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Observational Study: The American Museum of Natural History, Saturday afternoon (2:15pm-6pm) and The Brooklyn Public Library, Central Library at Grand Army Plaza, Thursday morning (11am-12pm)

A trip to a museum is an excursion, an event—it's planned and prepared for in advance. Conversely, a trip to the library is an errand. For the first hour at the American Museum of Natural History, I kept a tally of the number of people who took pictures of the dinosaurs in the lobby with cameras vs. cell phones. The numbers were closer than I expected, though true cameras did significantly outweigh cell phone cameras in the end (28 vs. 12). This relates to the planned nature of an AMNH visit—you know you're going and you know you'll want to document the trip, so you bring the better camera. I also saw at least two children under the age of 12 using the Nintendo DS as a camera, so they could "be like Daddy" and independently document the trip from their own point of view. There were also two kinds of picture-takers at the Museum: those who took pictures *with* the exhibits and those who took pictures *of* the exhibits, suggesting users who value their trips differently—some are there for information while others consider it more of a social outing.

The AMNH provided a huge number of flyers, from floor plans and maps to information about individual exhibits and special screenings to Museum history (and each in several different languages). What was more notable than the flyers themselves was the recycling bin placed at the exit of the Museum, suggesting that enough people do not keep the flyers that the Museum felt it necessary to provide them with a receptacle, lest the literature be littered about the foyer floor. As the art of scrapbooking begins to

wane, so does the collection of keepsakes from significant outings. Additionally, I saw people pick up flyers but not actually look at them, which begs the question, “Do people even read the things they pick up while they’re still inside the Museum?” (At the same time, I wonder how often people even look at the exhibits. There were at least three people who thought the Allosaurus in the lobby was a Tyrannosaurus Rex. What skeleton were they looking at?) It seems like an attempt to connect the patrons more directly to the Museum and their experience there, though I’m not sure how successful it is. The BPL provides a few flyers as well, though the majority of the world goes to a library with the specific task of picking up books, so people only took flyers when they were actually interested in the information provided (such as a certain program or hours of operation) or needed a bookmark.

Obviously, the AMNH’s holdings are too extensive to see in one day, and no person, not even employees, is going to attempt to read every caption on every display. More than this, however, was the feeling that everyone was constantly thinking about “where to go next,” before they even looked at the room they were currently occupying. Few patrons made the effort to traverse a room from one end to the other, at least looking in every case, and would often only get about halfway through before getting distracted or moving on. In general there seemed to be much more walking than any actual standing, looking, reading, or learning. People who read captions often did so after pausing at an exhibit for an unrelated reason, such as to tie a shoelace. Others would stop only after uttering, “What is that?!” appearing more interested in immediately learning what something *is*, rather than learning more *about it*.

Though the majority of exhibits are stagnant, AMNH provides many interactive exhibits (though not as many as a science museum would), as well as extensive use of AV materials. There are at least eight mini-theatres or benches with educational films playing. The popularity of these movies varied greatly: the benches in the dinosaur movie were full even as the museum was closing, while we were actually discouraged from seeing the Great Lakes documentary by Museum staff.

Actual conversation with AMNH staff:

Brittan, reading the sign outside the theatre: It's called "Secrets of the Great Lakes," but that's not very helpful.

AMNH Employee 1: Those lakes—they're very secretive.

Me: But what is it?

AMNH Employee 2: It's a documentary, but not a very good one.

Me: Do we need to know all their secrets?

AMNH Employee 2: No, you don't.

Me: Should we just watch "Planet Earth" on a fancy TV instead?

AMNH Employee 1: Yeah, definitely. OR YOUTUBE IT!

While the documentary in question is not actually available on Youtube, but the general sentiment of "just go on to the Asian Mammals, it isn't worth it" was felt nonetheless. Furthermore, interactive displays require a period of extended engagement, and people would usually walk by if they were in use, rather than forming a line. Even for the dinosaur-chasing-you-in-a-taxi movie maker, which I assumed would be fairly popular, never had a line of more than two couples.

I would image that during the week the museum would be slightly less crowded, though it is still one of the most popular sites in New York City. The types of visitors would still be diverse, though there would most likely be more class trips and thus groups of students with notebooks, and fewer families the parents of which could get off work.

Like at the AMNH, patrons of the Brooklyn Public Library are many and varied, running the gamut from toddlers to the elderly, of every color and nationality. This is the

same every day of the week. However, the “arrangement” of patrons is quite different, in that there are many more single guests, and families who arrive together do not necessarily travel from one section to the next together; rather, they usually split up and each member finds his/her own books, then they meet again at checkout. Though there are people who linger, browse, read an entire newspaper in the reading room, and spend significant amounts of time (i.e.: more than 30 minutes) using the computers and other library resources, the majority of patrons are of the “in and out” variety, stopping by just long enough to find the book they’re looking for, check it out, and then leave. I know a lady who goes online and puts holds on all the books she wants so that library staff will pull them and put them all together on the holds shelf for her so that she doesn’t even have to find them in the stacks and can walk in and out in under five minutes.

Similarly, it seems that there are fewer and fewer people in the reading rooms every time I go, and often it’s the same few grizzled old men, indicating a shift in the way patrons use a library as more and more information is readily available online in one’s own home. To combat this and try to lure people back into the library, the BPL offers a wide variety of educational programs for all ages, especially at the Learning Center. They also have an auditorium and frequently screen films and host speakers, as well as activities in the meeting rooms, specialized meeting rooms for kids, and the “Teen Tech Loft” (there are no interactive displays beyond computer games, however). This programming seems successful, as the meeting rooms are often lively and the auditorium full, but for the most part people are most interested in getting their books and leaving, or using the free computers. The employment and job search resources are also constantly in use.

Libraries are also always trying to engage and interest children in reading, and the BPL has taken this quest to near-museum level with its displays and art exhibits. Currently it's a Sesame Street theme, complete with artwork put on view in the main foyer and Bert and Ernie puppets in a glass case. Other, more traditional library setups include displays for newly acquired titles and programs of special interest, especially outside the more specialized subject wings, such as biography or science and technology. Like at the AMNH, people seldom read the captions and only look at the art when waiting in a long checkout line. I saw a few people glance at the tables of "librarians' picks," but no one picked up a book to peruse it or asked where they could check out any of the suggested titles.

The final similarity between AMNH and BPL is that of food: BPL is the only public library I've ever been to with a café in the foyer. I actually find it off-putting every time I go, as it seems so out of place, and I recall every time a school library yelled at someone for eating in the library during middle school. It implies a shift in organizational mores, however: libraries are the new museums, and museums are the new theme parks. Will people soon be spending all day in libraries, such that the library café will become standard? Will museums soon require a fast-pass for admission to the IMAX show? As of yet, BPL isn't mythologized in the same way the AMNH is; it's just "the library," without concern for its name or location, which you go to presumably because it's the closest library to your home. But if *Night at the Library: Battle for Grand Army Plaza* comes out in theatres next year, this could be a whole different ballgame.