THE WRONG AND THE RIGHT ROAD FOR MUSEUMS

Kenneth Hudson

Every year the organisation responsible for the European Museum of the Year Award organises what it calls its Prestige Lecture. In 1993 it took place in Utrecht, in 1994 at both ends of the Channel Tunnel, and in 1995 in Barcelona. The 1995 lecturer was Michel Van Praet, Professor of Museology at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. In the course of his lecture, he made a very significant observation. When planning the complete reorganisation of the Grande Galerie at his museum, a process for which he was responsible, a good deal of research was carried out into the behaviour of visitors at other museums. One result of this was to show beyond doubt that there was a direct connection between the number of people who were in the museum at any one time and the frequency with which visitors stopped to look at objects and displays. The more visitors, the fewer the stops, and vice versa.

If one assumes, as Michel Van Praet did, that the number of stops is a measure of the quality of the visit, then attempts to increase the number of visitors was counter-productive. One obtained quantity at the expense of quality.

For many years now museums have been travelling along the quantity road. Success has been measured by the number of people the museum attracts and progress by the annual increase in that number. This criterion is now being seriously questioned and Michel Van Praet’s attack on it is typical of a number which I have heard from people I would certainly consider to be both well-informed and socially responsible. It is time that we took stock of the effect that the numbers-chasing game has been having on our museums.

We can approach the problem from a number of different directions. Let us first try to compare museums with other public attractions. The manager of a theatre or a concert hall would consider himself extremely competent and successful if every seat was sold for every performance. His aim, rarely fulfilled, must be to get as close to this ideal achievement as possible. The same would be true of a football club or an airline, where the prime objective is to fill seats, and of a hotel, where to have every room occupied 365 days a year would be to dream of heaven. In all these cases, the management knows what the
target is and does its best to hit it.

Museums, however, are not in the same position as hotels, theatres or airlines. They do not have seats to fill and they are only vaguely aware of what their maximum capacity is. On the whole, they welcome long queues of people waiting to get into a special exhibition and they are prepared to tolerate gross overcrowding and discomfort for their patrons, because income and profits will benefit. The quality of each individual visit is not considered to be important on such occasions. With expenses to meet and bills to pay, numbers are everything. But queues are not part of the daily life of the great majority of Europe’s 30,000 museums. They are rarely embarrassed by having more visitors than they can handle. On the contrary, they have been conditioned to consider themselves as failures if they are unable to register a steady annual increase. They have become prisoners of the equation, better = more, and they have adopted policies which they believe could bring them the extra visitors which society and their employers are driving them to find. They dare not wonder whether going for popular appeal will lessen or even destroy quality.

Generalisations are inevitably dangerous, because one can only guess at why people feel, respond and act as they do. One is sure only about oneself and for this reason I propose to describe certain experiences in the hope that this will sharpen and focus the debate about quality and quantity in museums. I grew up in a world where very few people went to museums, compared with the crowds which the bigger ones attract today. I accepted this situation and liked it. In London, the thought of Westminster Abbey or the British Museum being crowded with tourists would have been sufficient reason for me to stay at home. I liked these places precisely because they were quiet and unpopulated and because they provided an opportunity to form my thoughts in peace.

