

FOLLOWING VISITORS' COMMENTS IN DESIGNING A MUSEUM REFURBISHMENT: IDENTITY AND AUTHENTICITY

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Abstract

Planning the renewal of a Museum must take in consideration many aspects. Among them the most important ones, as our experience taught us, are visitors' expectations and respect of the authenticity of the Museum's cultural offer. In facts, the experience we faced rethinking the outfit of the Museo Civico di Sansepolcro (home town of Piero della Francesca and building in which originally the "Resurrection" was painted by the Maestro) gave us an unexpected learning. The choice of updating the apparatus of communication with explanatory, interactive and multimedia tools had to recede to the acknowledgment that visitors had no complaint about the lack of information or modern devices but instead, the bareness of the Museum and the outdated outfit of its display can allow visitors to get in direct relation with the artistic essence of Piero's masterpieces. In this case, the Museum's identity is a whole with the authenticity of its cultural offer: the exhibition of the history of art in the very space in which it was created and collected during the centuries could have the power to erase all the other possible "noises" in the background enhancing the experience visitors live in the direct and unmediated exposure to art. The analysis of theories normally applied to other fields of science (Heuristic, Consumer Culture Theory and Theory of Entertainment) can help defining the correct strategy in planning the best environment in which allow visitors to experience their visit to the Museum.

In 2006, the Museo Civico of Sansepolcro (Arezzo, Italy) commissioned a feasibility study for the renewal of its display. The city is the birthplace of one of the *Maestri* of the Western history of Art: Piero della Francesca and the building itself, at Piero's times, was the public palace of the governors where Piero was appointed to paint the fresco of the *Resurrection* that was referred to by A. Huxely as "*the most beautiful picture in the world*"¹. The most part of the Museum's art collection belongs to the governors' will of enriching the City Hall during the centuries; therefore, these paintings have been exhibited in the building since the beginning of their acquisition. Among them, can be seen artworks by the Bassanos, Raffaellino del Colle and Leonardo Cungi, in addition to a dramatic *San Sebastian* by Pontormo. Many other paintings and frescos, instead, had entered the exposition after the suppression of the religious orders under Great Duke Leopold² in the late 1700s and Napoleon³ in early 1800s when it was decided the paintings, alienated from their original locations, would have been hosted in the building in order to reduce the danger of deterioration. This is the reason why in 1901⁴ the *Madonna della Misericordia* polyptych, commissioned to Piero della Francesca in 1445 by the local *Confraternita della Misericordia* (Fraternity of Mercy) for their chapel and finished only 15 years later, became part of the town owned collection. In the

¹ Aldous Huxley in Attilio Brilli, *Borgo San Sepolcro. Viaggio nella città di Piero*, Città di Castello, 1988, pp. 110-111

² Zeffiro Ciuffoletti, *La soppressione degli enti ecclesiastici in Toscana, secoli 18.-19. : nodi politici e aspetti storiografici*, Florence, 2008; Anna Benvenuti, Riccardo Nencini, *La soppressione degli enti ecclesiastici in Toscana, secoli 18.-19. : censimento dei conventi e dei monasteri soppressi in età leopoldina*, Florence, 2008

³ Orianna Baracchi, *Il patrimonio artistico ecclesiastico: inventari delle soppressioni napoleoniche*, Modena 1991

⁴ Enrico Verrazzani, *Il Museo Civico di Sansepolcro nel costume cittadino: da piccola raccolta d'arte all'inaugurazione come istituzione comunale*, Firenze 2009, p.66

1920s, the Museum was formally established as an art gallery.⁵ Since then it has undergone a series of restorations and embellishments until the late 1980s when an entrance and reception hall were designed in some sort of shopping-centre style, destroying the original little cloister and modifying the plant of the whole building.

When we started working on it, it was clear that nothing structural could be made at the moment due to economical reasons, but the director and the Board of the Institution of the Museum decided to work on the display of the artworks and their exhibit, enhancing the communication within the Museum and reorganizing the museological plan and visitors' flow.

