

ASSESSING VISITOR EXPERIENCES AT THE IRON GATES HYDRO-ELECTRICAL POWER PLANT (ROMANIA)

EVALUAREA EXPERIENȚELOR VIZITATORILOR LA MUZEUL HIDROCENTRALEI PORȚILE DE FIER (ROMÂNIA)

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Abstract: Guest books are acknowledged as a means of public dialogue and have been used as a source of information regarding visitor experiences in museums. The current paper focuses on an exploratory case study, namely the experiences visitors have at the Iron Gates Hydro-electrical power plant in Romania. According to the classification of Pekaric et.al. 1999 and using the entries in the visitor books for 12 months, the study highlights the fact that while Object experiences are dominant, there is no doubt that for quite many visitors, there is a feeling of pride and ownership obvious in their short narratives.

Key-words: *museum, visitor book, satisfying experiences, interpretative techniques*

Cuvinte cheie: *muzeu, caiet de impresii, experiențe satisfăcătoare, tehnici interpretative.*

1. INTRODUCTION

During the last decades, exhibits and exhibition techniques shifted their focus from the objects displayed to interpreting the underlying concepts and contexts in ways that engage the public and promote learning (Rennie & Williams, 2006). At the same time, numerous studies started analysing and debating what visitors want and what they value when visiting a museum.

Some of the earliest research on reasons and motivations of museum goes belong to Falk and Dierking (1992, p. 6), who considered that “The visitor’s experience can be thought of as a continually shifting interaction among personal, social and physical contexts”. The personal context refers to visitor’s interests, motivations and concerns, the social context is related to the visitor’s companions, while the museum itself provides the physical context. However, the museum visitor experience is ‘an ephemeral and constructed relationship that uniquely occurs each time a visitor interacts with a museum’ (Falk, 2009, p. 84). After decades of research and practice in the museum field, they updated the model by adding a new dimension, arguing that the key to understanding the museum visitor

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experience is the construct of identity, which runs through all facets of the museum visitor experience (p. 9), since ‘a museum visit itself is strongly shaped by the expectations an individual develops prior to a visit, based upon his or her own identity-related need, as well as by the expectations and views of the larger socio-cultural context’ (Falk & Dierking, 2013, p. 10).

Following a seminal research in nine Smithsonian museums investigating the experiences that visitors find satisfying in museums, Pekarik et.al. (1999) identified four such categories: Object experiences, Cognitive experiences, Introspective experiences and social experiences, including 14 items in total. For the first cluster, *Object experiences*, the focus of the experience is the material culture object, namely seeing ‘the real thing’, seeing rare/ uncommon/ valuable things, being moved by beauty, or thinking what it would be like to own such things. *Cognitive experiences* stem primarily from gaining information or knowledge and enriching one’s understanding, while *introspective experiences* are those in which ‘the individual turns inward, to feelings and experiences that are essentially private, usually triggered by an object or a setting in the museum’ (Pekarik, 1999, p. 158). *Social experiences* stem from the interaction with someone else, wither ‘spending time’ with family or friends or watching one’s children learn.

Analysing how visitors approach museums and what types of ‘museum experience’ they are looking for, Doering (1999) concluded that these four major types of museum experiences tend to conflict with one another as visitors are diverse in their interests, which means that museums should equally respect and consider as valid each of them.

Regardless of the starting point for analysing museum experiences, researchers agree on its complexity, precisely because of the multiple dimensions of a visitor’s life it involves.

Quite frequently, visitors offer some insights into these experiences by leaving their comments in the visitor books, available in museums worldwide. Referred to as *odd things* (Romesburg, 2014), *cultural and technological fossils* (Ross, 2017), *familiar artifacts in tourism, treasuries of comments, impressions and observations* (Noy, 2008) or *loyal witness* (Marinescu, 2013), visitor books supply the public spaces for expressing strong public opinion in three sentences or less, being one of the last remaining formats for slowly handwritten sentiment (Morris, 2011).

Researchers agree on the fact that visitor books are a source of access to audiences, revealing directly or indirectly issues that visitors care deeply about (Pekarik, 1997), a means of public dialogue (Andriotis, 2009; Morris, 2011; Magliacani et.al., 2018), providing many advantages: they are produced independently of the research (Macdonald, 2005; Noy, 2008), they provide the views of the visitors on the exhibition and its subjective experience (Macdonald, 2005; Miglietta and Boero, 2012) as visitors take on the role of commentators and evaluators (Ross, 2017), while being a medium of free speech and open wells of feeling-some of the humblest, yet most dangerous outlets for anonymous writing in public places (Morris, 2011). Consequently, they are ‘self-revealing and honest

research instruments' offering practical insights into experiences of phenomenological value (Andriotis, 2009).

