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Framing and Interpretation of Architectural Education

Cristina Claudia POPESCU¹

Abstract

The article analyses the redesign of the Museum of the University of Architecture and Urbanism Ion Mincu (UAUIM) in Bucharest. The second-hand life of the didactic objects of the Bucharest School of Architecture tells a nostalgic story of lost values, of bits and pieces saved from various historical assaults (demolitions, change of ownership, etc.). The organisation and the display of the collection entails a psychological, emotional and cognitive price payed by the curator in order to facillitate the visitor's acces. Another price to be payed is the long term investment in the preservation of the objects and the interpretation and communication of the collections. The redesign of the UAUIM Museum can be seen as a form of „frame extension”. The old museum, molded by the historical circumstances of its birth, was extended, in order to attract a broader audience. Not through the introduction of “entertainment” but through a shift of interest: from architectural details (plaster molds, demolition fragments) to all the documents relevant to the history of architecture and the history of the Bucharest School of Architecture. Thus the relevance of the museum was encreased. Drawing on a personal experience of the framing of the exhibits and of visitor interaction, the article compares what the curators envisioned and what was experienced by the visitors. The comparation and analysis can be used to guide the interpretation of a collection which has grown meanwhile justifying its reframing as an Exhibition and Documentary Center. Some proposals are made for changing the collection presentation on its website and on its Facebook page.

Keywords: *spatial design; visitor experience; framing; interpretation.*

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze the redesign of the Collection of the University of Architecture and Urbanism Ion Mincu (UAUIM) in Bucharest, starting from an old collection. The purpose of the redesign was to open up the museum to the general public. The brief of the redesign also comprised a certain interest in the increased relevance of the collection, the creation of a timeline, preserving as much as possible from the old display as a means of reaffirming the museum and the University's tradition and of cutting down expenses. The old collection, molded by the historical circumstances of its birth, was reframed, put in a new display layout, in order to attract a broader audience. The analysis is a qualitative one, although it does not use interviews with visitors but only the memory of my interactions, as a guide, with them. These interactions, as well as my interaction with curators and exposure, at various events or visits, form the 'subject' of the analysis.

On the basis of my two-year experience with a growing collection and with an original mode of exposure I modelled my guided tours and promotion. The web site [4], created at the beginning of my experience with the museum, does not speak about the way the objects are displayed, although the redesign project participated in the 2015 Architectural Biennial [1].

The second-hand life of the didactic objects of the Bucharest School of Architecture tells a nostalgic story of lost values, of bits and pieces saved from various historical assaults (demolitions, relocations, death, change of ownership, exile, etc.).

The organisation and the display of the collection entails a psychological, emotional and cognitive price paid by the curator in order to facilitate the visitor's access. The visual impact of the exposed objects, including archival documents and prints, drawings and photography, is complex as it encourages a diagonal reading: "a story that you read diagonally, making mental associations between things that are exposed." [5].

2. Theoretical Background

The U.A.U.I.M. museum's redesign is, in fact, an installation (an idea expressed by professor Augustin Ioan), a mechanism which infuses "display environments with an artistic quality", creates loftiness, meaning and tradition out of a puzzle of fragments and historical and information gaps.

Inspired by the look of the Glyptothek, the museum redesign emphasised the authenticity and personal character of copies (plaster moulds, prints, photocopies) by staging them through repetition, context and thus recapturing their historic value.

The installation was created in two ways: by spacing the old objects or by gathering them in sequences and by filling the voids with new elements. Reframing the old exhibits was accomplished through their reordering and selective display. Broadening the museum discourse was accomplished by an articulation of the old collection through photos and quotations (fragments of documents and texts used to contextualize the exhibits). The majority of these reproductions were given a unitary look through contrast and the choice of black and white images.

