

# MUSEUMS AND EXPERIENCE. TOWARDS A NEW MODEL OF EXPLANATION

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo se centra en los diferentes enfoques que los museos han utilizado para estudiar a sus visitantes, de los Países Bajos. En el tiempo transcurrido, desde la década de los setenta hasta nuestros días, los museos de los Países Bajos han pasado por varias etapas: primero aparece el concepto revolucionario de "servicio" que se ofrece al "cliente" (visitante) mediante las tiendas, la cafetería, los programas de extensión, etc., y que produjo el aumento del número de visitantes a los museos. Segundo, con el tiempo los visitantes se acostumbraron a estos servicios y cuando otras ofertas de esparcimiento aparecieron, los museos se vieron compitiendo por atraer a los mismos clientes de estas nuevas ofertas. El artículo sugiere que el paso a seguir por los museos es convertirse en proveedores de "experiencias", una vez que tomen conciencia de las aspiraciones de los visitantes.

## ABSTRACT

The article discusses the changing perception in museums concerning the visitors focusing in the museums of the Netherlands and uses as a interpretative tool the concept of experience economy propose by Joseph Pine. Within the course of the 1970 to today the museums of Netherlands have gone through the following steps: first the revolutionary concept of "service" offering to the "client" (visitor), through, shop, coffees, outreach programs, etc., that caused increase in the numbers of visitation. Next the visitors got used to those services and when other leisure offering entities came along museums found themselves "competing" for the same "cliente". Finally the possible future step is discussed for the museum as a creator of experiences: the "transformation" of the visitor once is able to recognize in advance the audience's aspirations.



## INTRODUCTION

During the 1970s researchers of the University of Leiden were working on the behaviour of invertebrates, in this particular case: woodlice. In order to carry out statistical analyses, the researchers worked with large groups of individuals. The experiments did not produce satisfactory results. They asked one of the curators of the national museum of natural history for advice. This specialist on taxonomy explained the researchers that they were working with mixed groups of woodlice, consisting of at least three different species. As every species has its specific behaviour, the results of the experiments, based on groups with a different mix of species, were never identical.

## METHODOLOGICAL WARNING

Museums are very complex group cultural institutions. Diversity is much larger than definitions suggest. For example, art museums have different traditions than natural history museums, despite the fact that they are both based on collections. In the United Kingdom art museums are not even called "museums"; they are called "galleries". In addition, there are many groups of institutions that sometimes are considered museums, but sometimes not. Examples are: visitor centres, science centres, zoological gardens, etc. In a recent Dutch study, museums were compared with themeparks. Open air museums and zoological gardens were included in the category "themeparks".

The result of this study would have been very different if open air museums and zoological gardens had been included in the category "museums". Any hypothesis concerning museums must specify which group(s) of museums is addressed.

## MUSEUMS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Depending on the definition, the Netherlands count 900-1100 museums (on a population of about 16 million). Most of the museums are small. Only about 20 % of the museums has a staff of more than five paid professionals. Most of the museums are either governed by a foundation (80 %) or governed by a municipality (12 %). As to the collections, 52 % of the museums are defined as historical (including archaeological museums). Art museums, which appear very prominent in the press, comprise "only" 11 % of the total number of museums.

## VISITORS AND VISITS

Museums tend to prove their success in terms of number of visits. The total number of museum visits is about 21 million. Foreign tourists are responsible for about 20 % of the number of visits. Of the adult population (18 years and older) about two-third very seldom visit museums, more or less the same as in the United Kingdom, France and Sweden, for example.

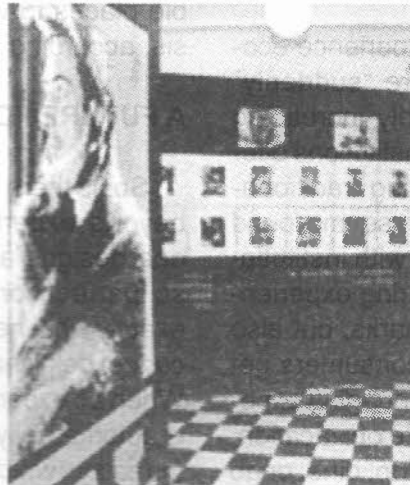
The number of visits has increased from 2 million in 1946 to 21 million in 2001. This increase is only

partly the combined result of an increased population, an increased number of museums, and increased incoming tourism. The increase is also the result of an increased percentage of the adults visiting museums, in particular those older than 50 years. The increase of the number of visits of Dutch museums throughout the 20th century shows three stages: (1) until the mid 1970s the growth rate was linear, (2) from the mid 1970s till the end of the 1980s, the growth rate was exponential, (3) from the beginning of the 1990s the number of museums visits has stabilised. In the period 1979-1991 the percentage of the Dutch population that visited museums increased from 25 to 34 %, with a noticeable decrease afterwards.

## A NEW MODEL OF EXPLANATION

The "sudden" exponential growth during the 1970s and 1980s, and the stagnating growth during the 1990s might be explained with help of Joseph Pine's theory of the experience economy.

