

Enhancing Museum Experiences : Curated Walks

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Abstract

The concept of curated walks in museums or heritage sites refers to an activity where visitors traverse the physical space occupied by the object(s) of interest, while being mediated by a guide or a curator. These walks allude to a three-way dialogue between the audience, the mediator and the object. This paper will investigate how curated walks and the dialogues they engender function in museum spaces, and what it entails for production, comprehension and consumption of knowledge about artefacts and heritage among visitors and curators alike. The crux of the exercise is to comprehend how visitors and curators understand and experience museums through curated walks, and how the meanings generated from this interaction are distinct from conventional modes of interactions occurring in museum spaces. The ways in which people derive meanings out of their interactions with their surroundings is immensely diverse, depending upon age, worldview, and socio-political and economic backgrounds. By focusing on the issues of spatial mobility in three case studies from New Delhi, this paper argues that museums need a gradual paradigm shift from directing people towards objects to allowing people to interact with objects in a free manner. The possibilities of engaging with spaces, or with objects, in their own terms would create a rich repository of human experiences for the audience within and without museums. Allowing a free-flowing network of conversations, dialogues and articulations would create a dynamic, inclusive and democratised curator-audience experience.

Keywords: Curatorship, Representation, Museum space, Visitors, Conceptualisation

Introduction

Conventionally museums have been associated with the collection of objects or materials that have cultural, religious and historical importance assigned to them. Their preservation, investigative research and their display is intended towards certain audiences, for didactic purposes or for pleasure. Museums in the early days prior to the enlightenment era, including the cabinets of curiosity were exclusive and elitist, with only those with the means or the requisite education having access to view them. In the contemporary days, with an increasingly egalitarian and democratised world, restricting access to museums is an unpragmatic and non-viable act and hence increasing engagement and dialogue between people, museum authorities and the objects of the museums is a need of the hour.

In a democratic setup, expressions, articulations and dialogues are paramount in sustaining the inclusive and all-encompassing nature of the society. Opening up of the temporal and spatial dimensions of museums for such unregimented circulation of dialogues is crucial for democracy and transparency of governance in communities. For this, museums should incise across the arbitrations of disciplinary territorialities and espouse more challenging, specialised and microcosmic worldview; not merely being limited to tangible objects and collections. Innovative, people-oriented, community-minded, programme-oriented, professionally concrete and children-friendly approach will make the transition to such a worldview more holistic and even.

Museum is a lived experience where diverse and divergent topographies of spatiality and temporality converge. To customise this experience to increase its efficacy, an optimum usage of the textual and contextual possibilities of the objects and the materials is crucial. While enhancing the museum space, the exhibit anchors the audience experience to the assets of the museum. An innovative and cutting-edge methodology to exploit this is regular hosting of curated walks in the museum spaces.

The concept of curated walks or culture/heritage walks around museums and other tangible heritages refer to an activity where visitors take a walk around their object(s) of interest, mediated and negotiated by a guide or a curator. These walks comprise a mode of three-way dialogue between the visitors, the mediators and the objects. This paper will attempt to investigate how such walks and the dialogues self-contained within them function in museum spaces and what it entails for production, comprehension and consumption of knowledge about artefacts and heritages among visitors and curators alike. To put it in plainwords, the paper is about how visitors and curators understand and experience heritage and museums by means of curated walks and how these are different from other (and conventional) modes of interactions between them.

The Importance of Curated Walks: Theoretical Underpinnings

Curated Walks are one of the few tools at the disposal of museologists that can enhance and sustain a prolonged spatial and temporal experience of the museum for the

visitors. The mobility of the visitors across the terrain of the museum allows them to have exposure to the fascinating details about the exhibits and the context, subtext and behind-the-scene-stories about those exhibits, how they came into being and what distinguishes them as objects worthy of exhibition. The chief epistemic concern behind such an act lies in the theoretical conceptualisation of a museum space with certain values, some being intrinsic and some acquired or assigned to them.

A large part of the intellectual milieu of the post-modern academic landscape has been influenced by French philosopher Michel Foucault (1984). The shift of the historical investigation from temporal to spatial inquiries can be attributed to Foucault, as he had correctly surmised, the contemporary human anxiety had been much more concentrated around space, than towards time. Rather than going into his major works, here we shall focus on his short essay on the conceptualisation of museum as a 'heterotopic' space.