We started out our meetings imagining a very interactive model of Museum, with a large usage of multimedia devices and technological tools meant to provide a comprehensive organic understanding of the masterpieces of Piero della Francesca on the one hand, and the virtual relocation in their context of the artworks coming from the suppressed churches of the area, on the other.

The underpinning idea was to strongly assert the Museum's identity with its territory, first of all as the Museum of Piero and then as the Museum of the history and art of the surrounding area, empowering visitors – both residents and tourists – with an interactive and imbibing process of visit, providing them with the most innovative tools (touch screens, holograms and computers). The fact that Piero's artworks are scattered around Italy and around the world, either due to his appointments to the most important Italian courts of his times and to the history of collectionism, convinced us that we had to draw together in a virtual way all of his works in order to offer visitors an overall view of it, providing the chance of comparing images, getting into them and accessing multilevel information. To our point of view, it represented the best way to allow visitors to create their own experience of visit, supporting them with different tools and with the most appropriated reference materials which might comply to their will to deepen their knowledge on the subjects. At the same time, we thought it could have provided the easiest way to lighten their staying in the Museum, diverting their attention from a constantly high peaked concentration (given the amount of important artworks they had to confront with) to self-learning moments of creative rest. We also considered it, in facts, as a sort of hands-on experiment since we were planning to give visitors the possibility to touch and follow in a very interactive way the development of history of art related to the area they were visiting.

We tried to organise the sequence of the rooms of the building in our theoretical narration path, removing anything not connected to the spirit of the Museum and its mission (i.e. the little archaeological collection or the diocesan collection deposited since the 1970s in the semi-basement of the Museum). The plan was redesigned basing on the rationalization of the visitors' flow. Currently, the Museum presents a circular path of visit on each of the three-storey levels compelling visitors to enter rooms they already visited in order to reach the higher and the lower storeys. Entrance and exit coincide through the same reception room where also the shop is placed, just in front of the entrance door, opposite to the ticket desk which is not immediately to be seen. This is reason of some congestion in different times of the year when large groups arrive and linger in the reception hall. Reaching the flight of stairs or the elevators is also a confusing practice since it entails mixing two different functional actions as passing in an already visited room diminishes the value of the room itself to a hallway. Therefore we wished to avoid the sense of uncertainty and annoyance which can occur from meandric and poorly (or over-) signalled paths and from the lack (or redundancy) of well balanced information, limiting to the minimum the "noise" that

⁵ Enrico Verrazzani, *Il Museo Civico di Sansepolcro nel costume cittadino: da piccola raccolta d'arte all'inaugurazione come istituzione comunale*, Firenze 2009, p.83

might arise during the visiting process. In fact the action of smoothing the process of visit within the Museum area might increase visitors' attitude to live cultural experiences in a fuller and more involving way as it in behavioural studies and heuristic science applied to space.⁶

Our overall aim was to offer visitors an unusual experience which could change in depth their approach to Museum visit, overcoming the extraordinary and unforgettable feeling due to the aesthetic and cultural exposition⁷ to Piero's masterpieces that might be induced in the most part of visitors, with the construction of a *flow experience*⁸ so much more complex and imbibing. In fact, a well balanced structure of levelled information - both on a cognitive and on a spatial level - in an exhibiting frame set can accompany visitors to achieve the understanding of what they are observing and can give them the chance of building up their own visit path, every time in a different way following their interests, their knowledge, their curiosity or their mind-set of that very moment within the logic frame provided by the binding direction of the general path, starting out an informal and continuous process of self-learning⁹.

We had to face some unexpected surprises, though that brought the project to be restricted to a rationalization of the spaces and an improvement of the technical systems like air conditioning and lighting. In fact, while we started on weaving a story about the city focusing on Piero's artistic life-time and its meaning for the area and broadening it to space and time, we also began to study the insights visitors had left in five years of filling the presence books. At that time, the Museum did not have a proper system for testing the visitors' satisfaction, although – even after the adoption in 2007 of the form issued by Regione Toscana – the most relevant comments still can be found in the presence books, filled in by the visitors also nowadays.

