The Museum and the Web: Three Case Studies

Conclusion

While all three museums have websites that are more or less effective, none integrates concept, content, and design in such a way that the experiences of visiting the museum virtually conflates with visiting it physically.

In addition, usability was an issue at some level for all three websites, and related problems often interfered with the virtual experience–considerably at times. One faulty link may be all it takes to impel the viewer to shut off the computer. The museums are not using much in the way of current trends in websites, but a public history museum website does not have to be fancy. It needs to be accurate, well supported, easy to navigate, and genuinely informative, and it needs to work without glitches. Overall, using advanced technology is less important than conveying meaning and conveying it quickly, succinctly, and vividly.

Except for those museums that have established systems for recording information during a physical visit for use later on a home computer, few public history museums are considering the relationship between a physical visit and a post-museum Web visit. As for a pre-museum web visit, the focus is on communicating what is being exhibited, as well as details about hours, directions, and the like. So much could be done simply by deliberating on how to construct an interface between the two spaces and the three visits (before, virtually; during, physically; after, virtually). A section of questions to ask during the exhibit, things to look for, other sources, chat rooms, personalized "collections," personalized history pages--these are but a few ideas. The possibilities are as endless as the Web itself; the issue needs only thoughtful attention.

In the sections for each museum, I have made additional suggestions for implementing an interface approach to their websites. I would also recommend that both public history and art museums create sections on their websites that teach how to look at art and artifacts. These sections would, ideally, discuss and demonstrate what to look for in terms of composition, scale, texture, content, and context. The very idea of context--the who, what, where, why, and what else was going on that is relevant--would be addressed generally as well as specifically for that museum and its exhibits. I am convinced that such an approach would lead to better-informed and more alert museum visitors. This in turn would likely increase physical visits to museums. An informed public is a more curious public. Further, websites that offer meaningful interactive activities, such as developing one's own collection of artifacts online, will generate a better understanding of the role a public history museum plays in preserving history. Indeed, genuine comprehension of why history is important, of why we must remember the past, is a concept that a tightly interfaced website is in a unique position to convey.

In doing so, public history websites would inevitably detour into the territory that Sue Ann Cody, cited at the beginning of this paper, called the "controversial" and "disturbing" aspects of history. But if museums are to teach history, they must also face history, in both its glory and its shame. The public history website can serve as a go-between between these two grounds, as well as between sacred and democratic sensibilities, and between populist and authoritative ideologies.
Earlier I mentioned an article by Barbara Fahs Charles, in which she raised some questions about designing exhibitions. Some of these could be applied to assessing the museum and its website as a unit, as well as to stimulate ideas about how to marry the two. I have paraphrased them for this application:

- Do the physical space and virtual space work as a whole?
- Do they encourage further study in each other's space?
- Are labels and descriptions not only informative, but also interesting?
- Are graphics and artifacts doing work, or operating as eye candy?
- Do the virtual and physical environments add something to each other; do they work together to enhance understanding of the subject matter?
- Is the design reflective of ideological intent?
- Do they have a unity in intellectual conception, mission, and design?
- Is the sum greater than the parts?

When these can be answered in the affirmative, the museum's "house" will be as large as it needs to be.