3. Argument of the paper

A detailed analysis of U.A.U.I.M. museum's redesign can be made using the concepts of: framing, resonating, channeling and broadening, as theorized by Tiina Roppola [15].² The learning and the pilgrimage frames used by both visitors and curators should also be used in the online presentation of the museum (Exhibition Center). The didactic objects are highlighted and ennobled through the display, this perception of the Exhibition Center must also be transposed online. Unlike the museum display and interpretation, which uses exploration, the online presentation should not have unnecessary structures and provide instant access as in a showcase. But this showcase should also have a context: a philosophy of the institution, a certain exhibition space, some personalities around which the museum was crystallized, etc. This context should create the exploratory area of the online presentation (social media, website, blog, etc.).

4. Arguments to support the thesis

In a museum people come to broaden their highly specialized and focused perception. But even then, people come prepared to deal with things outside their perceptual horizon, these (eccentric) things are "framed" as the pearl frames the dust wire to make it harmless [3]. The frames used by the museum visitors for focusing their perception towards a goal could be those

² "visitors perceive museums and exhibits through particular frames, a sense of resonance draws them to specific elements in exhibition environments, they channel physically and conceptually through the museum and the derivation of substantive meanings act to broaden visitors."

identified by T. Roppola: object holder, learning place, enjoyment, pilgrimage [16]. The goal of the visitor could also be an experience, something to be found by exploration. Museums also maintain a certain self-image, more or less consistent with these frames. A memorial museum, a place of pilgrimage, will be presented differently from a museum focused on a collection of objects. The contemporary museums have evolved from the exposure of authentic objects to the offering of authentic experiences [7]. There are many situations where museums have to offer stories (contexts, elements of atmosphere, etc.) rather than objects.

In the case of stories, enjoyment or learning, perception is no longer geared toward a known purpose (objects), but it is an exploratory perception that builds and finds its purpose [9]. Tiina Roppola calls this "broadening" and is the final purpose of the museum experience [16].

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

The framing of museums or museum objects by the visitors was deduced by Roppola through a qualitative *analysis* and is supposed to be the first stage of the visitor's experience. The frames identify what makes a museum a museum but also the resistance of certain visitors to the recent changes in museums. Roppola's analysis was more interested in the visitor's frames than in those expressed by the museum's management. As a qualitative analysis that of Roppola has a certain degree of subjectivity. The museum is seen as a stage of interaction between the visitor and the display. The design of online museum presentations should offer fast-forward experiences, directed towards clear goals rather than exploratory or aesthetic experiences.

6. Dismantling the arguments against

The redesign of the School of Architecture Museum [12] (S.A.M.) was a form of "reframing". The old fragmentary museum / workshop, moulded by the historical circumstances of its birth, were reframed, in order to attract a broader audience. Not through the introduction of "entertainment" but rather through a shift of interest, from architectural details (plaster casts, demolition fragments) to *all* the documents relevant to the history of architecture: "letters, drawings, details and architectural objects, which are all documents of history" [10]. The architectural details (the wood architecture, plaster ornaments, demolition fragments) and objects (a few small models) have become, from the main text of the

museum, simple *footnotes*, context elements for the greater story of the evolution of the School of Architecture. This passage from text to context meant the passage from the *Learning and Displayer-of-Artifacts* frame to the *Learning and Pilgrimage* frame. It is a type of exposure that relies on the interpretation of collections, "appealing to the interests of the target audience and of communities or stakeholders"[18]. Interpretation comes to life mainly through guidance that helps visitors understand the exposure in a more personal, less intellectual way [6], and to see the "glimpses of the old school atmosphere" [11].

Architecture and architectural education implies a gradual space exploration from fragments to assemblies, a process of discovery. The great advantage of the demolition and molding parts was precisely their fragmentary character that makes them appropriate for recombination, these parts being devoid of an accentuated individual expression that could harm the unity of the whole. "The good fragments are neither surprisingly complete nor embarrassing of incompleteness; they have the charm of revealing the unexpected qualities of the parties, suggesting a *lost identity* beyond them." [2]. In the case of the fragments of the U.A.U.I.M. Collection, this lost identity is that of the old architecture before homes (and buildings in general) become "*écorchés*" by skinning the layers that separated them from the outside [8].

