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Learning and Having Fun: Visitor Centers Imparting Knowledge Using a New Format

--Experience from the World Heritage Visitor Center in Regensburg

1. TERMINOLOGY

In the past two decades information centers, or so-called visitor centers, which have their origins in English-speaking countries, have become common place in Germany. Although the objectives, target audiences and nature of many of these facilities are similar, there is no consensus in understanding the concept. However, as a rule the visitor center is different than the classical museum: unlike a museum, there are no scholarly inventories, no collections, no objects on loan or in exchange with other museums, and there is no academic staff. Unlike a museum, a visitor center does not purport to comprehensively and exhaustively represent a topic. A visitor center distinguishes itself by affably and concisely interpreting singular historical facts, so that visitors can gain an overview and a first impression of a [in this case] UNESCO World Heritage Site. Regensburg put this into practice with its World Heritage Site Visitor Center. The variety of themes that were eventually presented and the media that were eventually used were influenced by several factors: the availability of meaningful illustrations, the space allowances for the exhibition and the fundamental communication concept all played a role.

2. TRENDS

At present it is the goal of many historical cities to establish visitor centers in conjunction with significant individual monuments and / or ensembles. Outside of economic

considerations, priority is often given to reaching the wider public using modern communication approaches.

The visitor should be the focus. Ideally, the various [human] senses should be addressed through ingenious learning techniques that motivate the public to acquire deeper understanding of the immediate site. Above all the visitor center gives access to and opens deeper levels of understanding of the immediate site. In many countries ‘visitor centers’ have sprung up in the context of organizations, business enterprises, natural heritage sites, etc. Take, for example, the visitor center of the chemical company, BASF, in Ludwigshafen; the UN Visitors' Center in New York; the national park, De Hoge Veluwe, in the Netherlands; the Munich Airport Visitor Center, the Tourism Vancouver Visitor Center, and many more.



The World Heritage Visitor Centre in Regensburg

3. THE REGENSBURG WORLD HERITAGE VISITOR CENTRE

On the 28.5.2011, after three years of planning and construction, the Salzstadel (Salt Warehouse) next to the Stone Bridge was inaugurated as a World Heritage Visitor Center. Following approximately two years of regular operation, the first review could be drawn:

a visitor count (as of 30.4.2013) of 574, 358, [averaging] just under 25,000 [people] per month.

Because of the immediate location to the Stone Bridge, a high traffic pedestrian zone, and because admission was free, and the business hours were visitor-friendly, the Center achieved one main objective: namely, a visit was made as easy and enjoyable as possible. Using simple yet frequently entertaining ways of conveying information, the Center attempts to awaken the visitor's own (intrinsic) motivation [to explore]. A holistic educational approach has been taken, which does not limit visitors to the understanding of a fixed curriculum, but rather builds on modular principles. Based on his or her prior knowledge and interests each guest can pursue an individual course of learning. The feedback from both tourists and the citizens of Regensburg, in particular visiting professionals, has been tremendous right from the start. Users of the installations have praised above all how facile the imparted information is, and how varied and amusing the design of the permanent exhibition is, without being cumbersome.



Non-permanent Exhibition in the ground floor

Since the opening, some necessary improvements have remained and these, especially, will be implemented in the coming months. As such, a showcase about the Niedermünster (Lower Munster) has been added between the display areas 'City Life' and 'City of the Imperial Diet'. The inclusion of this outstanding archaeological monument was crucial as it only became available as a documented educational resource after the opening of the Visitor Center. In the entrance area, a floor plan has been installed to help guests orientate

themselves more easily. Furthermore, the popular Tear-off Sheets with directions to other Regensburg cultural sites have been made easier to handle.

In the coming months the software to the globe in the entrance area is to be overhauled thereby optimizing its user-friendliness. In addition, the services offered in 2013 at the Visitor Center will be supplemented by multilingual audio guides linked to the real World Heritage of the Old Town. An interactive application for Smartphones is to provide another opportunity for tech-savvy users to broaden their horizons.

The space in the basement of the Visitor Center has also lent itself well to special exhibitions. Already since its opening in May 2011 shows have been held here on the subjects of ‘the World Heritage Shopping Experience’, ‘Modern Architecture in the Upper Palatinate’, ‘Old Town Redevelopment in Regensburg’, and ‘Infrastructural Small Buildings. Strategic partners have also been present, among others, the BDA Bavaria, the Bavarian Chamber of Architects, the Circle of Architecture Regensburg, and the Office of Urban Development. For the time being plans, and much more, are being made for exhibits on the Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC), on the children and youth projects of the World Heritage Coordination, and, not to mention, an information display on the projects supported by the federal government’s Special Investment Program for National UNESCO-World Heritage Sites.

