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Observational Study

I conducted my observational study at two museums, Tenement Museum, a historical museum, and Met Breuer, a modern and contemporary art museum. I had two trips at the tour-based Tenement Museum on Thursday, Feb 10th, a 90-minute tour of “Shop Lives” from 12:00 pm to 1:30 pm, and a 2-hour tour of “Hard Times” followed by discussion on Tuesday, Feb 14th to see the only two exhibitions they had at that time, “Breuer Revisited: New Photographs by Luisa Lambri and Bas Princen” on the fifth floor and “Marisa Merz: The Sky is a Great Space” on the second floor.

Background

The Tenement Museum locates in a restored 3-floor building for early immigrants on 97 Orchard Street, lower east Manhattan. As “the gate of America,” the area has witnessed the settlement of immigrants of different ethnicity background, from German, Italian, Jewish to Chinese. The museum educators narrate the immigrants’ personal stories based on research. Therefore, the only way to visit the museum is through tours, with 15 people at most. I was impressed by the interaction between the museum and the visitors.

The Met Breuer is the new branch of the Metropolitan Museum and it focuses on modern and contemporary art. It situates in the upper east, six blocks away from the Met. I intended to learn what the museum would offer on Valentine’s day and how it communicated art to the public.

Methodology

I used my phone to track people’s time spent in each room in the Tenement Museum, but in the Met Breuer, I only estimated how long people stared at an artifact.

Regarding my interaction with the visitors, **I was a “participant observer” in the Tenement Museum** and a more traditional objective observer in the Met Breuer. While I interviewed people in the Met Breuer, I did not ask any question in the Tenement Museum. I appeared to be as devoted to the tour as anyone else. I noted down people’s talks without disclosing my intention of research. This was partly because I did not want to interrupt the immersive atmosphere of the tour, and that I gathered enough demographic information at the beginning of the tour or by mere observation. But the deficit was that I did not know people’s former understandings about the museum theme, not to mention classifying the visitors into a hierarchy of knowledge levels to evaluate their responses respectively (Gyllenhaal 1998).

I regretted not having kept in contact with any visitors in both museums, which disabled my further inquiry into the long-term impact the museums had on the individuals (Falk 1998).

The Demography of Visitors

- Gender

In the Tenement Museum, the proportion of women were 9 out of 14 (64.3%) and 4 out of 5 (80%) in the two tours. Both the educators were women. Although there were a few male educators in other trips, **female dominated the visitors and the educators. It could explain why, there was a strong emphasis on women's livelihood and the protagonists in the story were largely women**, in addition to the fact that women spent more time at home and were more devoted to the housework in the tenement. For instance, the educator of "Shop Life" encouraged visitors to imagine what hard labor Katherine had to take, especially in the heat of summer, like caring for the baby and baking good snacks to support the family business of the Beer Saloon. Another educator of "Hard Times" suggested the heavy duty embedded in Natalie's housekeeping routine, such as carrying the heavy water bucket to the third floor.

The Met Breuer had an almost equal appeal to both men and women, with 15 women out of 28 visitors (53.6%) during my observation.

- Age

The visitors of the Tenement Museum had an average age around 50s, and **the elder people prevailed**. It could be due to the visiting hours on Thursday afternoon when young people were working, and children had classes. On weekends, according to an educator, there would be more kids in the museum tour organized by the school, and the average age would go down. **The museum's appeal to elder people was probably because people at the age of nostalgia, were particularly attracted to the museum with a personal historical dimension, whose setting resembled the house of their grandparents and thereby brought to life their childhood memory.**

The Met Breuer visitors were considerably younger. Half of the visitors were around 30s, and half were elder. Many young artists visited the museum to gain inspirations.

- Nationality

The Tenement Museum had a larger diversity in visitors' nationalities than the Met Breuer. The former had American visitors who had Irish or Italian ancestry, as well as Canadians, Germans, and Australians. The educators cherished such rich backgrounds of the visitors and welcomed everyone to bring in their immigrant stories.

The Met Breuer was dominated by Americans presumably, but there were also more Asian people than Tenement Museum, including 2 Koreans and 1 Chinese out of 28 visitors (10.7%).