In recent years I have been immensely privileged, because I have often been able to visit a museum on a Monday and at other times when it was closed to the public. When, as has sometimes happened, I have paid a second visit to the same museum with a lot of people in it, my reaction has been entirely different. The Vasa Museum in Stockholm is a case in point. I have seen the Vasa five times, twice in its temporary home, where the timbers were being treated, and three times in the present building. On only one of these occasions, in the new museum, was I alone, although the Director was in the building attending to other matters, and it was an altogether different ship. It spoke to me directly and it gave me another range of messages. It came across to me as a symbol of human vanity and stupidity, a water-borne castle which was destined to overturn and sink from the height and weight of its own impossible splendour. It was indeed both a folie de grandeur and a grandeur de folie and, with nothing and nobody to disturb my thinking and my imagination, I was able to ponder on the prodigal, vainglorious wastefulness of its design and construction, of the number of fine oak trees that had been felled to build it, of the number of craftsmen who could have been employed on more worthwhile projects, and of the size and futility of the investment.
But these were not the messages conveyed in the museum's public, official interpretation of the vessel. They were not concerned with questions of ethics, morality or values, and concentrated on the Vasa's practical context — the wars and the power struggles involving Sweden at the time when she was built, advances in shipbuilding techniques, armaments, equipment on board, crews. The Vasa Museum is visited every year by more people than any other museum in Scandinavia, and what is provided for them, apart from the ship itself, is essentially information. The Vasa itself, of course, is the principal object in the museum and nothing could prevent it from stealing the show. But the crowds who come to see it are part of the exhibition and they inevitably distract one's attention from what one has come to see. The bigger the crowds, the greater the distraction and the smaller the probability that the items on display will evoke an emotional response.

There is a paradox in this situation because, for a high proportion of our fellow citizens, the crowds are part of the attraction. They do not want to go to events at which very few people are present, partly because would feel lonely, partly because they enjoy the sensation of being a member of a crowd, and partly because they feel that anything which fails to draw a large attendance must be of inferior quality. So crowds breed crowds and museums have found themselves, willingly or not, caught up in this phenomenon and forced to cater for it. In the process of doing this, they have begun to lose or to abandon their special and traditional ability to encourage individual responses to what they offer for their visitors' attention. They have joined the standardised, guaranteed reaction business.

To some extent this depends on the scale of operations. A museum which has 10,000 visitors a year and is open five days a week for seven hours a day will have, on an average, about four people arriving every hour. If each of them stays for two hours, there will be only ten people in the building at any given time and ten people are hardly likely to interfere very much with one's private thoughts, although the size of the building is a factor to bear in mind when making this kind of calculation. On the other hand, it appears to be increasingly felt by the authorities who control the money supply that a typical municipal museum is no longer viable if its total of visitors falls below 50,000 a year. This means 50 arriving every hour and 100 being in the building at any given moment. The pressures are beginning to build up, the noise level is rising and one can no longer ignore the presence of other people.

It would, of course, be completely unreasonable for anyone to regard either a museum or a church as existing for one's own special benefit, though pleasant and rewarding splendid isolation might be. Some degree of compromise is clearly necessary, but it should be the right kind of compromise, in which different kinds of needs are recognised and catered for. In the case of a museum, these needs might be defined as stimulus, reflection and information. What I am suggesting is that in number-driven museums, reflection has become the casualty, as it has in tourist-filled cathedrals.

I am convinced that the real barrier to museums developing in a balanced and
creative manner is their tradition of pedes-

trianism. They have always been thought

of, unlike libraries, as places to be walked

through and the term 'museum feet' is full

of meaning. In order to get more people

through a museum or an art gallery in an

hour, one simply makes them walk faster,

using the people behind to push forward

those in front. This is commercially effec-

tive and culturally abominable. One sees

the technique at its worst in the public

visits to Buckingham Palace in London,

where a never-ending stream of tourists

moves slowly but steadily forward through

each room, guidebook in hand and confi-

ned to a defined pathway by a rope. No

close-up inspection of anything is possible

and there can be no pausing or variation

of pace. So far, there has been no shortage

of people to put up with such treatment

and the commercial results have been

excellent. To that extent, the experience

has clearly been a great success and, assum-

ing that the incentive is great enough,

the method is clearly capable of wider

application. If Buckingham Palace, then

why not the next Picasso Exhibition at the

Royal Academy? It is clearly inefficient to

allow members of the public to move

through an exhibition at its own pace.

Why not control them, if necessary by

putting them on a moving walkway? Why

allow them their present freedom?

