

“Baffling Beauty”: A Pilot Project about Beauty, Health, and our Bodies

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The initial ideas for the “Baffling Beauty” project were born when the Anstiftung, a nonprofit research organization in Munich, asked a group of professionals to take part in a series of discussions to explore alternative approaches to health education. The result of these discussions was a decision to develop a “health forum,” a traveling exhibition with supporting public programs. An early commitment was made to integrate the use of evaluation into the exhibit planning and implementation process.

A survey of health exhibitions in Europe and North America enabled the exhibit developer to construct an accurate picture of the state of the art in health education in museums, science and technology centers, and related institutions. By reviewing what other institutions were doing, the Anstiftung was able to identify the directions they wanted to explore further. The next step was the formulation of a well-defined set of goals and objectives for the project.

The unlikely topic of beauty was selected as the theme for the pilot project. After much deliberation, it was thought that such a nontraditional theme might capture the interest of a broader public. Since opinions from lay people as well as experts were of interest to the Anstiftung, it was decided that the front-end evaluation for the project would consist of a variety of individual and group interviews on the topic of beauty and health.

The lay public was surveyed by means of a series of one-on-one interviews as well as group discussions with a broad spectrum of potential visitors: adolescents, adults, and senior citizens, all from a variety of social backgrounds. The interview questions were pretested and revised before the official round of interviews began.

In addition, four focus groups of 6 to 8 experts in the field of health and beauty were formed to participate in three moderated discussions. Their expertise was varied, ranging from medical practitioners and journalists to fitness trainers and cosmeticians. The goal of these expert focus groups was to explore and critically assess an initial exhibition concept drawn up by the exhibit developer after her preliminary research phase, to discover new and relevant themes, and to discuss ways to communicate the exhibition’s goals.

Compilation of the interview results into a comprehensive transcript for both the lay and expert interviews was a time consuming, but very useful, task. Overall, it appeared that the concept of “beauty” is *understood and recognized by*

everyone. However, what beauty *actually* means to one personally is another question altogether. For some, it is the outward physical appearance glorified in the mass media. For others, it is a *je ne sais quoi*—an inner quality which is immediately recognizable but almost impossible to describe in words. Together with the goals and objectives of the pilot project, the transcript served as a basis for further discussions by the planning team about potential interpretive approaches to the exhibition.

Developing an innovative design approach to the subject matter was another goal for the pilot project. Was it possible to integrate this goal into the analysis of the front-end evaluation results? It was decided to see whether this could be accomplished by another group which would discuss the initial analysis of the front-end evaluation. The session took the form of a creative brainstorming. Professionals working with interpretive media (interactive media specialists, theater producers, game designers, etc.) and selected experts from the previous focus group of health and beauty experts were invited for a day’s discussion. The “mix” of interpreters with content experts was intentional. As a result of their participation in the previous focus group, the experts had an intimate understanding of the potential interpretation of beauty and health in the proposed exhibition. It was hoped that they would answer specific questions about the exhibition’s content, posed by the interpretive media specialists. This was indeed the case. A wonderful interplay between exhibition goals and creative use of various interpretive media ensued.

The brainstorming dealt with five topics which developed out of the front-end evaluation. A moderator kept the discussion from losing focus and overrunning present time frames. Since the format of the brainstorming and participant structure were entirely new to the group, the morning was designed as a warm-up for topics to be discussed during the afternoon session: it consisted of an animated discussion of the concept of an advance organizer for the exhibition experience and the nature of the exhibit environment needed to set the mood for the visitor. These were topics that concerned the interrelationship between design possibilities and the interpretation of the exhibition content. In the afternoon, two abstract concepts which have arisen as part of our front-end evaluation were discussed—“radiance” and “beauty at the first and second glance.” A wrap-up session enabled the participants to brainstorm about how to make the exhibition a multisensory experience, since beauty is not only perceived visually but by the other senses as well. The ideas were plentiful as well as provocative. The results of the front-end evaluation have been published in the *Karlsruher Schriften zur Besucher Forschung*, vol. 4 (1993), and in a 35-minute video documenting the entire process. Both can be ordered from the initiator and funder of the project, the Anstiftung (Daiserstr. 15, Rgb., 81371 München, Germany, Tel. (49-89)777031, Fax (49-89)7470220). A detailed report in English is planned by the exhibit developer.