4. THE DIFFERENCE IN FEATURES BETWEEN VISITOR CENTERS AND MUSEUMS

A clear-cut distinction between visitor centers and museums is neither possible nor meaningful. More and more often, many of the characteristic features of visitor centers are appearing in newer and modernized museums to supplement the traditional museum mandate. As such the following table provides a current insight into how both facilities communicate information. The parameters named within are by no means to be understood as criteria that exclude.

Comparison between Visitor Centers and Museums

Specifications	Visitor Centre	Museum
Content	Selected, greatly reduced, exemplary, mainly medially communicated	Comprehensive, representative, communication based on originals and media
Scope	Provides an overview	Provides an overview and details
Location	Immediate to main artery of visitors	Defined by other parameters

	Immediate to Cultural and Natural Heritage	
Definition / Mission	<p>A visitor center is a public facility with exhibition character that has a direct relation to a local attraction or the immediate environment. As such it provides an overview and first point of contact to tourists and citizens as well as a central meeting and starting point for guided tours or for individual exploration of the site.</p> <p>Visitor centers are usually connected directly to the cultural or natural heritage sites. Information is usually communicated in an integrated permanent exhibition either in analog or digital form as well as verbally.</p>	<p>A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.</p> <p>(ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly (Vienna, Austria, 24 August 2007))</p>
Communication	Designed for fast perception; textual and medial brevity; interactive elements; limited possibility for in depth study	In depth study possible
Scientific Work	Not a permanent feature of the basic design, nor, in special activities, such as lectures, special exhibitions, guided tours	Conceptually a permanent feature of collections, inventory, research, and more . . .
Target Group	Visitors, citizens, public experts	Special interest groups with an affinity to presented themes
Cross-linkage	On-site cultural landscape features and possibly other cultural assets.	Other museums and cultural assets, i.e. loans, joint exhibitions and projects
Additional Services	Tourist information, possible shop, restaurant catering	Possible shop, restaurant catering
Primary Motivation of Visitors	Gain an overview or information on services, structure, and properties of the cultural or natural heritage site; the visitor center is not the primary aim of a trip; visit special exhibitions	Specific themes of interest; familiarize oneself with a collection; see originals

Selected Visitor Centers

	Theme	Location / Structure	Content	Opening Year	Operator	Target Groups	Admission	Website
Messel Pits Visitor Center (Germany)	Natural World Heritage	On-site / New Building	What is Messel Pit World Heritage? Information about Geology, Climate, Fossils, Landscapes Innovative Exhibits / Cinema / Themed Gardens / Multi-media	2010	Welterbe Grube Messel GmbH	Children, Families, People interested in geology, volcanism, fossils	Adults 10 Euros	http://www.grube-messel.de/de/besucherzentrum.html
World Heritage Visitor Center Regensburg (Germany)	Historical City – World Heritage	On-site / Old Building Historical Salt Warehouse (Salzstadel)	This historical importance of the city / interactive play stations / Multi-media Globe / Permanent Exhibition / Virtual Library / Interactive Model	2011	World Heritage Coordination – Planning and Building Division – City of Regensburg	General Public, Residents, Tourists, Families, Children	Free	http://www.regensburg.de/welterbe/besucherzentrum/59034
La Luz Visitor Center (Spain)	Natural Heritage-National Park	On-site / New Building	Park Observatory (natural and historic resources) Exhibition Space / Audio-visual Presentation Room / Viewing Platforms / Model	2004	Naturpark El Valle	Children, Families, People interested in mountain climbing	-	http://www.turismodemurcia.es/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=118&itemid=130&lang=es
Culloden Battlefield Visitor Center (Scotland)	Historical and Archaeological Heritage	On-site / New Building	What is the Battlefield of Culloden? Film? Interactive Figures / Audio-visual Content / Rooftop Viewing	2007	National Trust for Scotland	General Public, People interested in archaeology	Adults 10 pounds (12 Euros)	http://www.nts.org.uk/Culloden/PPF/VisitorCentre/
Durham World Heritage Site Visitor Center (England)	Historical City – World Heritage	On-site / Old Building (Almshouse)	What is a World Heritage Site? What is the Significance of Durham’s World Heritage? Interactive Map / Film	-	World Heritage Site Coordination	General Public, Tourists	Free	http://www.durhamworldheritagesite.com/visit/whvisitor-centre
The Grand Canyon Visitor Center— South Rim (U.S.A.)	Natural World Heritage – National Park	On-site / New Building	Outside Displays with Information on the National Park / Inside Displays with an Interactive Travel Planner, 3-D Map, Video Theater, Multi-media Exhibition Cube	-	-	Travelers	-	http://www.nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit/visitorcenters.htm
Ennstal National Park Visitor Center (Austria)	Natural Heritage - National Park	On-site / New Building	Information on Hiking and Mountain Bike Routes / Exhibits / Diorama / Forest Cinema / Discovery Cubicle	-	Nationalpark o. O. Kalkalpen GmbH	Children, Families, People interested in hiking	Adults 4 Euros	http://www.nationalparkregion.com/nationalparks/besucherzentrum/besucherzentrum-ennstal.html
Wadden Sea Visitor Center UNESCO—Natural World Heritage (Germany)	Natural World Heritage	On-site / New Building	What are Tidal Flats? What is the Wadden Sea Park? Saltwater Aquarium / Model / Aerial Photo / Video / Educational Games	2011	Nationalpark Wattenmeer	Children, Families, People interested in natural heritage	Adults 6.50 Euros	http://www.wattenmeerhaus.de/
Whakapapa Visitor Center- Tongariro National Park (New Zealand)	Natural World Heritage – National Park	On-site / New Building	Hiking Information / Exhibits on Volcanoes, Maori Mythology, Flora & Fauna / Model Map / Audio-visual Displays	First Facility build in the 1960’s / Modernized in 2001	Department of Conservation	General Public, People interested in hiking	Free	http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/national-parks/tongariro/activities/whakapapa-visitor-centre/