Foucault (1984) has argued that in all societies, there exist certain spaces where the 'real' arrangements that are symptomatic of a functioning society are represented, challenged, and overturned at one and the same time. For a conceptual coherence, we can think of heterotopia as a space that exists within our temporal and spatial comprehensions, but yet subverts the norms that guide and govern such comprehensions. Heterotopia as a spatial entity becomes fully functional when an individual commits complete breach with her/his traditional time. Museums are spaces where time accumulates and does not stop doing so. Museums are archives of enclosing different times under one space, and yet is a space that is outside time, according to Foucault (1984).

Hence, when a visitor walks into a museum, and rapidly passes through exhibits displayed from many different times, (she has already committed a subversion of the conventional linear time, in order to locate themselves in a space that transcends that time. Because of this, although museums generally evoke an imagery manipulating time, what museologists need to focus is the spatial aspect of those manipulations, to provide the optimum museum experience to the audience.

Expanding on Foucault's works, Tony Bennett (1995) argues in his seminal work on the modern genealogy of museum that museums should not only be understood as an instructional space, but also as a space with a diverse range of social practices and performances. Hence, while the past is being embodied in museums as distinct from the present, Bennett (1995) argues that the framework that sustains this distinction is maintained by present practices. As a result, the audience in a museum are subjected to textually organised meanings whose deliberations must be sought in the moorings of the present.

The space of the museums is however not innate and is constantly renegotiated, reconfigured and refashioned by the visitors and audiences. In museum spaces, the spatial arrangements of objects become accessible to the sensory experiences of the visitor only when they conduct a physical exploration of the space. Thus, the museum space in essence is always being shaped and reshaped by visitor's activities. Hence the layout of a museum space needs to be in sync with maximisation of the visitor's interactions. Keeping in view the diverse user experiences, curators and designers can work to

differentiate and control the diverse visitor experiences without limiting oneself to the pedagogic constraints of just one specific spatial strategy (Yoon Kyung Choi 1999: 241-250).

Thus, one of the most contentious struggles faced by the modern day museum curators is that of space (Clark 2008: 173–77). The issue is not only about how to devise a museum space that provides maximum visibility to visitors, but also to manoeuvre and guide the visitor experiences in such ways that augment this visibility. Both these concerns culminate with the innovative and non-rigid concept of curated walks.

Curated Walks and Communication

The concept of curated walks has many similarities with open air museums. However, we still need to make a distinction between curated walks and open-air museums. Bennett is quite sceptical about open air museums, which he calls as populist but not democratic. Most of the open-air museums project a romanticised and idealised imagery of past social relations and maintain no space for dialogue (Bennett (1955). For a successful curated walk, dialogue is essential and paramount. Hence, in museum spaces, unhindered communication between all the parties involved should be actively encouraged. In a museum, an object will attain a value only after it has been thoroughly categorised, contextualised and displayed. But that value can be augmented to a much larger magnitude if the audience of that object actively realign their subject-positions in order to enter a series of communications with the object, and with the curator.

This should not be seen as the museum having ‘something to offer’ but rather should be conceptualised as a ‘way to respond’. However, for a fruitful dialogue to occur in museum spaces, all the senders, decoders and receivers of communication need to be equipped with the requisite material, economic and cultural resources, and they must locate themselves in a pedestal of similar epistemic comprehensions. The coalescing of the different channels, mediums and agencies of communication will result in diverse forms of dialogues within museum spaces.

Quantifying the magnitude of success in these dialogues is a difficult task. These dialogues operate in a cyclical paradigm of democratisation of the museum space. While the conversations between the curator and the visitor dilute the previously existing unequal power relations in terms of participation, this exchange needs a democratised space to function. On the other hand, the epistemic underpinnings of that space gets further democratised due to these exchanges. The manner in which dialogues operate within such spaces can be further elucidated by three case studies that we have chosen for consideration. The first one involves an outdoor curated walk, and the other two occur in indoor museum spaces.

Case Study 1: Heritage Walk in the Tughalaqabad Fort

Sohail Hashmi, academician, activist, film-maker and the founding trustee of SAHMAT, started learning about the material heritage of the city of Delhi from his archaeologist father, “he began with the seven cities of Delhi, showed us how the dome structures evolved and the architecture changed. Now, most of these monuments lie as desolate ruins (Matthew 2015). In a chronological order, his father took him around the seven cities of Delhi which gradually unfolded their historical possibilities in an unforeseen manner. In 2000, following his father’s footsteps Hashmi designed similar walks for children as part of his project Discovering Delhi.

