



# Is it a Museum Experience?

## Corporate Exhibitions for Cultural Tourists

by Phaedra Livingstone

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What distinguishes a public museum exhibition from a corporate public relations program co-opting museum display techniques?

For years, I have collected material and notes on the private exhibitions I've encountered when traveling. This collecting is linked to my interest in public perceptions of museums, cross-cultural interpretation and representation issues, and my suspicion that corporate exhibitions aimed at vacationers generally offer neocolonial imagery playing to touristic desires for luxury. This article gives me the opportunity to analyze some of this material and consider associated interpretation issues and museum ethics in for-profit and nonprofit contexts. What distinguishes a public museum exhibition from a corporate public relations program co-opting museum display techniques? If having a Flickr site makes anyone a "curator" now, some might also be tempted to say that hosting narrative displays makes any place a museum. But differences in governance and mission are more than technical; these differences motivate significantly different interpretive strategies and ethics. The resulting exhibitions may, however, take on very similar formats. For the average visitor encountering any of the myriad forms of public and corporate museum exhibition, what might distinguish a "museum experience" from some other entertainment activity or from "consumer education"?

Following Danilov (1992) and Nissley and Casey (2002), I define a corporate museum as any incorporated as a for-profit business in itself, or operated as a private corporation's program, to extend their brand. In this article I focus on corporate exhibition programs. A broad range of corporate museum missions are possible, but all are ultimately responsible to the shareholders. Museum work is not popularly recognized as a profession with exclusive access (e.g., via certification) to the workforce (and

a high reliance on volunteers does nothing to dispel this), but it does subscribe to broad ethics regarding the display of cultural materials. These standards are not specific and if an exhibition is received negatively, censure may come in many forms, but unlike recognized professions, will not result in losing one's museologist license.<sup>1</sup> Private museums may follow very different agendas and operating standards than publicly funded and professionally accredited ones. They might not share, for example, public museums' concerns for the authenticity or cultural sensitivity of content presented. If popular perception of museums makes no distinction between public and private operations, then corporate museum practice will reflect on museum practice as a whole. Corporate museums are largely overlooked in museum studies (e.g., Seligson, 2010). In the ongoing professionalization of the field then, it behooves us to attend to what they are doing. Of course, in the process of exploring a differently informed approach to display, we might also learn a useful trick or two.

Self-interest is one simple reason to keep track of corporate museum practice. A more complicated concern is that of how public museums and corporate programs approach and may contradict one another in cultural knowledge construction. Below I reflect on these questions and my experience of three different corporate exhibitions: *The Dig* at the Atlantis Resort (Nassau, Bahamas), *The Museum Walkway* at the Hilton Waikoloa Village (Waikoloa, Hawaii), and the South Sea Pearl Museum (Guilin, China). Given pressure to engage ever-broader audiences, reflecting on such questions is politic for maintaining the integrity of interpretive plans and professional

standards while adapting to the global trends of privatization in museums, growth in the tourism industry, and the increasingly competitive marketplace of leisure experiences.

### What Distinguishes a Public Museum?

As museum professionals, we each possess a working definition of what we recognize as a museum. Disciplinary lexicons sometimes privilege narrower definitions; for example, art history texts may refer to the museum generically, meaning the art museum specifically. When new forms (e.g., science centers, virtual museums) have raised the question of what does and does not constitute a museum in practice (e.g., Cameron, 1971), the International Council of Museums (ICOM) definition has offered guidance. The terrain mapped by that definition has expanded significantly since the founding of ICOM in 1946. As I write, the definition is: "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" (ICOM, 2007). The ICOM *Dictionary of Museology*, to be published in April 2011 (cf. Desvalles and Mairesse, 2010), includes an annotated definition many pages long. Such an all-encompassing definition may leave one wondering what exhibition space is *not* museal? The technical answer still being, one that is in the service of profit rather than society; in other words, corporate museums are not museums as they ultimately serve the corporate stakeholders, not society. The practical answer—and a visitor's experience—is not as definitive.



