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Observing the Culture of Museums

In trying to better understand how a museum defines itself, I decided to look closely at how two very different museums are laid out for and utilized by their visitors. What I found in making observations at the Museum of Modern Art and then the American Museum of Natural History was two institutions that serve the same general function but do so with vastly different purpose and execution.

As an intern at the Museum of Modern Art, I am trying to understand how the Museum instructs its visitors' behavior and how its atmosphere informs them. I have walked through the Museum many times, so I decided to spend my lunch break (from around 1pm – 2pm over the course of a Monday, Tuesday and Friday) instead sitting in different parts of the Museum and watching patrons. I found that people tend to visit MoMA in pairs or small groups. Parents with small children, school field trip groups and elderly couples are more predominant in the morning (when I am getting to work and running errands), but by mid-afternoon (when I was able to sit and observe) I noticed more middle-aged and young adult visitors, most tending to be well dressed professional types. Had I been able to visit on a Saturday, I surely would have found larger, more diverse crowds.

The weekday visitors can be lumped into three groups based on how they experience the museum: children, adults and Tim Burton exhibition visitors. The Tim Burton exhibition is laid out in the Special Exhibitions Gallery on the third floor

of the Museum and follows a clear, directed path (which is even painted on the floor) through the art, films and movie memorabilia of Tim Burton's career. Tim Burton sells out daily and is always packed with a wide range of ages, many of whom are tourists, nearly all of whom have come to the Museum specifically for Tim Burton and plan to spend most or all of their time there. People tend to make their way slowly through the exhibition, reading labels, taking pictures and chatting much more loudly than in other parts of the Museum. Meanwhile, MoMA offers a small play area in the Education and Research building where children and their parents can have artistic play with shapes and drawing boards, a suggested path for parents with small children to follow and guided tours for families and school field trips. Children tend to quietly listen to tour guides and parents who bring their kids to these activities are often very hands-on. Adult visitors who are not visiting for Tim Burton tend to be older and well educated. They read labels and pace quietly. There is very little sitting, though in some rooms, such as Monet's *Water Lilies*, where benches are offered, one or two will sit to observe the art. Some take pictures or listen to the audio tour in headphones.

The galleries are rarely noisy and most people talk quietly. Volunteer ushers and information desk attendants are very well informed about the exhibits and Museum policy. Security guards remind visitors to not use flash when taking pictures and politely and discreetly keep order when needed (looking out for anyone behaving recklessly around the art work, etc). Lighting is clearly very well planned out, presentation of video art and film is of very high quality and paths are laid out to be aesthetically pleasing. I understand from speaking with my

supervisors and others at MoMA about this that this is all part of the culture of MoMA and visitors expect it and tend to be highly critical. If there is a mistake in presentation, it will not go unnoticed.

Gift shops are kept separate from the Museum, with their own entrances and look like typical shops. The cafés at MoMA are also somewhat removed from the galleries in their own aesthetically pleasing spaces. Café 2, the larger and more moderately priced restaurant, is always packed at lunchtime and guests sometimes have to wait for tables. The sculpture garden is directly outside of Café 2 and separates the galleries from the Education building and Theatres. MoMA clearly aims to keep the Museum galleries separate from the shops, dining and lounging.

I visited the American Museum of Natural History on a Saturday afternoon with a plan to observe in the same way, but quickly found that the Museum cannot be experienced that way. I decided instead to walk through every corridor of the museum, interacting with visitors and with the museum. I found that families dominate, and was surprised by the number of infants in strollers and very small children. The range in age and socio-economic status is wide, and guided tours are full. The Hayden Planetarium and Dinosaur exhibit had by far the biggest crowds, and the halls are noisy and crowded. The Dinosaur Hall was the perfect place to get a sense for how different people use the Museum. A guided tour lead children (holding on to a rope so none would get lost, parents trailing behind) through the dinosaurs while a bubbly tour guide spoke in simple terms and asked questions. Young adults and older adults without children read labels and information

provided at each exhibit and talked to each other about what they were seeing. Groups of teenagers sat on steps and talked loudly, and parents took pictures.

The Museum is laid out over five floors, with three gift shops, several small cafés, a huge food court and a lunchroom for school groups. I overheard a woman taking a break at the first floor café sum it up perfectly, “This is an all-day museum.” Visitors take their time, benches are always crowded and people even sit on the floors. Parents seem to take pictures of their children in front of nearly every exhibit, and there is a feeling (especially among teens and big family groups with children) of relaxed “hanging out,” more like a mall than a typical museum. Less time is spent at each exhibit than at MoMA, and I saw much more sitting and talking or tending to children than observing and reading labels. The one exception was the area of the first floor that makes up the Hall of Human Origins, Hall of Meteorites and Hall of Minerals. In this area there are many interactive exhibits and activities that parents and children seemed to be actively engaged in. A group of college students listened to an audio tour in Human Origins and took notes. Rooms with videos on meteors and the human body were full, with people standing in the back and sitting on the floor, and staying through the entire length of the video. The Museum clearly caters to children, making meteorites and dinosaur bones easy to reach and keeping them out so they can be touched.

Paid ushers and security guards are less formal at AMNH. As I was contemplating sitting in on a film about the Great Lakes in one of the Museum’s many theatres, two ushers informed me to not bother because it was boring.

Museum gift shops are situated in between exhibit halls, so that guests naturally

walk through them. They are laid out to look like part of the Museum when you first walk in, with high priced items in glass cases and a design that flows with the rest of the Museum. They do not begin to look like shops until closer to the cash register at the back of the shop. Items decrease in value and become more aimed at children the farther back you get into the shop. Small cafés are near restroom and sitting areas on every floor. The design is very well suited for families and tourists who plan to make a day of their visit. Despite large exhibits that command attention the halls tend to be informal. Theatres and AV presentation areas are easy to enter and exit and play videos on a loop or at regular intervals throughout the day. Visitors are much more likely to leave a screening halfway through or talk through a screening at AMNG than MoMA.

I found it interesting that the very deliberate design of these Museums caters to and at the same time informs visitors' behavior. Beyond that, the design, layout and visitors at each supports each museum's mission and creates a culture that the museums become known by and is expected of them.