This at first started as an after-school activity for children. But soon it garnered interests among adults as well. At present, he organises the ‘Delhi Heritage Walks with Sohail Hashmi’ and does around 19 walks in the city. Most of these walks are organised during the cooler, dry weather between the third week of September till the end of March, and each walk takes approximately around 3.5 hours (Chawla 2015).

One of his most popular trails, especially among children is the walk around the Tughalaqabad Fort, which lies in the eastern outskirts of Delhi in an undulating plateau. The gigantic fort was constructed by Ghiyasuddin Tughalaq, the founder of the Tughalaq Dynasty, one of the five dynasties of the Delhi Sultanate. The fort was, however, soon abandoned after its construction and never permanently inhabited. Local legends attributed this to a curse by the revered Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya. The walk Hashmi organises around the fort complex includes the Adilabad Fort, Tughalaqabad Fort and Ghiyasuddin’s Tomb (Bhagat 2010).

Hashmi’s walks around Delhi are generally slow-paced, often interspersed with food trails and other activities. Being an avid reader and researcher, Hashmi is also quite well-versed in different and diverse historical narratives. As a result, the conversations he has with his audience during the walks are accompanied by trivia and interesting anecdotes which keep the audience captivated. For instance, during one instance when we were fortunate to participate in the walk, he showed us a plant growing inside the fort which he said was used for medicinal purposes during the Sultanate. He asked us the name of that well-known plant and no one could do so. As it turned out, the plant was Aloe Vera!

Hashmi lives and breathes these heritage sites and he explicitly illustrates his displeasure at the low funding, insufficient security and the rampant encroaching over them. Especially, as the land surrounding Tughalaqabad had been used as a grazing ground for centuries, it is prone to encroaching. The Archaeological Survey of India generally pays heed to a site only when people start visiting it. That is why it is crucial to increase awareness among the public regarding such tangible heritages, so that people develop a sense of responsibility and awareness towards them (Bhagat 2010). The walks that Hashmi organises may serve this purpose, where the people of Delhi will get a forum to have a democratic dialogue regarding the heritages of their city and what future course of actions they need to take regarding these heritages.



Fig.1: An exhibition 'Cosmology to Cartography' at National Museum, New Delhi

Case Study 2: Cosmology to Cartography

In the previous case study, we illustrated how the space of a curated walk, even if it is not within the indoor confines of a conventional museum, can foster dialogues regarding museums. Moving away from it, our second case study concerns itself with indoor space of museums. But not only it is concerned about spaces, but itself is about spaces and how human rationality has conceptualised spaces. The exhibition *Cosmography to Cartography* held at the National Museum in Delhi during September-October 2015 illustrates the antiquated human obsession with spaces and representation of spaces by means of historical maps. The exhibition displays seventy-odd maps across the temporal span from the Kalakriti Archives of Hyderabad, an initiative of Prashant Lahoti.

Matthew H. Edney (2007: 84) argues that being representations of specific spaces; maps contain spatial, cultural and social meanings that are neither "inherent" nor "fixed and stable"; but are rather "read into the maps" by those who read them; within the confines of the discourse in which the readers locate themselves. As a result, the meanings procured out of maps may differ "between readers, over time, and between discourses". "Mapness" is not inherent to an image", Edney (2007) further adds, but is rather framed and fixed by the readers and consumers of maps. Hence, maps not only represent physical, but also mental geographies.

The exhibition touches upon the genealogy of spatial representation of physical and mental geographies of India across time. From the mythical visions of the planet to the projections rationalised by scientific cartography, the exhibition juxtaposes paintings from 15th to 19th century imbued with religious and cosmological symbolism to later historical maps. This juxtaposition is analogous to genealogy of maps or map-like texts, from the cosmological envisaging of the world as a World of Mortals to the pictographic representation of ritual landscapes to western scientific cartography (Nagarjan 2015). This brings out the diverse, diverging and often competing narratives of comprehending the Indian subcontinent as a lived and contingent geo-body. The maps and other pictographic representations appear in both printed and painted forms, as well as in the form of original manuscripts.