Since only a small portion of the visitors write in the visitor book (depending on the museum, between 1 and 20 per cent), they cannot be used as a systematic or the most appropriate means for analysing visitor opinion; nevertheless, they are a good starting point (Museum of Country Life, 2011).

Museum guest books, although seen as simultaneously public and intimate, with unclear audiences and vague intentions (Romesburg, 2014, p. 449), containing 'intelligent, articulate, sophisticated and sometimes vehement comments' (Alexandre, 2000, p. 86) or rather 'institutionally sanctioned rants' should be seen as an integral part of an exhibition, testifying for the impact of the exhibition on individuals (Macdonald, 2005; Morris, 2011), since museum users engage according to their own experiences and from their own ideological perspectives (Coffee, 2013). It is precisely the 'beneficial and rhythmic oscillations of opinions ranging from ecstasy, praise and thanks to reserved and even straightforwardly disapproving manifestations' that give value to the guest books in museums (Marinescu, 2013, p. 160).

The main aim of the current research was to inquire about visitors' perception of the museum of the hydro-electric powerplant and analyse 3 particular topics related to museum-visiting experiences, namely: attractions, satisfying experiences within the museum and style of comments.

2. MUSEUM SETTING: ACCESS TO EXPERIENCES

2.1. Iron Gates Hydro-electric powerplant

The first projects for a hydro-electric power plant on the Danube were carried on during the pre-war era, but the country lacked the economic power needed for such a project. Things changed after 1960, due to the politics of massive industrialization and the need for electricity for both Romania and Serbia (Yugoslavia at that time), but mostly due to the centralized economy that was able to direct all resources towards this massive objective, hydropower embodying the dream of social and economic modernisation, as well as specific values and symbols of communist ideology (Cretan & Vesalon, 2017). In 1956, the two governments agreed on joint works for the Danube at the Iron Gates and the following years, the technical and economic explanatory report was achieved by teams from both countries. On September 1964, works began at the *Iron Gates Hydro-Energetic and Navigation System*. In April 1972 the hydropower lake was ready to be filled with waters; the inauguration of the powerplant took place on May, 16th, 1972. It is the largest hydroelectric power plant on the Danube and one of the largest in Europe. It produced 20 per cent of the electricity production during the communist period.

While there is no doubt about the economic need for such a construction, this project also had traumatic consequences at the local level due to the coercive relocation of the local population, the destruction and loss of their homes and communities (Văran & Crețan, 2018). The official announcement of displacement

was made in November 1966 and the relocation took place between 1967 and 1972. On the Romanian bank of the Danube, there were some 14,500 inhabitants whose lives were affected, two settlements (Ogradena and Plavisevita) were completely flooded and relocated, while another 4 villages were never reconstructed (Curcan, 2002). The islet of Ada-Kaleh, inhabited mostly by Turkish ethnics, was completely flooded.

2.2 Museum of the *Iron Gates* Hydro-electric powerplant

The museum of the *Iron Gates* Hydro-Electric powerplant was opened in 1976, presenting general characteristics of the Danube and the powerplant as well as relics from various archeological cultures and settlements in the area. They are exhibited in the main hall next to the entry. Here, visitors can also see an old water mill, considered as the predecessor of the Pelton modern turbine. In the memory of people from Ada-Kaleh islet, the museum also presents a glimpse in a traditional Turkish home from the islet. The main attraction however is the descent to the Turbines Hall; exiting the elevator, visitors enter a somewhat narrow and long balcony from where they can see the entire turbines hall in the Romanian part of the powerplant. This part of the visit implies the compulsory presence of a museum guide, who also explains what visitors can see and some technical information about the dam and the powerplant itself. It takes 10 to 15 minutes the most, with no possibility to linger more. If visitors have more questions, they are answered in the main hall.

3. DATA AND METHODS

The strategy chosen for the current research was informed by interpretative techniques described in the international literature, despite a relatively informal and open approach in the beginning. Initially, we just leafed through the visitor remarks and commented on some of them, considering the questions asked by visitors during the guided tour, main attraction points, expectations and deficiencies that visitors perceive.

