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Timeless Displays: Reinventing Visitor Experience Through Participatory and Interactive Involvement at Mutare Museum

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Keywords visitor experience; interactive; participatory; design; technology

Abstract This paper analyzes how the Mutare Museum, Zimbabwe, intends to invoke dynamism within its stagnant displays by prioritizing visitor needs through offering educational services that are more inclusive, interactive, and participatory. Visitors no longer identify the museum as a bastion of high culture but rather as a place to interact, interrogate, and to engage with the collection, and learn in a relaxed atmosphere. Essentially, this entails thinking critically about the contested nature of exhibitions in respect to the agency and knowledgeability of visitors. Many of the exhibits at the Mutare Museum still reference the legacy and bias of colonization. The proposed re-arrangement of displays in the Beit Gallery will echo the museum's new approach to dialogical interactions. Upon the installation of the new exhibition, it is envisaged that visitor experiences will be underpinned by a variety of approaches to visitor education.

About the Author Njabulo Chipangura is employed by the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe as an archaeologist and is based in Eastern Zimbabwe at the Mutare Museum. He holds a Master of Arts in Museums and Heritage Studies from the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. His research interests include looking at the configuration and reconfiguration of museum collection and exhibition practices within colonial and post-colonial settings, and the depiction of the "other" within ethnographic exhibitions. In addition, he has researched the dissemination of public culture and the sense of community heritage ownership at cultural festivals hosted on heritage sites. He is currently a Wenner Gren Wadsworth African Doctoral Fellow in the Anthropology Department at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa. His Ph.D. research looks at the archaeological ethnographies of indigenous artisanal mining of gold in Eastern Zimbabwe.

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The museum is a potent social metaphor and mode of representation of societies, their history, and relationship with our cultures.¹ Today, most museums are seeking to engage a more diverse range of visitors by moving towards collaborative projects and activities designed through dialogical and inclusive participation.² This is in contrast with the traditional approach of the museum as an official collector of objects, even in the absence of voices of the represented groups – the so-called "other." However, at Mutare Museum, visitors and communities are yearning for more participatory and interactive experiences with collections. Such experiences must move beyond the outdated view that visitor interaction with museum objects should go no further than visual observation.³ For example in 2014, during the celebration of the Mutare Museum Golden Jubilee, visitors were given free rides around the city in a collection of vintage cars. This was a transformation for the museum in which a connection was established with visitors.⁴ This paper analyzes how the Mutare Museum intends to further invoke dynamism in its stagnant displays by prioritizing

visitor needs through offering educational services that are inclusive, interactive, and participatory.

Figure 1:



Located in Eastern Zimbabwe, the Mutare Museum is one of the five museums under the administration of the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ). This museum was established in 1964 and is a by-product of colonization, which started in 1890. Zimbabwe, formerly called Southern Rhodesia, obtained its independence in 1980 from Britain. The Mutare Museum is primarily the national collector of antiquities and transport objects, although it also houses botanical, ethnographic, and archaeological collections. The other four museums include: the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, in Harare, which specializes in human science collections including archaeological and ethnographic objects; the Natural Museum, in Bulawayo, looks after natural history collections; the Military Museum, in Gweru, maintains the military collections; and the Great Zimbabwe Museum, in Masvingo, specializes in the conservation of free-standing dry-stone structures. The Mutare Museum (formerly the Umtali Museum) opened its doors to the public on the 13th of September 1964. Since that time, exhibitions at the museum have been stagnant and biased toward colonialism such that many aspects of an independent Zimbabwe are ignored; hence the growing need to revamp the outdated exhibitions.⁵

The Beit Gallery

The exhibitions at the Mutare Museum have increasingly lost their educational value because the information presented is outdated and displays are encased in dioramas that inhibit visitor interaction and participation. Some scholars have called this phenomenon the imprisoning of collections for visual appreciation where visitors are simply recipients of fixed and authorized curator narratives.⁶ However, visitors no longer identify the museum as a bastion of high culture, but rather as a space for social interactions underpinned by exhibitions that are designed to tackle contemporary and controversial issues. Thus, this transformation into an interrogative museum will change timeless displays that seem to deliver declarative lectures to more of a dialogue asking visitors a series of questions.⁷

The Mutare Museum seeks to engage a more diverse range of visitors and move towards collaborative projects and activities designed through dialogical and inclusive methods. Part

of this mission will be achieved through the rearrangement of the Beit gallery and opening up the space for more participatory activities involving visitors.