The walk across the space that illustrates how we think of spaces is surreal in itself, and with some risk of sounding bombastic, can be termed as a spatial pilgrimage, where

one negotiates their conventional spatio-temporal designs. This begins with the illustrations of Hindu and Jain Cosmology, representing pilgrimage sites and sacred rivers. Then it moves towards ancient European cartographic portrayals about India. The distinctive juncture in this itinerary is the arrival of the Portuguese in the west coast of the country in 1498. From thence, with the coming of other European imperial powers, historical cartography and making meanings out of maps became an apparatus of military contestation, for supremacy over India. The final part shows the maps of various Indian cities, such as French Pondicherry, Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi, and how their landscapes were devised by means of cartographic devices and vice versa. As most of the maps are imperial in nature it implies the imperial epistemological, ontological and ideological biases, and how these moorings of the empire negotiated with the local understandings of spaces, geographies and topographies (Nanda and Johnson 2015). “Indigenous mapping done through early medieval period draws heavily from our experiences with pilgrimage and religious places. This contrasts the European notions of mapping that had more to do with measuring, quantifying, tabulating and calculating,” says curator Vivek Nanda who is also an architectural historian (Chattopadhyay 2015). At the same time the exhibition also shows the evolution of Indian printing industry, established by Europeans but influenced by Indian artistic styles and technology.

Some of the maps that have been included in the exhibition are ‘The Map of the City and Environs of Calcutta’, medieval maps of Hyderabad and Bangalore and Pondicherry’s enlightenment model, a map from 19th century that illustrates religious ceremonies that took place in the Jagannath temple at Puri (Nagarjan 2015). Also included are a map of Vraj yatra at Mathura and Another map by a Dutch merchant, trader and historian Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, a map of northern India, published in Istanbul in 1732, which was believed to be the first map of India to have been printed in the Islamic world and to have employed typography in Arabic characters and the first near accurate map of India made following the arrival of Vasco da Gama in 1498.

The seventy odd maps that are part of the exhibition have been curated from the private collection of Prashant Lahoti, founder of the Hyderabad-based Kalakriti Foundation. His interest in maps proliferated by a chance encounter with an antique map shop in Scotland in 2002 which left him mesmerised, ultimately leading to the largest private collection of historical maps in India. “The maps in the archives have not been researched or preserved and are in danger of getting lost for the future generations. The whole idea of putting together this exhibition is to make more people develop an interest in maps. So the next time they find a map in their house, they don’t just throw it away,” says Lahoti.

Case Study 3

From the diverse narratives about spatial representations in the last case study, we have seen how diverse and diverging can any civilisational claims be. And when these claims are about locating body in a large cosmos of epistemological and ontological



Fig. 2: An Exhibition 'Body in Indian Art' at National Museum, New Delhi curated by Naman Ahuja

ruptures, we enter the realm of the mystical, leaving the concretely conceptualised geobody of the maps behind. The bodies in such mystical planes can be heroic, yogic, ascetic, seductive and dangerous and via its plurality, the plurality of the diverse Indian civilisational ethos emerges. Our next case study will help us in understanding this in terms of Indian art.

The final case study is about an art show christened as *Rupa-Pratirupa: The Body in Indian Art*, an event that was exceedingly celebrated and is considered one of the finest instances of curated spatial experiences. The mastermind behind the concept was Naman P. Ahuja, an Associate Professor in the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. Held on March 2014, March 14, the exhibition had around 300 objects on display, from 44 institutions and individuals across the country. "It is a thematic exhibition on a scale that no Indian museum has ever attempted before," explains Ahuja. In the long chronology of Indian art or museum curation; this event was unprecedented in terms of its scale, ethos and quality. The exhibition underlines the complexity, richness, mystic hues, attractions and spiritualism of the Indian aesthetic traditions in a nuanced and contextualised manner, with enough attention to details, diversities and the multitude of narratives that may exist.