5. SUCCESS FACTORS

Establishing a visitor center is a complex task demanding different requirements than the development of museums. Based on the success of the Regensburg facility, some parameters, which were well received by visitors, have been specifically identified:

A. Location, Location, Location

A visitor center must be easily accessible and ideally located along a tourist route. Because of its association to a cultural or natural heritage site, a visitor center's reception varies depending on the clarity of its spatial relationships and opportune accessibility and visibility.

B. Interdisciplinary Development Team

As a rule establishing a visitor center and, in particular, an integrated permanent exhibition requires a breadth of knowledge and skills that cannot be found in singular expertise. Consequently, interdisciplinary collaboration that is as broad as possible, well-guided and under clear and strong leadership is the best way to meet multi-layered and complex requirements.

C. Didactical Reduction and Options based in Science

Less is more. This mnemonic applies more than ever to the contextual insights of current cognitive and motivational psychology. To gain an overview and to assimilate some important points of content, it is essential to reduce the number of facts to a good representative few. Because a visitor center can claim neither to be comprehensive nor fully representative, courage is required to leave this gap open.

D. Varying Methods

Communication methods that are always the same [i.e. using the same medium] can lead to visitor boredom over the long run. It becomes necessary then to use a variety of interesting delivery methods (i.e. visual, auditory, interactive, etc.) in order to stimulate as best as possible a curiosity and desire to visit.

E. More than Informing: Offering a Wide Range of Activities

Findings within educational psychology show that individuals remember 'experiential' and 'discovery-based' content best. Ideally, visitor centers should only attend to those communication methods that lend themselves to active participation.

F. Changing the Content of an Exhibition / Supplementing with Special Exhibits

Temporary exhibitions provide a wonderful opportunity to keep the thematic interest of regular visitors over the long term and to reach new target groups. Of course, one should always keep in mind the theme of the facility.

G. A Holistic Approach versus Absolute Knowledge

In conceptualizing a visitor center, it helps to move away from a theoretical model, and to define a set curriculum for content. The guiding principal of ‘acquiring a minimal amount of knowledge’ is not very productive for visitors. On the other hand, more promising is an approach based on the modular design principle, and the development of appropriate programs for different target, interest, and age groups.

H. Evaluating and Adapting Content

Changes in visitor behavior and / or visitor profiles must be acted upon. For this reason, regular evaluations of the facility are necessary and adjustments or additions should be made accordingly (e.g. [providing services] in additional languages when target groups diversify).

6. OUTLOOK

Visitor centers can never replace classical museums with their comprehensive collections. They can, however, create accessible programs and, thereby, appeal to segments of the population that do not visit museums. Concerning natural and cultural heritage sites, visitor centers provide a great opportunity to stimulate interest and to add new dimensions by presenting an overview of content. In communicating background information and drawing attention to specific details, visitors can assume new perspectives and learn from them. Most importantly, well-designed visitor centers entertain and enrich the visitor’s experience by using a variety of set methods to communicate information. In this way the visitor can identify with the cultural or natural heritage more easily. Given that people willfully protect only those things they know and value, visitor centers can make an important contribution to the sustainable conservation of our natural and cultural heritage.

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A Translator's Note: Bracketed text, i.e. [], has been included by the translator, Andrew H. Lukat, to provide greater clarity.