These are not frivolous questions. The

traditional kind of museum has become

very expensive to run, if its use of space

and personnel are judged in a commercial

way. One could, of course, say exactly the

same about the traditional kind of cathe-

dral, before it became fashionable to char-
ge for entry, and to 'interpret' the cathe-
dral for the benefit of tourists. Once one

begins to look at a museum with the eyes

of someone trained in modern manage-

ment methods, it seems economically

absurd to heat, light, clean and staff a lar-

gge space on a valuable site for the benefit

of only 50 people an hour. To such a per-

son – and public authorities now contain

a steadily increasing number of them –
museums are bound to seem a luxury for

which the taxpayer should not be asked to

pay.

It is not easy to defend the purpose and

usefulness of a museum against purely

commercial criticism. It is not uncommon

nowadays to be presented with statistics

which show how much each visitor costs a

particular museum. These figures are

obtained by taking the annual net expen-

ses – the total after receipts from entrance

fees and any profits from the museum

shop and café have been deducted – and

dividing the result by the number of visi-
tors in the same year. I have seen a num-
ber of such costings relating to museums

in Great Britain. They have ranged from

£23 a visitor, the lowest, to £106, the high-
est. At first sight, these figures may seem

frightening, but no more so than the cost

per pupil in a school or a university or the

cost per attender in a church. But it is not

the case that museums which attract a

small number of visitors necessarily have

higher unit costs than those whose visitor

totals run in millions. Both the British

Museum and the Musée du Louvre, for

instance, have very high costs per visitor,

over £100 in each case, despite their enor-
mous number of visitors. The main reason

for this is that they do not exist only for

the purpose of displaying their collections

to the public and consider their main

functions to be the preservation and con-
ervation of the portable national heritage and research and publications based on their collections, all of which is very labour intensive and therefore expensive. Smaller museums will almost certainly not devote as great a proportion of their total resources to what one might call scholarly activities.

How, then, is one to define a museum's purpose and establish its aims in ways which will at the same time satisfy those who have to look after the public finances and those whose main concern is with the creative and fruitful use of material which has been left to us by our ancestors and of collections which illustrate the natural world and cultures not our own? I am quite sure that the completely wrong approach is to put one's emphasis on increasing visitor numbers. To do this is to play into the hands of the enemy, the people who assess institutions only in terms of their commercial efficiency. It should go without saying that any museum should be run in a businesslike manner, that wasteful working methods should be eliminated and modern labour-saving techniques should be introduced wherever possible. A museum, like any other concern, needs to be managed and it is unfortunately true that many museums, large and small, are not well managed.

The road which museums should be following today is, I am sure, one which leads to a better quality of visitor. The wrong road produces a policy which simply demands and possibly obtains more visitors, irrespective of their quality. A better quality of visitor implies a better quality of visit. I will try to explain what I mean by both. A high quality visitor is one who is mentally curious and who comes to a museum in order to widen his experience, add to his stock of information and discover new pleasures. A low quality visitor is in the museum merely to pass the time not unpleasantly and who goes out in much the same mental state as he went in. The business of a museum is to attract and satisfy high quality visitors. These, sadly but inevitably, constitute only a minority of the population, which is another way of saying that good museums are not likely to attract large numbers of people. Museums should be essentially for thinking people and the supply of these is unfortunately limited, although they are to be found in all social classes. An elaborate and expensive education is no guarantee of a thinking person and, most regrettably, not everybody who works in a museum is a high quality person.

I have one recommendation to make which I believe would greatly help to set museums on the road which leads to salvation rather than damnation. It is to end the concept of a museum as a place in which people are in perpetual motion, walking or drifting ceaselessly from room to room. The museum of the future should be a place which emphasises the value and the necessity of sitting down, in order to digest, reflect and discuss what one has seen. It should be a place with many light, pleasant-looking and easily movable chairs, with the help of which ad hoc groups could form and a new kind of staff member could stimulate and guide visitors in periods of stocktaking. One usually thinks much better sitting down than standing up and the physical shape and appearance of museums needs to change in order to acknowledge and cater
for this. The traditional linear arrangement of museum galleries encourages walking and forward progress. What is required now is a pattern of circles and closed views, so that sitting down and reflecting becomes an automatic reaction to what one has seen.

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