Reading right now #3

On fear of entering cultural institutions

A Suitcase of Methods is continuously searching for new inspiration from other cultural institutions. We are interested in how other institutions interact with users and audiences, how they evaluate user experiences, and how they communicate their work and purpose internally within the organisation and externally to users and potential users. In this context, we came across the impressive transformation of the [Smithsonian Design Museum, Cooper Hewitt](#). In the article "Strategies against Architecture: Interactive Media and Transformative Technology at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum" Sebastian Chan (Director of Digital & Emerging Media the Cooper Hewitt) and Aron Cope (Senior Engineer at the Cooper Hewitt) describe the process of rethinking the museum and "…reposition its role as a design museum". The problem was initially that the impressive mansion housing the museum had "the wrong kind of glory" (2015 p.353). As they describe it "Carnegie's residence, with its high fence, was purpose-built to keep people out" (p.354). The building thus worked against the aims of this re-thinking process, and therefore it was renovated extensively.

Furthermore, the technology became a tool in the transformation of the Smithsonian museum into a design museum. Using different technology – for instance an interactive pen – the visitors are now able to interact with the exhibitions. They can collect items digitally, design their own wall paper, etc.[i] The technology thus aims to encourage the visitor to engage with what they see. Much "against the architectural impositions of the building – which instils a sense that the visitor should, when crossing the threshold, be quiet, not touch anything, and adopt a reverent frame of mind" (p.533).

We will not describe the process of rethinking the museum's further in this blog. It is explained in the article mentioned above. Instead, we will dwell a bit on the term 'threshold fear', which is mentioned in the article as a challenge when rethinking the museum. 'Threshold fear' stems from the field of psychology and is connected to the field of cultural studies by Elaine Heumann Gurian in the chapter by the same name in the book *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions* (2005) by Suzanne Macleod. Gurian describes it as the "constraints people feel that prevent them from participating in activities meant for them". These constraints can be literal and physical for instance if a museum, a theatre, etc. is inconvenient to visit, or they can be mental in the sense that visitors may for different reasons feel some kind of resistance when planning a visit.[ii] People can for instance be insecure as to what type of behaviour is appropriate, what they should wear, or if they can 'understand' the art that is presented to them.

In relation to museums, Gurian argues that there is a "disjuncture between museums' programmatic interest in inclusion and the architectural program of space development" (2005 p. 203). It is thus important that aims and visions of the institution or organisation are backed up not only by the artistic content, but also by the building and the setting of the experience.

In our studies with A Suitcase of Methods, we often hear audiences describe hesitations or concerns before their theatre visit. Sometimes their apprehensions concern the formalities of the evening (how and when to arrive, how to find their seats, etc.), and other times concerns are directed at the art experience, and how they and their guests might react to it. What we have learned is that creating a 'suitable' threshold is about *balancing* the tone and the atmosphere in which we meet the audience. Balance is crucial here. We often hear audiences describe the threshold as a challenge to overcome and at the same time, they describe the status and reputation of the Royal Danish Theatre as presenting the extraordinary as an important part of the attraction. Elaine Haumann Gurian touches on this difficult balance as she reluctantly concludes, that a museum cannot be a cultural icon and a home-town club-house at the same time (2005, p.204).

This threshold fear is also a focus point in the different departments in The Royal Danish Theatre. For Instance, we are working on making the foyers in the three different houses more welcoming in order to attract people during the daytime and invite them to use the facilities whether they are coming to watch a performance or simply to have a coffee. We are also aware of this in our communication with ticket purchasers. Before they are going to watch a performance, they receive an email with information about the production and different practical information. We do this to make them feel prepared for the evening and thus to make the threshold a little bit easier to step over.
The aim for The Royal Danish Theatre is thus to balance the positions (the inviting and the

extraordinaire). We want to make the leap over the threshold easy and still give the audience a feeling of entering a special space of excellence and extraordinary experiences.

Literature:

Chan, Sebastian & Cope, Aaron (2015): "Strategies against Architecture: Interactive Media and Transformative Technology at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum" in *Curator. The Museum Journal*. Volume 58, Issue 3. July 2015. Pages 352–368.

See also Sebastian Chan's Talk about this work at a Tessitura conference in 2016 here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUXeWuyROus&feature=youtu.be

Gurian, Elaine Haumann (2005) "Threshold Fear" in Macleod, Suzanne: *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions*. Taylor and Francis. Routledge.

---

[i] See more about this in Sebastian Chans presentation at a Tessitura conference in 2016 here.

[ii] Here Gurian lists several reasons why visitors may feel constraints: "...community's attitude toward the institution, the kind and amount of available public transportation, the admission charges and how they are applied, the organization of the front desk, sensitivity to many different handicapping needs, the security system upon entering, and staff behaviour toward unfamiliar folk" (p.203).