The Museum and the Web: Three Case Studies

Introduction

I propose that the museum website, rather than being a mere outbuilding, is potentially a doorway that leads to many rooms in the same house. In fact, it is a doorway that can open to more rooms than the house itself can hold. Viewed this way, the opportunities for contextualizing and enriching the museum experience are staggering. Yet even museums with large budgets sometimes fail to treat the Web viewer as an actual visitor, or to integrate the experiences of visiting virtually and visiting physically into an overall, deliberately considered, museum experience.

Given the explosion of the Internet as a source for information about everything (figures vary from 185.5 million to 199.9 million users in America alone), no museum can afford to avoid a Web presence, to create a website that is doing less than it could, or to create one that performs badly. The World Wide Web is "where" people "go" to learn what a museum exhibits, what its mission and philosophy are, and—increasingly—information about the history and culture represented by those exhibits. Further, studies have shown that a Web presence augments rather than decreases museum attendance. A 2003 study by Ross J. Loomis and Steven M. Elias\(^1\), Colorado State University, found that seventy percent of their participants indicated that using a museum website would increase the likelihood of a visit.

The intersection of a course on the history of museums and interpretation with one on web design led me to ask a number of questions about how public history museums use their websites. Among these were the following:

- What, if anything, is revealed via the website regarding current issues of interpretation of public history and culture?
- Do websites offer just the facts or are they interpreting the facts, and is the distinction clear?
- Who is the authority behind the website? Is a curatorial voice evident?
- Is the approach consistent for both the virtual and the physical space?
- What does a physical visit achieve that a virtual visit cannot or does not?
- What does a virtual visit achieve that a physical visit cannot or does not?
- Does a post-museum visit to the website add anything to the experience?
- How can and do both visits work together for a more satisfying, educational, and memorable museum experience? In sum, what is the interface between the museum and its website?

My goal in researching the answers to these questions was to understand the relationship between public history museums and their websites—both what it is and what it could be. A second goal that developed as I worked was to integrate previous studies and my own research into a comprehensive set of criteria for both developing and assessing public history museum websites so that they function as an active and deliberate interface between virtual and physical spaces.

In looking at the relationship between museums and their websites, a parallel can be drawn to Richard Kurin's ideas about the relationship between museums and the public, as expressed in *Reflections of a Culture Broker*. "If there is any type of mediation in representing culture, any agency involved on behalf of the representer, the represented,
and the audience to whom they are represented, brokerage is involved.² He elaborates further:

Brokers, if adept, also transform values from one domain to another. [. . .] Culture brokers empirically and interpretatively study the culture to be represented, arrive at models of understanding, develop a particular form of representation from a repertoire of genres, and bring audiences and culture bearers together so that cultural meanings can be translated and even negotiated. If the process is effectively executed, the culture broker can facilitate participatory cultural transformation and change–both between and within culture groups.³

Bearing Kurin's comments in mind, another way to ask my question is: "Are public history museums truly using websites to mediate culture?" I would suggest that a website is more than a marketing device or an online encyclopedia: it is a culture broker. The website that translates and negotiates the museum's values is one that acts as an instrument of the museum's mission. Few museums undertake this consciously, however. The public history museum website is underutilized, then, when it is treated primarily as an incidental tool for raising attendance or even for education that is relevant but not integrated into an overall experience. To reiterate: Museums should treat a visit to the website not as a separate encounter, but as part of the encounter of visiting a museum.

In a discussion about Roland Barthes and Camera Lucida, David L. Eng makes comments about photography that can readily be applied to the concept of the Web. The Web has the potential to be, like photography, "a medium in which the distance between the referent and its signifier is collapsed [. . .], in which the boundary separating representation and 'reality' blurs."⁴ The Web, again like a photograph, arrests an object in time, collapsing a "three-dimensional object into a two-dimensional plane"⁵ that suggests spatial convergence of object and image but which in fact does not–cannot–converge them. The "space between image and object can never be entirely eliminated" (ibid.). The camera lens–and, in effect, the Web designer's "lens"–shapes the information by choosing a particular point of view, a point of view that (ideally) the museum integrates into its mission. This "ideal geometral point from which we perceive reality is not merely a physical but an ideological positioning" notes Eng, and then he raises a question that directly relates to this issue of how museums use their websites. "How does the imperative to see the world from a particular temporal, spatial, and ideological location–to accept its reality from a particular social point of view–intersect with the domain of history?"⁶

In the arena of public history, resolving what "truth" or "reality" is or how it should be presented is tied to a complex series of issues that have been vexing curators since the 1960s. These issues are so contentious that at times they have complicated matters of presentation within the physical space almost to the point of paralysis (as with the Smithsonian Institution's Enola Gay exhibit, for instance). When exhibits move into a virtual space that many people do not understand, presentation and ideology operate under additional constraints. This website cannot address all of these issues, but it takes a necessary look at how some of them govern what museums are able to put on the Web. Because of the Web's capacity for contextualization and multiple viewpoints, an argument might be made that museum websites can portray "truth" and "reality" better than the physical space can. It might also be argued that the virtual space is ultimately the
more democratic one, as it can present a full range of perspectives within the same "house."

An essential element of this argument is that the Web attracts a wider audience with a greater diversity of economic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds than is typically associated with museums, and "surfing" the Web can land all kinds of people in a museum site. If it is interesting enough, they will stay there. With features including text, graphics, animation, audio, video, and/or three-dimensional imaging, a website can be incredibly entertaining, and in the process replicate nearly every aspect of the physical museum visit except for the physicality itself. According to Jacob Nielsen, however, only ten percent of users scroll beyond the first screen. The top four or five inches (the area known as "above the fold") are the most critical in the design. Whether viewers just "hit" the site or "visit" it (remaining more than ten seconds) depends in part on their intent but also in part on that seven-second impression of the top third of the page. If it's powerful, someone might walk through the virtual door and discover a marvelous world hitherto undreamed of.

---

3 Ibid., p. 21-22.
5 Ibid., p. 40.
6 Ibid., p. 42.