

## **Education, Edutainment or Event – An Outlook into the Future of Prehistory Museums**

In modern society archaeological museums cover a topic that is crucial for all human societies - past and present: They try to explain our origins. Since Charles Darwin published his groundbreaking work "On the Origin of Species" which radically challenged the way we perceived ourselves the proofs of our origin are displayed no longer in ancient cathedrals but in modern museum buildings.

The range of our social memory and of human evolution differs dramatically. The task of prehistoric archaeologists is to explore the area beyond the last junction between both and to recall the memories of our origins to the consciousness of modern society. Only archaeologists are able to carry out this task which is their major designation. The public office they hold affords more than busy archiving and cataloguing but is an obligation to interfere and appear in public. Their essential agent of interference is the museum. Since the beginning of archaeological research in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the range of our prehistory has been expanded back constantly. This inconceivable long human past imposes an obligation to project a successful future of humans. Therefore our prehistoric past grew to a powerful authority. Remembrance is part of our planning of future. Modern society has invented the archaeological museum as a new form of social memory.

The archaeological museum is constructed by four basic elements:

- objects (mute witnesses of the past)
- knowledge (the scientific interpretations that fill the gaps between the objects)
- persons (visitors and staff)
- spaces (the architecture).

These four elements are constantly interacting and change the appearance of the museum - a process that is stimulated by actual trends in the society.

Archaeological museums have changed their presentation dramatically within the last decade because information exchange and learning has changed dramatically in modern society. Meanwhile, the use of new media in exhibitions is an integral element of most newly founded museums. Beyond the art museum, scenography, film, audio text and info-PC are part of everyday museum reality. Generally speaking, the museum and its modes of presentation have adapted to the technological standards of society.

At the same time and as a result of an expanding leisure industry the habits of museum visitors have changed. Leisure time culture has transformed into event culture. From the automobile agency to the DIY market – companies and service providers outside the culture industry regularly utilize modules from the cultural building set. Elements of dance, the visual arts, music, sports or vari ete are recombined with gastronomic events and sales presentations in order to form full-day leisure events. Complemented by raffles and prize draws an attractive package is created that has a high entertainment value for the entire family and is, most often, made available free of charge. This mixture of commerce and culture is a competitor for the traditional cultural institutions that should not be underestimated. The culture industry itself regularly uses media based production strategies for its events in order to generate high frequencies of visitors. In order for the cultural institutions to be noticed in this concerto of many voices the dimension of their productions and their respective event character must go beyond a critical level. Beyond this level the public is normally willing to pay high entrance fees. Moreover, the mass media have discovered archaeology as an attractive and lucrative theme – archaeology is a best seller. Glossy magazines and TV stations popularize archaeological themes with considerable effort. TV productions combining science with theatre of science are scheduled to show during prime time. Scenes in feature movies and animations put to life the inanimate objects of archaeology. History is being arranged as a capturing panorama of images, and a big audience looks onto its own past with fascination.

The archaeological museum, therefore, is no longer the only place where research results are presented and archaeological knowledge is transferred into the wider public. New formats of

presentation in the mass media reach millions of people. At the same time the popularization of archaeology in the mass media has changed the museum's visitors mode of perception. The public expects to be treated to a form of science that is opulently produced and captivatingly presented, and thus of high entertainment value. This emotionalizing of archaeological themes is definitely a chance for the museums. With the help of the mass media they can, for the first time ever, reach a broad spectrum of the population, including people who would not count among the traditional museum goers. The museum can in this way fascinate children and young people, the visitors of tomorrow, for the prehistory of man, thereby fulfilling its educational task better than ever.

However, for the archaeologist this popularization also runs the risk of losing interpretive authority with regard to the archaeological objects and the reconstruction of our past, and, as a worst case, we risk popular prejudices taking reign over scientific understanding. Another danger arises when the museum's mode of presentation no longer matches the audience's expectations. This can result in a turning away from the museum altogether. Against the backdrop of this social development the museums must, in order to remain competitive, find a way between the worlds of science and of entertainment.