Pine usually explains his theory with the economy of coffee. Companies that harvest coffee beans and trade it on the market receive a certain amount of money. When a manufacturer roasts, grinds, packages, and puts those



same beans in a grocery store, turning them into a good, the price jumps two to six times (depending on brand and package size). Brew the ground beans in a vending machine, coffee, or kiosk and that service now sells for perhaps about twenty times the initial price of the beans. So depending on what a business does with it, coffee can be any of three economic offerings commodity, good, or service with three distinct ranges of value customers attach to it. Serve that same coffee in a five-star restaurant of a grand hotel where the ordering, creation, and consumption of the cup embodies a distinctive ambience or heightened sense of theatre and consumers gladly pay much more. Businesses that ascend to this fourth echelon of value establish a distinctive experience that envelops the purchase of coffee, increasing its value (and therefore its price) by several orders of magnitude over the original commodity. Experiences are a distinct economic offering, as distinct from services as *services are from goods, but one*

that until now went largely unrecognized. When someone buys a good, he receives a tangible thing; when he buys a service, he purchases a set of intangible activities carried out on his behalf. But when he buys an experience, he pays to spend time enjoying memorable

events that a company stages to engage him in a personal way.

The success of Dutch museums during the 1970s and 1980s might be related to the development of a service economy in which the service of museums was recognised and valued. The increased education of the population and increased leisure time were important conditions. As Zahava Doering has described, museums increasing conceptualised their visitors in terms of "guests". When museums see visitors as guests, they pay considerable attention to hosting functions ("servicescape"). Advertising, outreach programs, and affordable membership programs, among other methods, are used to invite the public to museums. Restaurants, shops, and theatres have been added as amenities appropriate to hosting behaviour. In some cases, museums have been totally rebuilt in order to provide more of these amenities.

### **WHY DID THIS CHANGE AT THE END OF THE 1980S?**

In an emerging experience economy museums were "suddenly" confronted with rapidly increasing competition of other institutions offering experiences. Being traditionally service oriented, museums found it difficult to compete with institutions specialised in offering experiences, such as themeparks, but also shopping malls. As consumers get used to wonderfully engaging experiences - not only while on vacation, but whenever they shop, dine, or go

out for the day or evening they will demand that every experience they have engage them just as much. Dutch museums need all their potential to sustain their position in this new economy.

As Doering says: "Visitors make use of museums for their own purposes, and from varying perspectives. The museum can influence these outcomes but cannot control them." Museums need to acknowledge the implications of museum going as a leisure time activity. As such, museum going is one of many activities that serves our need for "personal self definitions and agendas for development." Not by coincidence the number of publications is growing in which museums are given advice to implement this new paradigm. If staff were to recognize the full range of benefits their museums offer, they would likely communicate the museum going experience in a more compelling way, reach more effectively different segments of their audience, and establish a reputation for their museums as enjoyable places to visit on a regular basis, according to Neil Kotler.

### **A FUTURE FOR MUSEUMS?**

So, is there a future of museums beyond experiences? Well, when one designs an experience that is so perfect for a visitor providing exactly what he needs right now one cannot help changing that individual. When an experience is customised it is automatically turned into a transformation, which companies layer on

top of experiences just as they layer experiences on top of services. With transformations, the economic offering of a business is to change the individual person as a result of what that person does. In other words, the customer is the product! The individual buyer of the transformation essentially says:

Change me. According to Pine, the company's economic offering isn't the materials it uses, nor the physical things it makes. It's not the processes it executes, nor the encounters it orchestrates. When a company guides transformations, the offering is the individual. Therefore, the exact form and content of any particular transformational offering has to be considered very carefully. The transformation elicitor must first understand its customers' aspirations before it can hope to affect the right change in particular traits whether they be physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual within that individual. These aspirations centre not on some external good or service, but on the customer himself, about what he or she wants to become.

Interestingly, this comes very close to what "new museology" aims.

The new museology movement emerged in the early 1970s. In new museology the museological objectives are geared towards community development, hence the term "community museology". In present day discussions the term "social inclusion" tends to be used more often than "new museology". The ambition is the same. Presentation and preservation of the heritage are considered within the context of social



action and change. Heritage is a resource to be considered and developed within the context of community improvements. The people of the community themselves have to take care of their own heritage, hence the term "popular museology". Key concept is the empowerment of communities as well as individuals. As such, new museology is geared towards transformations.

To tap into the visitor's desire for transformations, first understand the aspirations of the visitors, Pine says.

What more are visitors looking for from the museum, than just the experience itself? What do they want to become? Once the museum determines what aspirational possibilities exist, it can add specific elements into the experience to guide visitors to that end. According to a new Dutch publication by psychologist Susanne Piët, transformational experiences relate to five concepts: security, authenticity, romanticism, meaning and identity. These concepts, or at least some of them, might be developed as core

of the transformational museum experience.

If the museum can understand and guide its visitors to achieve their aspirations, it can provide both meaning to the mission and success to the balance sheet. For there is no economic offerings more valued than helping customers achieve their aspirations. This seems to be a great challenge if not the greatest challenge of museums of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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