- Accompany

In the "Shop Lives" tour of the Tenement Museum, 6 out of 14 (42.9%) people came with their families. One man brought here the visiting parents; another man came with his sister and brother-in-law. In the "Hard times," a tour followed up with a discussion, there were five people. Except me, two were friends, and two were lovers. **But one good thing about the Tenement Museum tour was that you did not feel lonely during the visit.** Even if you did not know anyone, as people introduced themselves, stuck together and listened to the same story, you felt you belonged to a team, sharing and living out a history together.

In the Met Breuer, 18 out of 28 (64.3%) visited the museum with families and friends. Maybe it was Valentine's Day that increased the number of couples, which amounted to seven in the afternoon. People with companies discussed the art among themselves, and people who came alone, could by no means feel integrated to any visitor group.

The Expectation of Visitors

It was lucky for an observer that the educators of the Tenement Museum asked people what they intended to gain from the tour at the start. **Some people had research interest.** In the small group of "Hard Times," which showed how immigrants survived economic depressions between 1863 and 1935, there was a young female **social worker** who wanted to learn the common struggles of immigrants to better assist poor immigrants in London. Another elder woman in her 40s was interested in **genealogy**. She searched the internet and found this museum. Other people visited because they heard friends talking highly about it, and they tried to establish an intimate connection with the past.

In the Met Breuer, 3 out of 8 people I interviewed were artists. A 26-year-old Korean man, who majored in architecture, told me that he had been planning to visit for a while because he was a big fan of the Brutalist architecture, of which Breuer was exemplary. He was as interested in the building as, if not more than, the exhibition, so he carefully chose the last week of the show to enjoy an empty room, where he could get the "resonance" of the building. Another female Korean artist liked the museum, and wanted to kill time before she met other friends. A 28-year-old Chinese student at Parsons School of Design stopped by because he felt tired after walking in the Central Park. As a member of the Met, he frequented the museum.

As it was an afternoon on Valentine's day, I saw seven couples at the Met Breuer. There were three young, three middle-aged and one elder couple. One young couple sat on the bench chatting in a low voice, giggling, but did not show interest in the exhibition. They had been here for a couple of times because they liked the building, but had no idea what exhibition was going on. **For some visitors, the Museum was like an indoor park to rest.**

Visitors' Attention

In the Tenement Museum, visitors' attention was driven by the educators in the tour. **Because the room was packed for holding several tours at the same time, there was a predetermined route to prevent visitors of different lines from bumping into each other.** In the tour of "Shop Life," visitors walked through the saloon, the kitchen, the bedroom and saw the backyard, as the educator encouraged us to imagine what life was like with a hint of the smell in this little room. People were free to ask questions and share their knowledge about a piece of furniture, such as an old lady pointed out the texture of a table which reminded her of her grandparents. **The visitors' stories enhanced the personal connection between the museum settings and the visitors themselves.** Such was an effective strategy to hold people's attention and leave them a strong impression. (Gyllenhaal 1998:23)

I tracked the time we stayed in each room during the second trip, "Hard Times." Visitors spent 7 minutes at Gumpertz family's entrance, 9 minutes at the parlor, 28 minutes at the kitchen, 10 minutes at sewing room, 20 minutes looking around at an Italian home and finally visitors discussed for 15 minutes before leaving. People spent the most time in the kitchen discussing the hard life of a woman, whose husband disappeared during the Panic of 1873, and

the visitor of social work background talked about the role of the “welfare” system that supported this woman in the community at that time. **Time spent at a room was relatively flexible and was adjusted to visitors’ interests.** There was no central room because every room constituted a crucial part of an immigrant’s life, the sewing room for tailor job to earn income, the bedroom for cuddling the children to sleep and the kitchen for feeding the family.

There was no label in the Tenement Museum, which fitted the immersive atmosphere as if visitors were transported to the vivid life back then. As people examined the decoration of the room or the utensils of the old days, the educators explained the story behind them, passed around more archaic props and sealed documents, like the certificate of a beer saloon. Meanwhile, visitors were free to raise questions or add their knowledge to the tour. Therefore, people did not learn from labels but the educator or other visitors.