Since the 1990s the deployment of technical image and sound systems has resulted in a noticeably higher attractiveness of presentations in archaeological museums. However, today the use of such technology is no longer innovative. A further increase in technological support promises little benefit for the museums as they are simply incapable to keep up with the technological means of the mass media and their possibilities to medialize content, particularly against the backdrop of ever shorter periods of those technologies' half-life. Hardly any archaeological museum can afford to modernize its regular exhibitions in cycles of 3 to 5 years.

Over the past ten years archaeological museums have, in addition to the technological revitalization of their exhibitions, opened themselves up to a broader public by introducing experimental archaeology and the related concept of 'living archaeology', turning prehistoric techniques and life styles into a true spectacle. From modest beginnings in the scientific discipline itself the interest jumped over into the public domain and created a boom of leisure time archaeologists. Today Stone Age hunters, Celts, Romans or Vikings appear at huge mass events and use exoticism for commercial gain. Museums have initiated this trend, and profited from it. In order to survive in our current day event culture the archaeological museum must transcend the protected area of the exhibition and venture out and into society itself:

One element in this strategy is to offer school based as well as extra mural learning modules. School classes have for a long time been a target audience for museums. However, life long learning has also become a central task in our society. Adult groups, therefore, will in future constitute another important audience group who can be served by the museum through its knowledge and expertise. Workshops and weekend seminars for "silver agers" are an important component of the leisure industry. This goes hand in hand with co-operations with the region's private industry whose products or services might have interfaces with the museum. For example, guided tours through a museum in combination with tours through a company can create special synergies. Companies might also use the museum as a venue for a culture tourism event, or even as a sales venue for their customers.

Another element is joint ventures with tourism operators. Archaeological museums have a great potential in terms of regional, national or international tourism. This does not necessarily mean that the organizing museum itself must also be the destination. It can also be the point of departure for a journey to other archaeological sites. Existing scientific contacts with colleagues in other museums can be used as a special expertise and differentiating factor vis-à-vis traditional tour operators.

Add to these public spectacles such as Roman or Viking days which by now are already a standard element in the repertoire of many archaeological museums. In addition to these 'living archaeology' events evening productions around light and sound effects with an archaeological focus are another way to produce public interest and gain audiences.

Finally, we should also consider the use of museums as a platform for cultural events such as concerts, public readings, theatre, dance or markets with a special theme.

Museums must aim to create a network between their own themes and society in general. Accordingly, in the Neanderthal we try to develop an archaeological landscape of discovery which offers something of interest to different target groups, and for different tastes among our visitors:

The famous discovery site is an important building block of the valley. It was however completely destroyed during limestone extraction along with eight other caves in the valley. Until 2002 it was an industrial wasteland. In 1997, there was the sensation of the sediments being found from the Feldhof Cave that survived undamaged on the floor of the valley the last 144 years. It was possible to recover stone tools, the remains of fauna and human bones at the excavations in 1997. A second excavation campaign took place in 2000. More than 60 fragments of human fossils could be excavated. Three of them fit to the original skeleton from 1856. Beyond this, two further Neanderthals could be discovered. The Feldhof Cave itself is lost forever, but it is possible now to have a careful approach to the ancient topography. The same audio system as in the museum provides information on the valley's natural and cultural history. The site can be reached by following the Time Axis which, with its cultural milestones escorts visitors through the evolution of the genus Homo over more than two million years. A grid set in the ground documents the discovery site's location within the global coordinate system. Stone benches invite visitors to relax and absorb the surroundings. It was from this very spot that the idea of „Neanderthal Man“ started its voyage around the world.

The „Human Traces“ sculptured path begins opposite the museum where the Mettmann stream flows into the River Düsseldorf. 10 European artists were invited whose work and materials were compatible with the idea of natural conservation. Their contributions deal with the conflict between humans and the environment. They challenge us to reflect on the nature of humankind. The locations do not allow monumentality, rather they lend themselves to “cautious artistic interference”. The project's concern is reflecting the finite nature of human creation and on the question of what traces remain. The „Human Traces“ project has created an artistic monument of international proportions in the Neanderthals's landscape of recollection. The same audio system as in the museum and at the discovery place featuring interviews with the artists provides interesting insights into the sculptures.