In order to reduce the fatigue associated with a linear display the curator thought of a sort of puzzle in order to "break up" content and create associations. Even if the exposure on the drawing boards follows a chronological order, it is open to associations. This lax structure is very useful in terms of additions to the collection but also because it favours a relaxed and associative mood, particularly suited for a museum made of bits and fragments. This exploratory approach of visiting is similar to that of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

In the case of the Romanian Peasant Museum, the guided tour has a voice that gives meaning and personal depth to the presentation. In the case of the UAUIM Center, the Museum Night presentation movie, with the voice of actress Maia Morgenstern, plays a similar role.

The personal exhibition concept, the collaboration with an artist (Ionel Iștoc), the wealth of the artistic context make the relationship with the past to be different, not nostalgic, respectful and comforting, but rather based on fellow feeling and empathy [13]. This empathy creates premises for a *broadening* of the story of the School. We can speak here of *experiential* broadening (outsiders of the field of architecture take a glimpse into it), *affective* broadening (understanding the story on an emotional level as it happens in the presentation movie through the voice of actress Maia

Morgenstern) or *discursive* broadening (understanding the way architects have presented themselves, the way they shaped the national identity, etc.) [17].

The *affective* broadening is encouraged through the creation of an authentic atmosphere: natural wood, antiquated labels and prints, black and white photographs, everything was meant to emphasize *the forgotten and transient* character of the collection (fragments, student projects and tools used in design). The objects are treated as memories in an effort to redefine the professional identity and the objects themselves.

Exposure breathes an air of reconciliation with the past. These remnants, which can not defend themselves and can speak for them only as symbols, are part of a resigned cult, a pilgrimage. It is an attempt to recover the spirit of the School and the context in which the objects once functioned.

With the occasion of the promotional efforts, a presentation of the collection and a good fit was needed. Initially, the audio guide relied on learning. The website, made in 2016, used the idea of a "showcase of objects", which reminds of a virtual shop. In 2018, the presentation movie framed the museum as an unread story (based on the idea of Untold Museum Stories) and used the idea of a pilgrimage place, with Mincu's image as an accreditation letter. The Facebook page does not contain enough material for learning to attract interest and the site contains too much text. On the site we find recycled texts, not specially created texts to facilitate access. The framing of the collection determines the experience of on-line or off-line visitation, and it was therefore important for the framing to be coherent in all communication. The idea of framing is a landmark that deserves to be taken into account when building an identity, a communication strategy, or the means of interpreting a museum's collection.

Some, but not all of these means of interpretation, took into account the way that the museum is framed by its creators and promoters ("valueless objects", "bits and pieces", "collection of memories", "Mincu's heart"³ [14]). *Pilgrimage* is the dominant frame, used in the museum publication⁴, on its Facebook account [13], in the guided tours; the other frames (Display-of-Artifacts, Learning, Enjoyment) remain simple possibilities that come to life only in special occasions (Museum Night, temporary exhibitions and tours). These frames suggest how to visit, interact and, ultimately, affect the visitor's beliefs.

³ Quotes from the presentation movie, part of a promotion project of the National Network of Romanian Museums.

⁴ *The Museum's Notebooks*.

7. Conclusions

I suppose some of the visitors' frames make them miss the special charm and the evocative capacity of the display from the main exhibition space. If the frames the visitors hold are incongruent to those ingrained in the exposure, there will be a feeling of disappointment. Fortunately there are various exhibition spaces which can satisfy various visitor frames: the Glyptothèque could satisfy the displayer-of-artefacts frame, the painting gallery could satisfy the enjoyment frame, the Romanian Architects Creators of Cultural Heritage Gallery could satisfy the learning frame and the Teacher's Busts Gallery could satisfy the pilgrimage frame. Thus the overall offer of the Exhibition Centre could be suited for the multiple frames or expectations of the visitors. This rich offer should also be reflected in the online interpretation means.

In order to frame the online presentation of the museum in a context associated with tradition, architectural identity, *ancient regime* identity, there could be used the means created by the old architects from the beginning of the School of Architecture: magazine covers, graphic identity statements, special fonts, etc.

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