As a result of these efforts, a document reflecting the information gleaned from all facets of the front-end evaluation (interviews with the lay public, the expert focus groups, and the creative brainstorming) was written to direct the planning and design of the exhibition "Baffling Beauty." Because the integration of evaluation is central to the raison d'être of the pilot project, the general goals for the exhibition itself were so formulated that they could be tested during the formative as well as the summative evaluation. The results of the formative and summative evaluation of the exhibition should be made available sometime after the July 1995 opening of "Baffling Beauty" in the Forum der Technik in Munich.

The Institut für Museumskunde

Bernhard Graf
Institut für Museumskunde

The Institut für Museumskunde (Institute of Museum Studies) was founded in 1979 and, as a division of the Staatliche Museen (State Museums) in Berlin, was put under the command of the general director there. It is a federal organization devoted to research and documentation in the various areas of museum work, traversing the themes of actual museum collections. Its research work is defined by the scientific disciplines relevant to the individual project (sociology and social sciences, psychology, education, engineering and natural sciences, information and computer science, law, etc.).

The work of the Institut für Museumskunde concentrates largely on the following tasks:

- * It conducts research on development of the museums and museum visiting (annual collection of figures on visits nationwide and updating the institute's databank).
- * It furthermore investigates possible alteration in the structure of the museum-going public and performs effectiveness analysis of certain didactic and medial offerings in the museums (trend analyses of museum visits; polls of visitors at selected museums; additional studies on public relations, advertising, educational museum work, etc.; conducting of model projects introducing new media into museums).
- * It organizes and participates at research colloquia on the above subjects.
- * It carries out the entire range of economic research, including the gathering of administrative and personnel data from the museums, in cooperation with the Deutscher Städtetag (German association of communes), which participates in the data collection, and with the Ifo-Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (Ifo Institute of Economic Research), which is partly financed by the federal and state governments via the cost-sharing model "Blue List." In contrast, questions of museum management and proprietorship are

now being more intensively investigated.

- * In the Department of Computer-Supported Museum Documentation, extensive investigation into the use of new programs and new technology, as well as implementation of those found suitable, is a major task in the areas of documentation and cataloguing. Where no software appropriate for museums is available, some development work in collaboration with a qualified research institution will continue to be undertaken.
- * In the area of museum technology, research takes the form of cooperative projects. However, because basic physical and technological research can be done only by highly specialized personnel with complicated, expensive equipment, the chief assignment of this department is to report on extramural results that may be applicable to museum work. In such reports, independent research by our department is clearly distinguished from the accomplishments of other institutions, such as the Bundesanstalt für Materialprüfung (Federal Institution for the Testing of Materials), individual professorial subdepartments at the technical universities, or the Rathgen-Forschungslabor (Rathgen Research Laboratory).

Additionally, certain research topics are investigated under the aegis of the head of the institute. Museum-related legal questions, to name just one example, are studied in a project supported primarily by the Robert-Bosch-Stiftung. *The Handbuch des Museumsrechts*, of which four volumes have already been published and two more are under way, is edited by Prof. Küfner-Schmitt (see the list of publications by the Institut). In addition, individual experts are sometimes consulted on questions that are hard to classify legally (the legal status of museum volunteers, the granting of manufacturing contracts, privatization of services, etc.). The Institut für Museumskunde itself does not offer counsel in specific legal cases; however, it does help potential legal clients find a lawyer with the necessary qualifications.

Among the other services of the Institut are a comprehensive technical library with international collections and an information service, which searches for bibliographic information and book reviews, and compiles technical bibliographies at the request of any museum.

Beside the technical library, the Institut für Museumskunde also works on and adds to the archival holdings on the national and international history of museums. The primary collections on which this work is based are the archive of the Deutscher Museumsbund and the archive of the European Museum of the Year Award (EMYA). Sometimes research projects on the history of museums, inspired by these archives, are planned and carried out either independently or in cooperation with other institutions.

The Institut works closely with the Deutscher Museumsbund. On behalf of this countrywide association of museum professionals, it not only collects the annual visit