The outcomes of our study of this ancient but efficient and user-friendly system of creating a communication thread with the public, thus, made us review our intentions of modernize the Museum and its communication equipment. The bare simplicity of the rooms and their minimal informational apparatus was not perceived as a minus in the visitors' expectations of the Museum, since the main reason of their visit was the direct and not mediated contemplation of the Piero's *Resurrection* - even more than the Polyptich -, a masterpiece they are aware they cannot see anywhere else but in the very place where it was painted. Lighting and climatic control were reported as items which had to be improved, as we already scheduled, but no claims for more technological or interactive equipments were raised in the visitors' comments.

In agreement with the Director and with the Board of the Institution, and resenting also of the incoming economical crisis that in that internal part of Central Italy had already started to show its grip, it was decided to reduce the museological and museographical interventions and to leave the display as it was, concentrating on the structural improvements (light and climatic control) and on the rationalisation of the image and of the external communication of the museum (new logo; outside banners to highlight the presence of the museum and street signs to it within the town; new website; some branded merchandising...) and new activities in order to enhance the fruition on the

⁶ Daniel Kahneman, Amos Tversky and Paul Slovic, eds. *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics & Biases*. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1982; Koyanagi Fumiko, Kon Tadashi, Higashiyama Arata, *The Recommended Path Indication System in Hakone Open-Air Art Museum with Time Designation*, Journal of the Faculty of Science and Technology Seikei University, 2006, vol. 43;no. 2;pp.1-8; Rika Burnham, Elliott Kai-Kee, *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation As Experience*, Los Angeles, Getty Publications, 2011, pp. 97-98; Torsten Reimer, Konstantinos Katsikopoulos, *The use of recognition in group decision-making*, Cognitive Science, 2004, n. 28, pp. 1009–1029

⁷ As following the definition of *peak experience* in Abram Maslow, *Religion, values and peak experiences*, New York, Viking, 1964; Gayle Privette, *Peak experience, peak performance, and flow: A comparative analysis of positive human experiences*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1983, Vol. 45, pp. 1361-1368;

⁸ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*, New York, Harper and Row, 1990

⁹ David A. Kolb, *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1984

internal and domestic side (guided tours in Italian and foreign languages to be booked; theatrical representations involving local acting companies also in local dialect on the history of Piero della Francesca; a scheduling plan of exhibitions on the “minor” collections and on modern and contemporary art...). All of these in order to match with the series of values we were able to list in our report from the analysis of the visitors’ book, such as: emotion, glory, immersion, excellence, discovery, harmony, happiness, enthusiasm, care, sublime, fulfilment ...

In facts, the authenticity¹⁰ of the Museum’s cultural offer in its uniqueness, and its complete consistency with the visitors’ expectation and the unlikeness of its almost out-of-the-time setting vanishes any other request for modernisation. In this sense, following the *less-is-more effect*¹¹ rule that “*less information can lead to more accuracy*”¹² does not struggle with the PAD theory or with the theory of entertainment.¹³

The ostensive appearance of the fresco on the original Museum wall (except research denies it)¹⁴ can be compared to the appearance of an “essence” – Christ for the Christians or “the Art” for all the others. The strength of authenticity, in this case both iconic and indexical¹⁵, forges a unique experience that overcomes any possible superstructure and carries the observer in a sort of time-warp where the Museum environment fades away and turns again into the palace of the governors at Piero’s times. Nothing else is required: no other informational support or technological equipment that will be perceived as “noise” – even labels could avert concentration and diminish the experience. In this case, in facts, the concept of authenticity in itself and the *less is more effect* converge in the fulfilment of the genuine visitor’s desire to achieve the search of authentic cultural experience, as defined by Spooner.¹⁶ The same concept is well expressed by a paraphrase of George-Henry Rivière’s statement¹⁷ in which he said that the success of a Museum doesn’t depend on the number of visitors but on the number of visitors to whom it teaches something, phrase that can be turned into the concept that the success of a Museum depends on the level of authenticity perceived and experienced by the visitors throughout the visiting process.