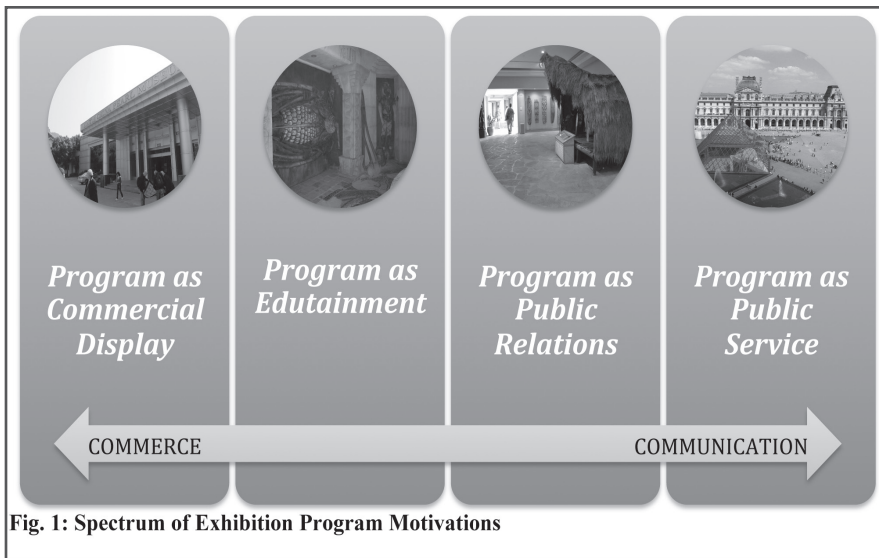
South China Pearl Museum, Guilin, China. Courtesy of Phaedra Livingstone.

Going beyond the technical question of something's museality, the practical question of how to distinguish corporate museums from others relates to (1) media literacy on museums (i.e. museum literacy), and (2) whether or not something is *primarily* a museum. This brings us back to a reformulation of the questions posed above: how might visitors recognize that a corporate museum with its messages differs from other exhibitionary contexts?

### Experiencing Corporate Museums

To explore the above questions, I discuss three private exhibitions created for foreign tourists, which I experienced as a foreign tourist. There are two benefits to this focus. First, it is common knowledge in ethnographic research that cultural messages imbedded in narratives created "at home" are so familiar they are harder to recognize and analyze than those from a "cultural distance." Second, over the last decade an impressive amount of empirical research has been published on cultural tourism, which has yet to be fully drawn into museology. The current ICOM definition may embrace a museum without walls or with intangible collections, but the notion of a physical space displaying artifacts remains essential to popular use of the term museum, leading to possible confusion.

If popular perception of museums makes no distinction between public and private operations, then corporate museum practice will reflect on museum practice as a whole.



**Fig. 1: Spectrum of Exhibition Program Motivations**

Figure 1: Spectrum of Exhibition Program Motivations. Courtesy of Phaedra Livingstone.

(continued from page 17)

The Atlantean narrative is carried into discussion of each exhibit, suggesting the creatures long-ago adopted the ruins as their home, implying a naturalism at odds with the recently built and obviously artificial reef.

**Corporate Museum as Commercial Display**

To reiterate, *corporate* museums are here understood as documenting, extending and promoting the affiliated corporate brand; the display techniques and terminology they apply draw together museum and merchandising techniques. The most common sort of corporate exhibition is the trade show or commercial display. These will rarely be framed as museums per se, but one exception is the South Sea Pearl Museum in Guilin, China. This operation is a factory store offering four small exhibit galleries (showing posters and pearl samples, and reminiscent of a department store space) for consumer education on pearl production. It also includes a runway for fashion shows and a large store, all aimed at foreign tourists. The commercial interests of such a corporate museum are obvious, and foreign visitors are unlikely to perceive such an operation as a public, educationally oriented museum.<sup>2</sup>

Let us treat this case as representing the far left end of a spectrum then, where there is no question in the mind of a visitor about the nature of the site as a corporate commercial display. The name may attract some who are subsequently disappointed, but upon arrival, North American visitors will not mistake visiting this operation for a public museum visit. Such an operation will not reflect on our professional practice, but on occasion an interesting technique might be observed and adapted to museum work. At the other end of

the spectrum is the public museum, in service to society. The other two examples I offer fall somewhere along the middle of this spectrum.