After a thorough documentation about similar approaches worldwide, we read the book containing 348 entries (July 2021- July 2022), in line with the recommendations of Pekarik (1999) who proved that around 200 comments is practical to analyse since this number of forms can be coded by hand without much difficulty. We tried to identify recurrent matters, which we used as major themes. Subsequently, when transcribing each and every entry, we divided the comments into two categories: neutral/ generic ones and those that would be further analysed, focusing on the style of comments (number of words, forms of address), major experience type and theme. Entries with only the date and signature, those that gave a one-word comment such as *good*, *interesting* or *thanks*, as well as those that could not be translated were considered generic comments. Then, we counted instances of particular kind of comments, falling into a particular category or sub-category of satisfying experiences at the museum, namely object experiences, cognitive, introspective and social, as identified by Pekarik et.al. (1999).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The visitor book at the Museum of the *Iron Gates* Hydro-Electrical Power Plant is an unstructured book with blank pages, where visitors can write down their comments on the exhibition or make any sign. There is no header whatsoever, no sections to be filled, no prompts, no questions asked. It is placed near the museum exit, so as to allow an ‘audience-contributed gesture of closure’ (Katriel, 2013, p. 71). The one that we analysed included 348 entries, each of them dated, from July 2021 until July 2022. Considering that the total number of visitors to the museum is around 21.000 persons for the above mentioned period, it means that less than 2 percent of the visitors signed the book. This is a much lower share than what was reported by other researchers in the Western museums (Macdonald, 2005; Romesburg, 2014). Those that wrote in the visitor book have different socio-demographic profile, are aged 8 to 80 years old, originating mainly from Romania (there were only 37 entries in foreign languages). Reading the entries, we were surprised by the the small towns as well as large cities from across all the regions from which people came, usually not alone (a third of them with family, 15% with friends or tour groups). For almost half of the visitors that signed the books, we cannot infer if they visited alone or accompanied by other persons. Although there are numerous examples of visitors providing their full name and place of origin after the comment (women wrote 46% of them, men 35%, while for the remaining 17%, there are two names mentioned), for approximately 60% of the entries, the name is not given.

4.1. Style of comments

Almost three quarters of the entries are just one or two sentences long, having less than 10 words, expressing gratitude to the staff of the museum or enthusiasm for what they saw and learned during the guided tour. They are what Macdonald (2005, p. 127) termed *short evaluative comments*, which are clearly a significant form of visitor-book entry. This is similar to findings in other museums and cultures (Macdonald, 2015; Ross, 2017, Magliacani et.al., 2018), considered as reactions, since they are too brief to be structured as even small/ partial narratives (Noy, 2020). Only longer texts include, apart from congratulations, various comments related to a particular element from the museum or feelings triggered by the visit. Despite the fact that most of the entries provide the full name, city of residence and sometimes even the job of the person writing in the visitor book, few comments include personal stories pointing to an introspective experience. Only 9% of the analysed entries have more than 20 words, and they provided the best insights and information for this study.

Most of the entries have a *positive tone*. The generic comments account for 22 percent of all entries, while there are only 4 ambivalent (both positive and negative) and no negative comments whatsoever. That does not mean that there are only satisfied visitors, only that the politer visitors sign in the guest book, clearly a result of the ‘guest book effect’ (Pkarik, 1997; Ross, 2007),

with ‘appreciative responses given out from guests to their hosts thereby affirming that the museum has accomplished its rhetorical mission’ (Katriel, 1997, p. 71). Moreover, there is a separate book, called *Suggestions and complaints*, next to the *Visitor book*, where visitors generally write if they are not satisfied with the museum staff, auxiliary facilities, schedule time, basically administrative issues.

Unlike the findings from museums in the Western countries, guest book entries from the Museum of the *Iron Gates* Hydro-Electric power plant are not in the form of a dialogue (Coffee, 2013) and do not refer to a previous comment. The enthusiasm for the museum is clear, despite its small size and limited displays, words as *amazing*, *fascinating* or *extraordinary* being found in almost all entries. More than a third of the entries mention the desire to visit again, while there is also evidence of repeat visits after a very long period of time:

‘I came back today after 30 years. I was just as impressed today as the first time I visited’

‘We, former students of the Faculty of Electrotechnics of *Ghe. Asachi* University in Iasi, came back after 50 years. We were simply floored by emotion, to visit again this engineering masterpiece, half of century later, and to refresh our memory. May God give strengths and know-how to those that run the power plant today!’

