

Devising and Evaluating Interpretative Strategy

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Introduction

A sub-theme of the Intercom conference on 'Leadership in Museums' was the relationship between scholarship and populism. The process of interpretative planning for a new regional museum in Co Antrim, Northern Ireland, was examined as a case study. This focused on how the key design concepts arrived at were evaluated through focus group testing. The aim of the evaluation exercise was to establish that the proposed design approach and subject matter appealed to future target audiences.

Background

The new Ballymena Museum will be the 'lead museum' for the Mid-Antrim Museums Service, a new regional partnership comprising the District Councils of Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey. A grant of £4.41m has been secured from the Heritage Lottery Fund towards the development this new purpose built museum. The total project cost is £6.5m. Consarc Design Group of Belfast are the project architects and the interpretative designers are Ralph Appelbaum Associates of London. It is anticipated that work will commence on site in the near future. The project is scheduled for completion in late 2004.

The present Ballymena Museum is currently located in temporary premises. It is a relatively small community museum with a social history collection comprising approximately 6,000 objects. It has limited interpretation and facilities generally, but is nonetheless the base for a rapidly developing service.

Key challenges

The key challenges for the interpretative design can be summarised as follows:

- Retaining local audience whilst broadening appeal to visitors from further afield.
- Maximising the potential of the existing collection.
- Making sense of the history and identity of Ballymena and mid-Antrim.
- Establishing a robust intellectual framework (for a range of accessible and engaging exhibits).

The design process

Over the past 18 months the design process has primarily centred on a core design team comprising museum staff, Ralph Appelbaum Associates (RAA) and a specialist scriptwriter. It has been informed by consultation with academics, local historians and educationalists.

Solutions?

The potential solutions arrived at can be summarised as follows:

- A fundamental recognition that local stories are part of wider stories – i.e. context all important.
- Objects connect with human / personal stories
- A mix of traditional and modern interpretative approaches – i.e. a mix of objects in cases and low and high tech interactives.
- A Curatorial perspective plus the ‘visitors view’.

The last point is important. From the outset museum staff have been keen to ensure that the Curatorial voice is not the only perspective in the display. For that reason design features have been devised that enable visitors to respond and express the views on the issues raised in the gallery. The interactives linked to each theme assist with this process. They have been designed to explore important overarching themes – for example, continuity and change, the nature of identity and our complex relationship with the past.

Evaluation exercise

The design team embarked on a formative evaluation exercise in June 2002 at the conclusion of the initial development phase.

The brief defined the key aims as follows:

- To ensure that the themes, storyline and general design approach to the gallery is accessible, stimulating and meaningful to visitors
- To ensure that the display reflects local diversity and experience in a meaningful way appealing to both local and outside visitors
- To explore the whole general concept underpinning the overall visitor experience.

Specialist consultants were engaged to undertake the evaluation exercise – a Dublin based market research company, Tourism Development International, in conjunction with Aidan Walsh, Museum and Heritage Consultant.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted. Five focus groups were recruited representative of key target audiences:

- Groups 1 and 2 – both recruited in Ballymena (local audience).
- Groups 3 and 4 – both recruited in Belfast (wider catchment area)
- Group 5 – international visitors

In regard to the two local groups and the two Belfast groups, one in each case was recruited in a ‘unionist area’, the other in a ‘nationalist area’. Within the groups there was further diversity in terms of gender, age, social background etc.

This approach aimed to canvas views representative of the general visitor, rather than established community representatives or special interest groups.

Museum staff and RAA prepared evaluation materials (a CD Rom containing visuals plus explanatory text).

The discussion aimed to test attitudes to the general museum proposal – i.e. the general design and interpretative approach; views on the proposed themes and storylines etc.

Evaluation findings

The findings of the focus groups evaluation can be summarised as follows:

- The project overall was well received.
- The content/subject matter was seen as interesting, particularly put within a wider context.
- Reaction to the design and layout was very favourable, including the key interactives.
- The image of Ballymena and the image of the 'museum' term were the cause of negative reaction.
- Overall the level of interest in the project was significant.

Conclusion

For modern museums, scholarship must have a clear purpose and application. This evaluation exercise aimed to test that the intellectual concepts underpinning a planned new gallery could indeed be translated into accessible and popular exhibits.

This project is still at a relatively early stage of development. There will be additional evaluation of prototypes at the detailed design stage and further negotiation with key stakeholders regarding content.