**Corporate Museum as Edutainment**

The Atlantis Resort in Nassau, Bahamas offers an experience I place toward the middle of the spectrum. It is an amusement park, where everything is over-sized. For hotel guests and cruise ship daytrippers, brochures and promotional videos for the destination resort promise a “2.5 million gallon exhibit filled with artifacts from the mythical sunken city” of Atlantis, housing approximately 200 species of marine animal in the world’s largest artificial marine habitat. A cave-like tunnel wraps around this tank, with a series of smaller exhibit rooms, all designed to look like reclaimed ruins of the city of Atlantis. Other than a few species names on tanks, there are no labels. The Discover Atlantis program is a ticketed, guided tour of the aquarium, which has viewing tunnels and hands-on exhibits of fish, all interspersed with Atlantean artifacts. The Atlantean narrative is carried into discussion of each exhibit, suggesting the creatures long-ago adopted the ruins as their home, implying a naturalism at odds with the recently built and obviously artificial reef. *The Dig*, as the exhibition hall is called, is an entertaining, theatrical setting to view a spectacular private collection of marine life. Throughout, Atlantis is treated as fact (I have to wonder how many children have left thinking the “cultural artifacts” displayed were real). There will be some educational merit to any guided tour, and the Atlantean narrative is entertaining, but ultimately *The Dig* serves brand awareness rather than marine education and offers no exposure to actual local history. As a private enterprise, Atlantis

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is not responsible for public education, but the program out-competes those of small local museums offering more authentic interpretations, and the misinformation and missed educational opportunities are unfortunate.

### **Corporate Museum as Public Relations**

Moving further to the right of the spectrum, we have the *Museum Walkway* at the Hilton Waikoloa Village, on the big island in Hawaii. The display of this hotel's art collection is the most likely to be perceived as a museum exhibition: it is named a museum, applies traditional art museum display techniques and labeling, and offers a guidebook (Goude, 2005) with information on the art and artifacts. This destination resort spans 62 acres, spread along the waterfront, isolated from any local communities. Guests must use a tram, boat, or mile-long walkway to get from one side of the hotel's grounds to the other. Most use the tram, which plays a recording directing passengers' attention to, among other things, the walkway exhibition, which was "...curated by a professional art curator. There are more than a thousand pieces to see... worth millions of dollars." This same short recording asserts the collection reflects the "cultural cross-section of many of Hawaii's earliest settlers" with pieces from Asia, Oceania, Western Europe, and Hawaii. The great majority of works are from Asia; relatively few are from ancient or contemporary Hawaii. Yet, the tram statement continues: "Through the art and display we hope you gain a greater understanding and insight into life in Hawaii." The website reinforces this interest in local culture



The Dig at the Atlantis Resort, Nassau, Bahamas. Courtesy of Phaedra Livingstone.



Aquarium in The Dig Atlantis Resort. Courtesy of Phaedra Livingstone.

and authenticity. The labels provided do not generally support this interest, as they offer the date and location an object was collected, but make no connection to Hawaii; for that one must look to the few connections articulated in the self-guided tour booklet. What the labels do offer is a confirmation that the educational potential of an exhibition is recognized; but this art

(continued from page 19)

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Hilton Waikoloa Village tram announcement (as recorded December 29, 2009).

is valued primarily as a private collection and a museum experience that suggests status and sophistication. The "professional curation," size, and estimated value of the collection are the first things the tram statement and print materials each proclaim.