The work, which can be termed as a magnum opus, both at the individual level and at the level of the general aesthetic terrain, brings together 300 well-known and also lesser-known works of art in different forms. Drawn from dispersed archives such as provincial repositories, private collections and also from state-sponsored institutions, the exhibit attempts to chronicle, contextualise and celebrate the diverse, conflict and complementary representations of the body in the Indian aesthetic traditions. The corporeal plurality that results from the diversity of tradition, sociological and economic positions, complex interaction between different faiths and the expansive cultural geography of the country is revealed through monumental stone sculptures, bronzes, paintings, manuscripts,

printed posters, reproductions and video installations. The classical and the folk are set in dialogue with the popular and the contemporary to bear testimony to civilization and its unflagging meditation over the ideal representation of the body through time vis-à-vis ruptures, continuities and challenges to established iconography.

The exhibition space was adapted to the circular gallery space of the National Museum to resemble a *mandala* contained eight different galleries. They represented eight ways of looking at the bodies. The original rectangular model was adapted to the circular gallery space of the National Museum to resemble a *mandala* with eight galleries each narrating a complex thematic position beginning with death and finishing with sensual and enraptured bodies. The gallery about death shows as diverse objects as a Naga warrior, disembowelled bodies, a *sati* memorial and a female warrior slitting her throat. The graphic nature of the content brings the reality and inevitability of death closer home. From death the gallery leads to rebirth; in a cosmological spatial cycle; displaying diverse interpretations and absorptions of diverse myths of the creations and the cyclical nature of birth and life: Hiranyagarbha (golden seed) in the Vedic times to the stainless steel cosmic egg of Subodh Gupta. Another gallery interrogates iconometry and proportion system to articulate idealised, perfected bodies via dwarfed, morphed, composite, anthropomorphic, blissful, transcendental, dangerous and ferocious representation of divine bodies.

This last gallery was one of the most crucial of all; as it raises questions about how we tend to imagine forms in terms of symmetries; and how this symmetry is actually antithetical to our lived spatial universe. In juxtaposition to the second case study; this provides an interesting insight into how the modern humans have tended to see shapes, objects and spaces as concrete, proportioned and indivisible and how questioning them would lead to a more diverse and possibly more nuanced understanding of them.

Beyond its aesthetics; the sheer range of religious, philosophical, cosmological and art historical references brought in by the exhibition was able to cater to a general interest. With the proper mediation of curated walks this interest was able to morph itself to a wider concern about democratisation and open-ended articulation in and about museums.

Conclusion

Curated Walks revolve around the concept of the spatial mobility of people. The movement of people in and around objects of display helps them in comprehending how these objects fit into our social understandings. Hence, these movements of people across the physical terrain of the museum space correspond to their negotiations with both physical and mental geographies. In the aforementioned three case studies, an appreciation of this spatial comprehension of curated walks, have been attempted.

In regard to Hashmi's walks, the increasing awareness within the people of Delhi regarding heritages allude to the successful conveyance of the heritage spaces' culturally determined values to the public imaginations. The dialogue fostered and nurtured by

Hashmi regarding such spaces while he and his audience physically traverse over them, has led to a multifold rise in concerns in and about such heritages. But this dialogue over spaces also need further elaboration about how our ways of conceiving, conceptualising and receiving spatial imageries have changed over time. The exhibition on maps not only change people's perceptions about maps as an object of representation, but also about spaces they represent and this in turn would provide them with new epistemic and ontological tools to rethink and renegotiate their daily transactions, regarding what Edney calls as the 'mapness' of objects.

What we have seen in these two studies actually represents two ways of making spaces coherent, the first one by figuring out the space with sensory experiences i.e. by 'walking' over it; and the second one by cognitive means, by understanding what space is about by making meanings out of its representations and also knowing about such meaning-makings. In the third study, both these approaches coalesce. While exhibits on body art makes one realise the possibilities of the body as a form of spatial construct; the way the exhibits were displayed also allows the audience to adjust their physical and mental locations accordingly. The scope for dialogue and articulation within such a setting can be termed as limitless without hesitation.

The ways in which people derive meanings out of their interactions with their surroundings is immensely diverse, depending upon age, worldview and socio-political and economic backgrounds. By using the trope of space here, we have tried to argue that museums need a gradual paradigm shift from directing people towards objects to allowing people to interact with objects in a free manner. The possibilities of engaging with spaces, or with objects, in their own terms would create a rich repository of human experiences within and without museums. Allowing a free-flowing network of conversations, dialogues and articulations would create a dynamic and democratised curator-audience experience. And for the museologists of an age that is increasingly being seen from the prism of Postmodernism; nothing would be more rewarding than that.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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