



# Charting a New Course: Visitor Research in Asia and Continental Europe

by Maria Piacente

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In July 2004, the Louvre announced plans for a new permanent installation for Islamic Art to be displayed in the Court Visconti, the last historic courtyard to be transformed into a gallery. The project is immensely important and highly political as the French come to terms with their growing Islamic community in the face of cultural and religious conflict. But what is interesting about this project is the Louvre's interest in visitor research as a part of the overall concept development and design of the gallery.

Why would this be considered important? For museum professionals in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, audience development and visitor research is a given. It's at the core of our business, a part of our mandates. We couldn't imagine running our museums or planning a new exhibit without understanding our audience and how to serve them. How could the Louvre's project possibly be different?

As consultants for an international firm, my colleagues and I work with museums around the world. Over the last 20 years, LORD has completed more than 1,200 projects worldwide. This international perspective, along with a brief review of the literature, reveals that the visitor-focused approach to exhibit development and public programming is not the norm but rather the exception. While much research has been done in the field of visitor research and some museums have truly embraced an audience-centered focus, most museums do not actively support visitor research departments within their institutions. This is often due to lack of funding, and fears that visitor research results might be regarded as performance indicators and tied to funding and job fulfillment. Therefore, most attendance or audience data is linked to marketing not exhibit planning.

## Asian experience

Seven years ago, when LORD was first commissioned by the Hong Kong government to develop their brand new Heritage Museum, we recommended, as a part of our methodology, extensive community consultation and focus group testing. It was clear that this was something the client had never considered. To actually ask the people of Hong Kong what they envision the new Museum to be like was truly a novel idea. It was difficult to convince the client that this was a good idea, considering the time and money required to complete the work. We were successful in our bid, as the management of the Heritage Museum wanted to adopt a different operational model from the Hong Kong Museum of History that was being developed at the same time. They also wanted to avoid the criticism directed at the History Museum in which the exhibits were considered to have an "overly Western historical outlook."

Our team spent months in malls, schools, community centers, and neighborhoods conducting focus groups and public forums. The work was groundbreaking and residents were surprised and delighted to be a part of the process. The research identified the need for a children's museum—the first in Hong Kong—and temporary galleries that focused on pop culture, an area that strongly appealed to youth. Neither the children's museum nor the pop culture galleries were a part of the initial planning studies prepared by the client when the new museum was first proposed. When the museum opened in



2002, it attracted one million visitors in its first few months of operation! The children's gallery was a huge success and new professionally-planned children's museums are opening up in China as a result.

Despite this early success, there has not been a similar visitor-focused project of such size and scope in Hong Kong or China since, except for the on-going gathering of attendance data to determine the overall number, origin and profile of visitors. It comes down to the fact that these studies cost money and take time. Projects in Asia are carefully funded and organized around incredibly tight deadlines. Current practice places high value on established expertise. Design and architectural firms—especially from the west—exert an unusual amount of control over the exhibit development process and museum planners are often asked to apply and graft their planning experience from other work onto Asian projects. No need, therefore, to reinvent the wheel and conduct brand new grass-roots studies and development processes when experts can be hired to do it based on existing knowledge.

Museums in Asia are essentially a Western import, and Asian countries are still struggling to domesticate this transplant. Alongside massive cultural institutions celebrating civic pride, many of which have been designed and developed by western designers and architects, blockbuster exhibits from the West attract millions of visitors in Japan, Korea and Hong Kong. This troubling trend was highlighted by David Kahn in 1998 (*Curator*). Kahn correctly identified the need for Asian visitor studies beyond statistical analyses that truly profiles what resident audiences need from their public institutions. As well, more training and education will result in local professional staff who will begin to define an Asian perspective on museology and operational paradigms.

Smaller and more entrepreneurial institutions are beginning to lead the way by drawing on local traditions and talent to reinvent the museum exhibit. One example is the Fukagawa-Edo Museum in Tokyo, mentioned in Kahn's article, celebrating the neighborhood's heritage. In the meantime, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum has continued to build on the relationships it fostered with the community during the initial visitor evaluation studies conducted by our firm. The young and **trained** staff are mining the community to develop cutting-edge, relevant temporary shows from comics to animation to graphic and interior design. The permanent historical galleries are enlivened by the changing exhibits that reflect the vibrant urban sensibility of Hong Kong today. But this is still the exception rather than the norm.



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## Continental Europe

Audience research and development in Continental Europe is not a priority for many traditionally organized institutions, where public programming revolves around collections and the academia of curators. Hundreds of thousands of tourists flock to see the outstanding collections of the Uffizi and the Louvre with little interpretation and program support, so is there really a need to do any audience research when creating new exhibits or new museums?