4.2. Dominant types of museum experiences

Considering that the main attraction at the Museum of the *Iron Gates* Hydro-electric Power plant is the power plant itself, we were not surprised that 54% of the visitors appreciated the *Object experiences* (seeing ‘the real thing’/seeing rare/ uncommon/ valuable things) as the most satisfying:

‘for me, visiting the power plant is a dream come true (at 59 years old)! I find it spectacular and monumental!’

‘the entire structure is impressive!’

‘this is a jewel of the Romanian engineering!’

‘impressive, spectacular, nothing short of brilliant’

‘I came back today after 30 years. It was just as impressive as the first time!’

‘this is a construction of striking and unmatched amplexness. There won’t be something similar built too soon. We should value it accordingly!’

There were a few of the *Object experiences* which were not focused on the power plant itself, but rather on the several authentic pieces on display in the entrance hall:

‘we marvelled at the valuable pieces displayed, which were a nice surprise’

‘the power plant is interesting. But so is the collection.’

‘a very impressive display of the history and culture of this remarkable place’
‘fragments of the lost history are wonderful’

A fifth of the visitors that signed the visitor book were taken by the presentation given by the museum guides and found the *cognitive experiences* as the most satisfying. Some of them pointed to gaining information or knowledge:

‘I liked finding out about the entire functioning process of a hydro electrical power plant. It really is very interesting.’

‘the visit allowed us to find out the reality of many things that we benefit from and usually take for granted’

‘we were pleased and impressed by what we found out’

Others indicated that the visit to the museum helped enriching their knowledge:

‘the guide’s explanations certainly enriched our understanding of the events. This is valuable information about Romania’s history’

‘the exhibits are impressive. Thank you for helping us better understand our history and not only’

‘this is interesting and captivating! There are so many beautiful things that are worth seeing and finding their story! Thank you so much for answering all our questions!’

More than a quarter of the visitors that signed the book appear to be taken by *introspective experiences*, the focus being on feelings, private experiences and memories, triggered following a visit to the museum. In this particular instance, visitors recall the former communist period when the power plant was built and the sacrifices people made, either those that were forcefully deployed, or those that worked very hard to build it:

‘we were impressed by the sheer size of the project, but also by the beautiful and harsh story of the community whose homes were swallowed up by the Danube’

‘this is one of the greatest achievements of the people from the Golden Age’

‘I am overwhelmed by the size of the works carried on here. It made me think about all those who laboured here and the Ceausescu’s’.

‘We are bowled over what we saw here. Congratulations to our parents and grandparents for all their hard work!’

‘seeing this great power plant, it made me think about all the people that made it possible. All our respect to all of them. They should be honoured. And never be forgotten!’

‘I lived to see what man can achieve. It is impressive and moving at the same time!’

There is also a pervading sense of belonging or connectedness (Pekarik et.al., 1999), as well as pride, ownership and identity bound up in the visitors' sense of national history and what they perceive as identity landmarks for the Romanian people:

'This is so impressive. It makes you proud to be Romanian'

'this is a place full of history and national pride'

'this is a wonderful place, testifying for the richness of Romania. We are so proud of this land'

'Simply beautiful. We love you, Romania!'

'It makes us proud to be Romanians and to have such a structure, which is a page of our history'.

Fewer visitors have indicated that the interaction with a family member or a fellow peer was the most satisfying experience in the museum. While most of them refer to spending time with family and friend, there are also testimonies of satisfaction that stems from seeing one's children learn new things:

'I revisited the museum after 30 years. What a joy to be able to show it to my children and visit together!'

5. CONCLUSIONS

During the last two decades, ever more museums have started focusing on communicating the master narrative as well as audience participation, trying to engage as much as possible their audience. The interaction between museums as settings of experiences and visitors, who experience a particular museum, can also be grasped from the comments within the visitors' book, which can be quite informative for museum curators and managers.

The current paper focused on the experiences that tourists value when visiting the *Iron Gates* Hydro-Electrical power plant, using the comments from the visitor book, as a form of public dialogue. Following an interpretative approach, we established that the object experiences are the most valued by the tourists, while the Cognitive and Introspective experiences are a close second. This approach to measure experiences in this particular museum provides us a better understanding of what visitors value and what they are looking for. These findings should be relevant for museum management and museum guides, as many visitors stress the fact they were surprised or impressed by what they found out following the visit to the museum.

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