Such snob appeal is not problematic in itself. The door is opened to greater criticism when it goes beyond the claim of status associated with a stereotypical notion of art museums to also claiming to offer cultural education. The *Museum Walkway* is not just "showing off" the hotel's collection for guests to enjoy; it is claiming to be a professional museum exhibition that will help us understand Hawaii. But it does not actually interpret Hawaii, or uphold professional standards of practice common to art museums with similar size collections. And in making these claims, the practices here may in fact reflect on some guests'

perception of the museum field, and worse, some guests' understanding of Hawaii. Framed as museum communication rather than public relations (museum exhibitions being the most trusted information source, AAM 2001), a few stereotypical hula and luau images, for example, might be read uncritically as representations of contemporary local Hawaiian culture even if inauthentic and/or outdated.

#### Why Does the Distinction Matter?

Uncommon a generation ago, culturally-sensitive collecting and display techniques and visitor-centered approaches are now core aspects of professional ethics and best practice in public museums. Between government divestment of funds and the opening of new corporate museums, museum privatization is a growing global trend. Private museums are



Section of the Museum Walkway, Hilton Waikoloa Village Resort. Courtesy of Phaedra Livingstone.

obliged to share-holders, not the public good, and are under no legal obligation to pursue the professional ethics public museums have embraced. In particular, cultural tourism is a huge global industry, and museum programs face increasing competition from for-profit ventures offering package tours. Corporate museums and cultural tourism, however, have received little analysis in museum studies (good

These corporate displays go beyond simply looking like exhibitions to explicitly engaging terminology to liken themselves to museums...if potential visitors see a themed amusement park as your competition, then it is.


examples being Harrison, 2002; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Smith, 2009).

Answers to the questions I posed above, like experience, will be subjective. The spectrum and cases I offer suggest criteria for exclusion for what gets embraced as a museum experience, corporate public relations, entertainment, or commerce. In the Atlantis case, for example, the disregard for authenticity in interpretation is decidedly unmuseum-like. The *Museum Walkway* goal of increasing tourist understanding of Hawaiian culture is museum-like, but better served if we frame the whole resort as an odd sort of ecomuseum (e.g., Davis 2005) and consider the other cultural programming available, such as performances by local storytellers.

The conscientious museum professional might sniff at the interpretive approach of these displays, but do their guests read these as exhibitions akin to those found in the best public museums? These corporate displays go beyond simply looking like exhibitions to explicitly engaging terminology to liken themselves to museums. Understanding the popular imagination is important: if potential visitors see a themed amusement park as your competition, then it is. Private museums do not operate as public ones do. As corporations their primary duty is to produce profit for shareholders and not the public good; if both are achievable simultaneously, great, but of

course, such corporate social responsibility (public relations with an interest in ethics) is not the same as being a nonprofit. Nor does CSR demand research rigor. Museums, like universities, need academic freedom and rigorous research to develop and present works with intellectual integrity. In an era when, with increasing ease, a curated museum exhibition or collection can be edited by a board of non-expert advisors for financial reasons, distinguishing between private and public museum interests is called into question.

As tourist destinations continue to develop, more and more private museums, and programs like those discussed in this article, are being built around the world (cf. Gil & Ritchie, 2009). Such attractions focus on tourist needs, not those of residents, and compete with local museums for support.

Beyond what seems a blurring of public and private missions, further questions face exhibit developers and interpretive planners. What is it that visitors see and value as unique about a given context? Museums are valued as trusted sources of credible information (AAM, 2001; Wilkening and Chung, 2009). But if authenticity, for example, is more important to us than it is to visitors across their leisure activities, how might we adapt interpretation methodology? And at what point do we then stop operating a museum? 

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#### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Brazil is the only context I know of where museological training is now required by law for museum work. In other contexts then, museum work is technically still semi-professional, requiring advanced training for employment but without the self-regulation or benefits of other professions.

<sup>2</sup> Chinese museum participation patterns are different, however, and a perception concern is very possible for local users.