnificent resource. This service alone would draw more people to the website and open up numerous options for education both within and beyond the local community. Developing an interactive website, personalized so that viewers could "collect" objects from the artifact archives and create their own exhibits, would help publicize the importance of collecting artifacts, empower viewers as curators, and give students the chance to write their own exhibits. The latter could be accessible online and could prove more exciting than the educational offerings available when I was looking at the website. Putting student exhibits online would also motivate students educationally. Secondly, these innovations might even stimulate a national collection drive, spearheaded by the Anacostia—something that the community could then point to as an outgrowth of their efforts and as a source of pride.

Making the organization and content that is available on the site clearer from the onset would encourage viewers to explore the site thoroughly. A search feature that worked not only to look through primary sections but also the secondary ones would be helpful. A comprehensive site map, available from all locations within the site, would also be useful.

An ongoing, online exhibit of community artifacts, memories, photographs, and taped oral histories could be arranged around a historical and cultural timeline to teach and learn from. The educational section of the website could be more creative, incorporating online puzzles and mysteries into the neighborhood histories, for example. Currently the section is rather staid. The reasons for collecting family and community history are lost in language that reads like a textbook; history, especially history told to our youth, needs to be conveyed with the power of the storyteller.

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1 Kernan, Michael. "Around the Mall and Beyond." (Student Packet, assembled by Phyllis Leffler, University of Virginia) p. 315.
2 Gualtieri, Anthony. Webmaster, Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture. E-mail to Marcy McDonald, January 6, 2005.