In the Met Breuer, most visitors browsed through the art pieces. It was probably because they were not aided by any personal guide or audio devices. The labels were what visitors could depend upon. On the fifth floor, the labels were brief with only five lines, including the artist’s name, nationality, year of birth, artifact’s name, material and the acquisition. **Often, a contemporary art had no title, leaving visitors lost at the “Untitled” pieces.** The public browsed the art, learned the name, passed by, and the whole process usually took no more than 5 seconds. To compensate for the lack of context and descriptions provided by the labels, the exhibition on “Breuer Revisited: New Photographs by Luisa Lambri and Bas Princen” prepared a room with a table of books about the photographers, and the biography of Breuer, but **hardly anyone sat down to have a good read.** A Korean student who majored in architecture quickly leafed through the pictures in the book and used it as a prop for a selfie. Later I learned that he studied Breuer before, but according to my observation, he did not learn much from the book during this visit.

The more detailed labels on the Metz exhibition, however, also had problems attracting the audience. **A middle-aged NYU alumna complained about the excessive interpretations made by the curator.** She did not trust the curator’s ability to convey the “true meaning” of the art object. She wanted to hear the artist’s intention and that to her was the most authentic. In my opinion, the dislike of curator’s interpretation could be misguided. Once the art was created, the author was not the only one nor the most reliable interpreter. Curators, given their professional training in art taste, were helpful with their efforts to contextualize the artifact in the art history or offer possible meanings behind the piece. On the other hand, the woman’s complaint might result from her different point of view with the curator. **Her complaint suggested that the curators of contemporary exhibitions should not overwhelm the visitors with one explanation from the museum,** but allow more hermetic room for the visitors so that they were not upset by the discrepancy (Randi 1998).

Interaction

The Tenement Museum was characteristic of its interaction with the help of technological devices or role-play. **In “Shop Life” tour, there was a digital platform with multiple screens at the end of our visit, which was a new stimulus to the visitors’ declining attention.** When a visitor took a prop, say, an album, a microphone or a brick from the shelf and laid it above the screen, the screen will show information of this object. By clicking on the pictures, visitors could learn more personal stories of an underwear store and hear the oral history provided by

the shop owner.

Visitors also did role-play in the setting of a German beer saloon in the Tenement Museum. 15 visitors were each given a poker card with a saloon guest's name, age, occupation, and family. People acted as the given role of the 19th century, socialized with each other and vividly reenacted the historical scene. Visitors recalled the most amusing part was to hear an elder lady tell people that she was an 8-year-old boy with four siblings living upstairs. People were comfortable performing with the aid of the identity cards, and some even tried to improvise plots and make a deal with the saloon owner Mr. Schneider, who was played by the educator. **It was like a semi-immersive theater, and an assistant told me that many educators had the background of an actor,** not surprisingly!

In the Met Breuer, however, there was no interaction device or session. What a pity it happened in the museum concerning modern and contemporary art. Did not the arts have interactive potential, or did the curators believe that we should contemplate art instead of exploring it otherwise?

Behind-the-scene Research

Another notable thing about the Tenement Museum was that the interaction between the educators and the visitors did not cease on the surface of a tour but went deep into the research behind the scene. **On one hand, the research process was interwoven into the tour narration.** Visitors learned how researchers tracked down the story of a person (research), how they searched for the old furniture in the Brooklyn flea market (acquisition), and how they used wax to mold the foods in the pot (exhibition). **On the other hand, educators appreciated the clues contribute by the visitors.** "Please tell us if you find out what the son of the Schneider family does now. I mean it." An educator said.

Digital Devices

As for digital device policies, **phones were allowed in both museums, but photography policies were different.** The Met Breuer approved photography as long as the flashlight was turned off, and such policy was not communicated until someone violated it. The Tenement Museum, however, forbade taking photos once we entered the house, which was sometimes addressed after visitors purchased the tickets at the desk and was always communicated before we moved into the museum.

Neither the Tenement Museum nor the Met Breuer offered audio guides for visitors. But the Tenement Museum did have screens and records in some rooms. In the kitchen, the educator played a record as the visitors examined the house. There was a daughter's voice describing her childhood memory related to the house, where her mother bathed her in the sink, wept at the Italian soap operas in TV, and put Roosevelt's photo on the mirror. With the help of an oral history, the furniture was loaded with emotion, and visitors could imagine the Italian immigrant's life decades ago.