The Beit gallery measures approximately 224 square meters and contains a wide range of exhibitions that cover themes related to the traditional aspects of the Shona culture in Zimbabwe.⁸ Upon entering the gallery, visitors view a case containing transport accessories in which the artifacts have been placed as if they are in a storeroom with no orienting labels.⁹ Opposite this display are zoological displays which include an animal tree and two cases with different species of insects.¹⁰ Along the length of the gallery are a variety of mixed objects including geological displays, different types of traditional artifacts, such as drums and games. There is also a display case with beads, head rests, snuff boxes, and a portrait of a traditional chief adorned with symbols of chieftainship, such as badges and ceremonial artifacts.¹¹ Additionally, there are groups of objects depicting traditional modes of transportation lying on the floor of the gallery including bark boats and sleds. Lastly, there is an archaeological display with cases containing the prehistory of Manicaland.

In this current state, the variety and display of the exhibitions in the Beit gallery do not represent any meaningful story and visitors could easily mistake it for a storeroom.¹² There are neither clear-cut objectives nor specific themes addressing the visitor. Further, this type of scenography presented in this gallery fails to do justice to the social biography of these collections, which cannot be understood in terms of a single unchanging identity, but rather, by tracing the succession of meanings attached to the objects as they move through space and time.¹³ The artifacts are displayed on the floor in an almost derogatory way, presenting the objects as if they were strange and exotic, and devoid of any social and historical significance; thus furthering the notion of the “other.”

Figure 2:





It was realized that most schools are reluctant to embrace the museum and its collections as a mode of instruction that relates to their curriculum.¹⁴ These schools are tired of static exhibits that they have described as “drab” and “boring,” which can only entice excitement on the first visit. One visitor noted that there is need to constantly and continuously upgrade the contents of the Beit Gallery to make it more interactive and participatory.¹⁵ A visitor survey conducted in the late 2000s revealed that most visitors expected a change in which the ethnographic objects in this gallery were depicted arguing that were devoid of a clear educational value. Moreover, by removing artifacts from their cultural setting and inserting them into the visual symbol system of the museum, their dynamic web of physical and social meaning was broken.¹⁶ These ethnographic collections in the Beit Gallery are exhibited in a manner that conforms to the traditional practice of presenting objects exclusively for observation.

The Interactive and Participatory Beit Gallery

A new exhibition has been imagined and designed to reorder the collections to make them more inclusive and interactive. This exhibition will be the first wholesome post-colonial display at Mutare Museum designed with the full participation of the local communities. The new exhibition will use both audio and video depictions to illustrate the socio-cultural uses of objects previously collected and exhibited without proper context when this museum was opened in 1964. The basic museum functions of documenting, conserving, and exhibiting will be secondary to exploring how collections possess a social life once conditioned by their uses in various ritual activities before they were dislocated into the museum. This is because objects in their physical forms cannot be separated from beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a society. Communities should also be allowed to access their ritual objects that are displayed in museums. Consequently, this exhibition will accommodate community understandings that define some objects as living beings, connected with ancestral spirits, or in need of regular propitiation or feeding.¹⁷

Historically, the idea of an exhibition had to be conveyed by either the objects themselves or the accompanying written labels. Today, there are many more tools at a museum’s disposal

to convey information and key ideas.¹⁸ The interactive element will also entail that visitors are consistently active participants as opposed to being passive recipients of information. Multi-media displays have ensured that the once solely scholarly use of the museum has largely been replaced by the idea of a museum as a means of communication. Many museums have become curious hybrids that combine education and experience by using interactive participatory devices.¹⁹ Most visitors today recognize that the addition of technology and media into museums has opened opportunities for both varying degrees of depth of information and options that facilitate individual learning flexibility and choice.²⁰ The ever-improving capabilities of digital media enable more and more of the public to achieve levels of participation and engagement that historically were reserved for the few.

One section of the new Beit Gallery will depict the traditional music of the Eastern Shona and the musical instruments that they use during a variety of leisure time performances.²¹ This is where the invention of our interactivity is situated as our visitors will be allowed to have a high degree of association with the musical instruments both on display and on the LED screens. The visitors will touch the musical instruments and use them in real time. This is fundamentally different from the classical “hands-off” approach in the traditional museum. Instead of understanding objects as possessing an unproblematic concrete existence that can be visually understood, the exhibition in the revamped Beit Gallery will afford a multisensory interaction with visitors, thus aiding their experience. This is the participatory experience that visitors to Mutare Museum have been yearning for over a long period of time.