Authenticity, then, is composed by a mix of functions that, at the end, will represent the success of the cultural offer and the satisfaction of its perusers. The functions or fundamental elements that we recognized in the composing mix of authenticity are the

10 See a deeper introduction to the concept of authenticity in Museums in M. C. Vannini, *La ricerca di autenticità nel processo di visita museale*, in *TafterJournal*, 2012, n. 4

11 D. G. Goldstein, G. Gigerenzer, *Models of ecological rationality: The recognition heuristic. Psychological Review*, 2002, vol. 109, pp. 75–90.; Torsten Reimer, Konstantinos Katsikopoulos, *The use of recognition in group decision-making*, *Cognitive Science*, 2004, n. 28, pp. 1009–1029

12 Konstantinos V. Katsikopoulos, *The less-is-more effect: Predictions and tests*, *Judgment and Decision Making*, vol. 5, 2010, pp. 244-257

13 A. Mehrabian, *Pleasure-arousal-dominance: A general framework for describing and measuring individual differences in temperament*, in *Current Psychology: Developmental, Learning, Personality, Social*, 1996, vol. 14, pp. 261-292; M. Csikszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York, 1990; M. Csikszentmihályi, R.E. Robinson, *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter*. J. Paul Getty Museum Publications, LA, 1990; Stephen W. Gilroy, Marc Cavazza, Maurice Benayoun, *Using affective trajectories to describe states of flow in interactive art*, *Proceedings of the International Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology*, New York 2009; Robert Plutchik, *Emotion: Theory, research, and experience: Vol. 1. Theories of emotion*, New York 1980; R. Plutchik, *Emotions and Life: Perspectives from Psychology, Biology, and Evolution*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2002

14 In 2007 Opificio delle Pietre Dure – Firenze and the Soprintendenza SBAAS Arezzo started a research project for testing with the most innovative and non invasive scientific devices if the wall of the *Resurrection* is in its original position or – as some of the documents of the time might seem to hint – it was moved from the subsequent room in that where it is located nowadays.

15 K. Grayson e R. Martinec, *Consumer Perceptions of Iconicity and Indexicality and Their Influence on Assessments of Authentic Market Offering*, in *Journal of consumer research*, Vol. 31, 2004, pp. 297-298; ; A. J. McIntosh – R.C. Prentice, *Affirming authentic, Consuming cultural heritage*, in *Annals of Tourism Research*, 1999, vol. 26, pp. 589-612

16 B. Spooner, *Weavers and Dealers, the authenticity of an Oriental carpet*, in *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, *Cambridge University Press*, 1986, pp. 195-235.

17 Georges Henri Rivière, in *Territoires de la mémoire, les collections du patrimoine ethnologique dans les écomuées*, sous la direction de Marc Augé, postface de Claude Lévi-Strauss, Édition dell’Albaron et Fems, 1992, p. 7.

elements that correspond to the four points of the *cultural diamond* as defined by Griswold¹⁸ to which we added a fifth element (Communication) and a variable (Time).

The four elements are the Brand of the Museum that must be recognizable and reliable for its public; the Cultural Object: the main object or objects of the exposition, consistent with the Museum's brand image; the Social World in which the interest towards the Cultural Object arises; the Receivers, such as the visitors, willing to live a fruitful experience. If these four elements are well balanced, the cultural offer is cognitively consistent with what is expected and what is found by the visitors in the Museum. All of these four elements are connected by the fifth one which is Communication, namely both the environmental and architectural display and the messages the Museum wishes to communicate along with the related techniques and tools that must be as clear and direct as possible.

