The Museum and The Web

Comparing the Virtual and the Physical Visits

Examining the differences, advantages, and disadvantages of both the virtual and the physical museum can help understand how the two can be approached as parts of a single whole. I have not yet found a convincing argument for replacing a physical museum visit with a virtual one, although solely virtual museums are more and more prevalent and offer intriguing possibilities for curating exhibits which could not in reality be constructed. Cody cites both Helen Rozwadowski and Bernard S. Finn when she points out that the Web is unable to convey "scale, texture, a sense of place, and other three-dimensional qualities." [..] 'Be it small or large, seeing the real thing is unambiguous. There is often an emotional reaction that accompanies the perception of true size.' This perspective is undoubtedly lost in a Web presentation.¹

Three-dimensionality and scale are unarguably two of the most distinguishing, and irreproducible, elements of the physical exhibit. To see how small early 17th century vessels are in actuality, for instance, is to gain appreciation for the suffering a trans-Atlantic voyage caused. The texture of an object and such details as the surface, wear, or craftsmanship are lost in relationship to the whole when seen on a screen. On the other hand, display limitations might prevent close inspection of an artifact. To counter this, some museums (the National Museum of the American Indian, for instance) have point-of-display computer screens that make it possible to see a magnified view of a selected object.

The virtual visit is considered to be a solitary activity, one that might allow for enhanced concentration. By contrast, the physical visit is considered a communal activity, one you might be sharing, for example, with several busloads of elementary school children. (This proved not to be the case, however, during my visit to the Anacostia, when I was the lone person in the museum except for the guard.) Nevertheless, being part of a group viewing an exhibit (even a group of strangers) can alter the experience. While this might be a negative factor, in the museum space a dialogue is at least possible. A chat room, as Cody notes, affords some opportunity for conversation among virtual museum visitors, but it is an essentially faceless interaction.²

Cody's article also raised the issue of disconnectedness that occurs when viewers jump from page to page (or section to section) at whim rather than according to a progressive, linear plan that provides a clearer understanding of the overall content. Further, she questions the tendency for the Web to reduce attention span in the same way that television does:

[A]s one becomes used to the constant action Disney and the Web provide, the attention span for real, slower activity becomes shorter. The Web experience is not as memorable as an actual museum visit, but if seen as reality, it could further devalue the direct experience. When one compares personal memories of museum visits to memories of Web sites browsed, it becomes clear that real museum visits make a deeper impression than virtual experiences.³

As Cody implies, the ability of a website to convey "wonder and resonance" is limited. It is not impossible, however; in the same way that a book can move a reader, theoretically so could a website—although I have yet to experience this, and certainly I did
not in any of the public history museum websites I visited. On the other hand, any time an intellectual connection is realized, isn't it accompanied by a sense of wonder and even joy? That kind of discovery is certainly possible in a deeply layered, well-constructed site. Advances in Web design and techniques have brought the possibility of creating truly memorable websites closer to hand.

The museum website does have some advantages over the physical space. One of the most important is that access to archives and artifacts is tremendously expanded. For materials that are too delicate to exhibit, the Web might provide the only means for showing and viewing them. While photography exhibits suffer because the photographs cannot be seen in context of one another or (in some cases) in full size, those that are fading, decrepit, or small can be seen better on a website, whereas they might not be seen at all if not digitized. In addition, by reducing the amount of physical handling that some materials receive, they may be preserved longer.

The Web enables curators to provide a hierarchy of descriptions for the artifacts, targeting materials to different age groups and educational or interest levels. In the physical space, descriptions and explanations are often restricted to brief captions or labels due to insufficient room, because they might distract from the objects, because crowds may make it impossible to read more than a line or two (if that), or because lack of interest on the part of the average viewer prevents it from being worth the effort. On the Web, links can connect to source documents, in-depth articles, longer scholarly interpretations, related materials, and relevant collections in other institutions.\(^4\)

A Web visit eliminates crowds, difficulties of and expenses for travelling and parking, and sensory overload. A visitor who has journeyed a long distance to see an exhibit is likely to stay until exhausted, while the virtual museum-goer can "travel" to any museum in the world while eating dinner at home. Virtual visits provide access to collections that might otherwise be inaccessible, especially to an amateur researcher, and thus the virtual museum might be considered more democratic. In a paper presented at the 2004 "Museums and the Web" conference, Mike McConnell argued that "in the virtual world, users remain in control and are not limited or intimidated by traditional or 'expert' barriers such as cataloguing systems or curatorial taxonomies."\(^5\)

In the same paper, McConnell noted that properly researched, resourced, and designed websites expand the possibilities for creating meaningful relationships by placing materials in new contexts. In addition, creative websites may attract audiences that "would not normally use libraries or museums." Since restrictions of space, fragility, cataloguing, and so forth are removed, virtual visitors can see what they want to see—or thought they wanted to see—creating their own "exhibits" as they go. Some museums offer Web visitors the means to create their own "collections" online with digitized materials. A variation of this weds the physical and virtual visits by enabling visitors to the physical museum to use museum computers; on these they record items for a personalized collection they can later develop on their home computers. Either way, the process deeply enriches the museum experience, challenges the intellect, and offers more possibilities for gaining a sense of wonder from the virtual space. One potential problem, of course, is that an uninformed virtual visitor may need more guidance than is available on some websites to create a meaningful online exhibit.

The ability to link to information in many subject areas and in multiple forms so as to broaden and deepen understanding of the subject matter is one of the chief advantages of
the Web. Glossaries, timelines, narratives, music, literature, maps, oral histories, related cultural and historical facts, and multiple perspectives are just some of the possibilities available in the virtual space and limited in the physical space. Sidestepping the authoritative voice and encouraging diversity of interpretation are perhaps easier on the Web as well. Links can also lead readers to alternative topics of interest.

Accessibility issues for handicapped visitors can be managed as well or possibly better on a carefully constructed website. Voice-directed search programs, for instance, can open the museum's entire website to someone unable to visit physically. A website, unlike a museum, can also be constructed entirely without images, using descriptions instead for every artifact or picture.

The ability to extend the life of exhibitions indefinitely, to arrange materials in different contexts so as to present multiple perspectives, to create exhibits that would otherwise be impossible to mount, or to recreate past exhibits—all at a minimal cost compared to that required for mounting or maintaining the same exhibits physically—makes the Web an invaluable resource with tremendous advantages over the physical setting.

Visiting the website before a physical visit optimally pre-educates the viewer so that the museum brings an intelligent, informed audience into the physical space and thereby deepens the "conversation" that can take place during the visit. (Do most viewers even understand, for instance, what to look for in an artifact or painting?) The cost of printing and distributing sufficient materials to convey the same amount of information as on the website is prohibitive. In addition, such materials are generally distributed to members, previous museum-goers (if known), and to those on purchased mailing lists, which have an extremely low return rate.

In sum, a curated exhibition on the Web can have all the impact of a curated exhibition in a physical space except for those elements which are specifically related to physicality: scale, texture, surface, three-dimensionality, and physical context. But those elements can make all the difference in memorability.

2 Ibid., p. 40.
3 Ibid., p. 50.
4 Ibid., p. 23.