Figure 3:



A combination of participatory experience and education will be born out of this new display and thus allow visitors to have experiences which are absent in the traditional galleries at the Mutare Museum. This gives visitors a sense of freedom to participate in a way that they have not been able to do in the past.²² It is this focus on the proactive engagement of the visitor that influenced the redesigning of the Beit gallery. What electronic technology does in the museum is opening the crack in time beyond what would otherwise be an array of static, silent artifacts with interpretative text.²³ In the future, it seems inevitable that museums will become “hybrid places, combining recreation and learning, allowing visitor’s diversions from the intense stimuli of strolling through galleries and viewing multitudinous objects.”²⁴

“Please bring back the live snakes”: Realism and the Museum Experience

In addition to the envisaged interactive display to be in the Beit Gallery, visitors to Mutare Museum have been asking for the reintroduction of live snake displays, which were removed at the instigation of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 2006. The snakes were removed because of the dilapidated condition of the snake pits and plans are underway to repair them. Live displays provide an alternative, interactive, and realistic experience for visitors. Thus, the pursuit of the real thing or what has been termed hyper-reality has become an important tendency in contemporary cultures such that museums have been forced to adopt and display the real thing.²⁵ A random flip through the museum visitor book shows that the reintroduction of live snakes and birds, which used to be housed in the aviary, would again be a major draw for visitors. A typical visitor comment reads: “please bring back the snakes and the birds in the aviary- this museum is so boring with these old dead and stuffed objects on display. We want the real thing.”²⁶

Figure 4:



Visitor records also show that during the period when Mutare Museum used to have live birds and snakes the year in and year out numbers were higher than they are now. For example, between 2000- 2005, the number of visitors to the museum each year averaged between 10,000- 20,000 whereas between 2006 and 2015 the number dwindled to 2,000 a year.²⁷ Although there are a host of other factors which contributed to the decline of numbers, the most talked about as deduced from the visitor's response book was the absence of live displays. Many comments had a recurring flow path indicative of the reasons why most visitors would not want to come back to the museum again after their first or second visit. One visitor comment explicitly said:

When I was a kid we used to come here with my parents to see live birds and snakes now there is nothing to see. I even brought my own kids so that they could see the birds and the snakes. How disappointed I am! I will never come back to this museum until I hear that they have reintroduced the birds and the snakes.²⁸

Thus, the reintroduction of real experiences underpinned by live displays can also help to transform this museum by giving it an alternative look to the timeless cultural displays.²⁹ Unlike stagnant cultural displays, a live animal can demonstrate exactly how it feeds, seeks shelter, regulates its body temperature, and reproduces.³⁰ The reintroduction of live animal displays will, therefore, aid the reconceptualization of the old museum practice of simply collecting and exhibiting timeless cultural objects. The fundamental goal is to make personal experiences between the collections and the visitors thus providing opportunities for people to get involved and feel invested. Live animals offer multi-sensory experiences as they can be seen, heard, smelled, and touched. This is a useful approach when presenting programs for visitors who may not be able to fully see or hear from other forms of museum interpretation. Visitors want to find “the real thing” in museums in the form of authentic specimens and knowledge and live animals certainly qualify as “the real thing.”³¹ Unlike static displays visitor’s responses to live animals are emotional, filled with fascination and amazement.

Conclusion

Education is not the only benefit the visiting public perceives that museums afford. Increasingly, the visiting public now sees museums as social settings, as places where families, couples, and other social groups can comfortably recreate.³² The Mutare museum is seeking to incorporate interactive digital displays in the Beit Gallery and reintroduce snakes displays to accommodate this. Based on feedback obtained from the museum visitor books and our interactions, the visitors want to play a role in co-creating content and being active participants in the museum experience itself. The story of the Eastern Shona, for example, will be told in such a way that our visitors will experience the museum both in terms of knowledge building but also by finding a certain degree of affiliation within their properly presented cultural objects.

An underlying question, however, is whether the increased interactivity would bring out the expected participatory experiences and educational benefits, or whether this would reduce the museum to a mere fun house. Some have argued that multi-media displays have reduced a museum to a high tech futuristic institution with no linkages with the past.³³ The fear is that museums will lose their integrity and stray from their original missions to preserve and educate; critics suggest that they may simply become arenas for pleasure rather than education.³⁴ However, this article has demonstrated that there are multiple ways to promote and encourage a deeper visitor experience while maintaining visitor education. Developing museum experiences that are entertaining and enjoyable does not mean trivializing the experience or mission of the institution.

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- ¹ Ciraj Rassool, "Community Museums, Memory Politics and Social Transformation in South Africa: Histories, Possibilities and Limits," in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, ed. Ivan Karp, et.al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
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- ³ Njabulo Chipangura and Chidochashe Mandizvo, "Static Collections and Experiential Connections at Mutare Museum," *Museum International*, no. 257-260 (2014): 106-112.
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- ⁶ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).
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- ⁸ Shona is the name widely given to the indigenous population in Zimbabwe and is constituted by people who speak one similar language also called Shona. However, the Shona language itself is not homogenous because within it are different dialects that vary from district to district. Eastern Zimbabwe is constituted by the manyika, ndau, jindwi, hwesa and karanga speaking people. Chipangura, "Rethinking the Practice of Collecting and Displaying Ethnographic Objects at Mutare Museum," 192.
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