The Museum visit, thus, can be characterized as any other consumption practice and therefore it undergoes to a process that is very similar in its steps to the one drawn in the *Consumer Culture Theory*¹⁹. It is important to highlight that the process of visit doesn't begin at the Museum entrance but it can be related to the individual cultural personality construction where the "consumption of Museums" can be included among the issues comprised at the highest grade of the Maslow's pyramid. Closer to the moment of the choice of visiting a Museum, informational materials and tools, such as an appropriated and easy-to-be-browsed web-site, are very important.

As any consumption practice, the variable of Time has a relevant role in maintaining attention upon the cultural offer and usually it represents a critical point for the permanent exhibitions. This was the general learning that was leading us at the beginning of our work, therefore initially we started out considering the complete renewal of the Museum's fitting in order to renew also the level of attention both of the visitors (residents and tourists) and of the local constituencies²⁰. Nevertheless the analysis of the level of authenticity of a Museum and of its cultural offer, as we saw, can avoid the need of a constant and recurring general renewal, limiting it to minor modifications and updating. As we learnt, in facts, in the Museo di Sansepolcro, the Cultural Object is so prominent that supplies the lack of an appealing and modern display but also is so strong and powerful to maintaining its appeal upon visitors throughout time. Thus, visitors feel free from any pre-established frame set.

Therefore, in the cultural diamond scheme, adapted to host also the elements of Communication and Time, the Museum - and besides all its brand - results as a construction connected to the Cultural Objects exhibited and to the Social World related to it and from these two elements the Museum (and its brand) acquires value. At its turn, Communication is a superstructure elaborated by the Museum in function of the Cultural Objects and to the Social World it refers to to the point that Communication can be considered the real cultural product of the Museum itself.

In the example of Museo Civico di Sansepolcro, albeit a weak brand reputation in general due to scarce advertisement, the "aura"²¹ of the Museum and the indexical authenticity of the masterpieces exhibited increase the value of the Cultural Object that

¹⁸ W. Griswold, *Sociologia della Cultura*, il Mulino 2005; J. S. Bruner, *Lo sviluppo cognitivo*, Milano, 1994

¹⁹ DB Holt, *Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2002; E. J. Arnould – C. J. Thompson, *Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 31, 2005, pp. 868-882; E.J. Arnould – LL Price, *Authenticating Acts and Authoritative Performances: Questing for Self and Community*, in Ratneshwar, S., DG Mick, C. Huffman *The Why of Consumption. Contemporary Perspectives on Consumer Motives*, Routledge, 2000, pp. 140-163; Beverland, MB., and Farrelly, F.J., *The quest for authenticity in consumption: Consumers' purposive choice of authentic cues to shape experienced outcomes*, in *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2010, vol. 36, pp.838-856.

²⁰ We talk of constituencies instead of stakeholders in order to highlight the values - not only and merely economic - conveyed by local people, institutions and associations and of whom has interests towards the Museum.

²¹ A. Mottola Molfino, *Il libro dei Musei*, Torino 1998.

becomes the reason - the need, the aspirational desire – why the public decides to go and visit that very Museum.

The authenticity of the artworks and the lack of communication superstructures turn the Museum visiting experience into a deeply authentic experience visitors have the power to live at their ease.

Captions for pictures

1. Room of the “Resurrection” as it was before
2. Room of the “Resurrection” as it is now
3. Museum door as it was before
4. Banner in front of the Museum entrance
5. S. Giuliano by Piero della Francesca, chosen as “testimonial” of the museum
6. Original entrance of the Palazzo dei Priori, when Piero della Francesca painted the fresco of the “Resurrection “ The double flights of stairs and the door-to-ceiling opening have been stylized as a logo in order not to trivialize the image of the resurrected Christ.
7. Reconstruction of the polyptic of the “Madonna della Misericordia” by Piero della Francesca following the indications of the Soprintendenza PSAE-BAP
8. spaces on the lower levels
9. spaces on the upper level