The old museum was turned into a stone-age workshop - a pedagogical action centre where weekend seminars and workshops for all groups of our society are on offer. From here various guided tours take place: on archaeology, along the sculpture path, on the valley's natural history or to the game reserve and its animals, since a reserve with re-bred aurochs (*Bos primigenius*), wild horses and bison is also part of the museum context. This broad spectrum of attractions outside the museum enables visitors to look at the museum and its contents from various, ever changing perspectives.

The Neanderthal museum's permanent exhibition was changed in 2006 after ten years. We decided against a further increase in technical support. Our aim was to continue with the successful idea of an interdisciplinary theme oriented museum, to retain the existing exhibition in its basic structure and to modernize only parts of it. In order to achieve this goal the entire graphics of the exhibition including the descriptive panels was re-ordered and re-organized. The panels moved from their peripheral position into the visitors' central level of perception. The texts remained as concise as before. However, they were given a markedly larger visual platform on room high coloured panels which also hold additional information. Each panel has a pictogram in its upper third, functioning as a large format sign that informs visitors about the panel's content already from a distance. In addition to the central text, visual information (a photo of the object or a graphical image) is presented, together with secondary text. Alternatively, a display screen with movie clips can be integrated into a panel. At least once per theme room one of the lower thirds of a panel is occupied by a large format photograph with secondary text. These additions to the text add import to it. Information is structured deeper and on more levels, and the transfer of information is enhanced. This results in markedly more attractive reading texts for the visitors.

In the old exhibition scenic elements had a central position. Some of these were exchanged and replaced and new elements were added. One of these is the “replacement parts human” who integrates all the known elements of medical prosthetics. Another element is the “discovery workbench” which presents technical innovations from over 100 000 years from various fields of work in the form of an over dimensional work place. This includes the “Head Cinema” with movies on the ice age art that were taken from the Wendel collection.

The highly successful audio system, which is regularly awarded the highest scores by our visitors, was complemented by audio texts for children. The Neanderthal boy Kwakiuk (fox) who already welcomes them on special children’s pages on the museum’s website directs our young visitors through the museum along selected audio stations.

As a further new element researchers’ boxes were integrated into the exhibition. They are the central point of access for in-depth information. The boxes have a digital side and an object side. The previously stand-alone Info-PCs were embedded on the digital side; their digital content was continuously expanded during the past ten years. Today, they contain the largest digital repository on human evolution in German language which is only accessible during a museum visit. This digital compendium was complemented on the object side by study units presenting recent research results, important new findings and data. A system of drawers and covers gives access to detailed information. Research findings in form of print media are continuously updated in order to present the latest state of knowledge.

With its updated conceptual design the museum continues the successful combination of various media. This media mix is in line with the contemporary form of learning and information transfer in our society. It furthermore adheres to standards of scientific work in archaeology and anthropology. The digitalization of museum contents will progress further, and visitors will in future profit from this during a museum visit, or even at their PC at home. At two points the Neanderthal museum’s new permanent exhibition is interlinked with the Internet. In the thematic section “Tools and Knowledge” visitors can freely search the digital encyclopaedia Wikipedia. In the theme section “Environment and Nutrition” a world-wide geographical search via PC is possible, based on satellite maps and images accessed via Google Map.

An important task of the exhibition, to be further strengthened in future, is to visualize and make transparent the scientific process. Ten years of experience with the old exhibition have demonstrated that visitors are not just interested in scientific results. They also want to know how data is sampled and how the analytical process resulting in scientific knowledge is organized. Increasingly complex technical processes in the modern society have created a growing distance between every day tools and appliances and their production. Visitors take great interest in finding out how these discrete processes work. This is where the research boxes come into play. Through continuous updates they present recent research findings and communicate these to visitors almost in real time. Information which the visitor might have learnt from a daily newspaper is mirrored and commented here. This enables us to keep up to date and to buffer the ageing process of museographic presentation which all temporary exhibitions experience, due to low resources of finances and personnel.

The opening of the museum towards society can only be successful if the museum becomes visible as a place of active research. Cultural and scientific credibility can only be attained through high quality research. On this basis the museum can popularize without loosing its credibility. Also, through research and the direct transfer of its results into the public domain the museum achieves continuous updating. In the fast-paced society of today this is the best protection against the collecting of museal dust.

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