With mass migration and increased tourism—both effects of globalization—and the growing European Union, it would seem that a shift from object oriented institutions to a more visitor-centered model is essential. According to the 2002 International Migration Report by the United Nations, “most of the world’s migrants live in Europe (56 million), Asia (50 million), and northern America (41 million).” Urban centers have become rich transitional zones of diverse cultures and ethnicities. Defining the museum’s audience is more difficult than ever as visitors are no longer coming from familiar places and uniform backgrounds. There is much to be learned from the development work in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, where museums are constantly seeking new methods to reach out to their multicultural communities, to attract non-traditional visitors, and to create exhibits that speak to changing demographics.

As in Asia, visitor research in Continental Europe is primarily statistical, although more consistently applied and often at the national level. An excellent example is the National Museum Monitor (NMM) program launched in the Netherlands in 2002. The study allows for museums of all types, sizes and budgets to participate. Based on standardized surveys and questionnaires prepared and monitored by a market research firm, the NMM provides comparable information about visitors and their behavior. In Germany, the Institute für Musemskunde has been collecting attendance data for the more than 4,000 German cultural institutions since the 1980s. These types of studies are becoming more popular and systematic in Europe, as museums seek to understand the impact of the changing European demographic. Also, the uniformity of data collection and opportunity for comparisons make the practice very desirable at the national level.

These findings are interesting, but the results do not provide information about target groups or non-visiting publics. Nor do they tell how individual museums can improve their relationships with the communities they

serve. They certainly do not provide clear paths for making a significant change from collection-based to audience-driven museums and heritage sites. They are used primarily for marketing, funding and improving visitor services. Exhibits are still being developed internally by curators without significant input by visitor research.

Like the tentative steps being taken by the Louvre to involve the Muslim community in the development of the new Islamic galleries, there are some signs that European museums are seeking the audience awareness afforded by in-depth evaluation and consultation that can result in increased attendance, greater learning, and sustained visitorship. In 2001, Giorgio Chiozzi, curator for the Milan Natural History Museum, and private consultant Lidia Andreotti recognized the limitations of general visitor studies to evaluate the effectiveness of museum exhibits—especially their own. They conducted a series of custom in-gallery studies to evaluate the museum’s existing exhibits, which provided valuable insights into visitor interest in various topics presented by the museum. Contextual displays including large dioramas were more popular than text-heavy artifact displays. The studies identified the immediate need to redesign and re-organize the invertebrate galleries.

Natural history and science museums may be leading the way for visitor-oriented research and marketing because, unlike the great art galleries of Europe, they cannot rely on their collections to draw visitors. They don’t have the Monets or Michelangelos that will consistently bring visitors to the gallery. European science museums in particular struggled to draw audiences and sustain visitor attendance in the 1980s and 90s (Bernard, 1994). Modeled after American science museums, they did not resonate with Europeans as they did with North Americans, and competition with the art galleries was and continues to be fierce. The nature of their content—concept—rather than object-based—required these institutions to develop visitor-oriented exhibits, tapping into the unique exhibiting techniques that would attract European audiences. This resulted in a widespread paradigm shift among German science, technology and natural history museums. Science, technology, and natural history museums are also in a unique position to attract recent migrant communities. Refugees and immigrants from Africa, eastern Europe and Asia are an untapped market, people who will more likely visit the friendly learning environment of a natural history museum than an intimidating art gallery containing works that have no cultural meaning to them.



The shifting demographic landscape of Europe demands that museums look at ways to meet the needs of their changing audience. The collections of these institutions will continue to attract tourists and the traditional visiting public. But as these museums, such as the Louvre, upgrade and renovate their exhibits, they are perfectly poised to consider the needs of this changing audience. Will the museums of continental Europe embrace this outward-looking perspective to strengthen their relevance in their changing communities? Or will the long-standing academic tradition of these museums continue? As a consultant working internationally, it is necessary to understand and navigate cultural, linguistic, and operational structures that are different the world over. When encouraging community consultation and visitor research for exhibit and program development, we need to work with local staff and find new models that work for *them*, using successful results like the Hong Kong Heritage Museum to encourage on-going audience development.

Undoubtedly, as museums around the globe evolve it will be up to each institution to consider their own unique audiences and how to best meet their needs. The new exhibit work at small, local museums in Asia signals a sensitive and considered approach to exhibit design that is rooted in that community. European institutions will no doubt chart their own path, and the Louvre's Islamic galleries are the ideal place to start this journey.

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