In the last minute of the tour "Shop Life," the educator played a short video on a big screen. It was about a Yemen shopkeeper in New York, who provided 24/7 Deli to people however bad weather it was. The owner family were happily integrated into the neighborhood, learned different languages from the customers, and people loved their stores. **Since it was over a week after President Trump announced the travel ban on seven countries when I visited the**

museum, to me, this video was a protest against the travel ban. It delivered a message that the immigrant people were contributing much to this country, but their efforts were neglected by the contemporaries and only recognized decades later. But this did not preclude the possibility that the video had been played for a long time before the ban. Another educator of the “Hard Times” told me that more people cried during the discussion, **“the tour has the same content, but people feel the context has changed.”** She said, “things had been hard before, and people managed to overcome.” If I could count myself as a visitor, then the knowledge about immigrant history has a long-term influence on me and has empowered me ever since.

Moving Image Display

No moving images were displayed in the Met Breuer on Feb 14th, but **the Tenement Museum has been showing a documentary about its history.** The “theater” was located next to the gift shop, divided by curtain. Sounds could be heard from the outside, but the place was not visible. I did not discover it or think the possibility of watching until I have lingered in the shop for too long. The film was for free. There was no running time displayed, and it played in a loop. It was dim, and the only illumination came from the light of the gift shop leaked through the curtain. There were four rows of gray plastic chairs amounted to around 36 seats, plenty for visitors. People came to have a rest or spend the time before the tour started.

Café and Gift Shop

The Tenement Museum did not have a cafe. Since it was tour-oriented, visitors would not have free time in the museum. **They had a gift shop**, which shared the same place with the reception desk where people purchased tickets. It was also the place where people find the guides before they followed them to the restored tenement. Aided by a warmhearted volunteer, people had plenty of time shopping as they usually arrived early for the tour.

The Met Breuer’s gift shop was located behind the reception desk and next to the elevator, which was the first place to notice before going to the exhibitions or leaving the museum. The staff was cold, prices were high and not many customers visited in the afternoon. Unlike the Tenement Museum, **the Met Breuer had café and a restaurant.** A delicate Flora café opened on the lower floor, which provided coffee and takeaway sandwiches during the open hours. It also had a Flora Bar, which offered sit-down dinner, a cocktail or a casual meal in the evening even when the museum was closed. **As it was Valentine’s Day, the Flora Bar was delicately decorated**, with bouquet on the table, white candles flickering in the wind. Many people were curiously peeping down as the staff prepared the banquet. Unfortunately, I did not stay till the dinner started.

Security

According to the museum assistant, **there were no guards in the Tenement Museum**, mostly because space was limited. But educators held the keys to the museum rooms, and they kept an eye on the museum. They were taking the guards duty in a sense. The lack of official guards also created a homelike feeling of the museum.

The Met Breuer was armed with security guards in the suit. Despite the security check in the lobby, there were three guards in each exhibition. The guards not only guarded the art objects but also made the museum look like a prestige place.

Lessons

I tried to evaluate the two museums according to their ability to engage the present visitors. According to the time average visitors focused on objects, the application of interactive devices and the emotional impact, the Tenement Museum did a better job than the Met Breuer. The Tenement Museum was remarkable in establishing personal connections between the visitors and the displayed objects through story sharing, role-playing, and digital technology. It also successfully integrated the research behind the scene into the tour, which helped the visitors understand how the museum worked. It not only engaged the visitors as a learner but also a potential researcher.

There were some lessons for the Met Breuer. Although young artists appreciated it, it could not hold the attention of the visiting public. Many people browsed through the art objects, and some viewed the museum as an indoor park where they could rest, but they had little interest in the exhibitions. The modern and contemporary art could become more accessible to the public if the Met Breuer offered labels with information including the artist's intention. It would be even better if some interview or other curated information could be played through an audio device or an application on the phone. With passionate human voice accompanied by music, the information could be easier to digest than from a huge book laying indifferently on the table. Even if the information had to be acquired from the book, highlighting paragraphs and making bookmarks could make them more inviting.

Works Cited

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