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**SESSION D**

**MUSEUMS PROJECTS AND BENEFITS**



## THE MUSEUM OF LONDON, A CITY MUSEUM AS NARRATIVE EXHIBITION

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**Keywords:** Cultural heritage, City museum, Narrative exhibition, Exhibition Design, Communicative Tools.

### ABSTRACT

The British museums dedicated to the history of a city are based on some clear principles: firstly, being physically and metaphorically inside the city; secondly, motivating the sense of self-awareness; thirdly, interacting with the city itself; fourthly, becoming part of social promotion and, finally, over all, involving local audiences.

In the scenario of British City Museums, the Museum of London (MoL), as its founding principle, aims to give back London to Londoners. The museum was designed by the modernist architects Powell, Moya&Partners and was opened in 1976 by the merger of two previous museums; the Guildhall Museum, founded in 1826, and the London Museum, founded in 1912.

The MoL is placed at the southwest corner of the large Barbican complex and was built on an area destroyed during the Second War and today entirely restored.

**Inside the building the exhibition route is simple, distinct and clearly understandable. Ten different sections create the exhibition plan, each one relating to a specific period of history and each designed in a different way, using various strategies for exhibition.**

The MoL collects materials of all kinds, from Roman finds to everyday objects that best represented the most significant aspects of the long history of the capital. The Museum is an harmonious collection of many display systems; from the most traditional such as cabinets for valuable items models, and period room, to the most innovative systems such as touch screen, interactive message boards, and multimedia games. In a strongly integrative dialectic between the new and the old, the museum attenuates every distance between past and present.

The paper aims to provide a presentation of the museum and its exhibition and to reflect on the role of the city museums wisely designed to bring history alive.

### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between history and museums is doubtless indissoluble. However, unlike

history, which can articulate its communication structure through the complexity and the precision of the written language, museums use a multi-media language in order to achieve their goal, which is, in fact, to craft and present story-telling based around objects. Despite the variety of means that may be used (e.g. the architectural space, graphics, texts, lights, sound, models, displays, reconstructions, holograms) this language starts from a premise that is simultaneously restrictive and creative, namely that the centre of the narrative discourse must always remain the object itself (in particular the artifacts in archaeological museums).

Although the renowned Canadian museographer Duncan Cameron [1] recognized that the museum was essentially always an artifact and, as such, an ideological and epistemological product (and certainly not 'unsophisticated'), he argued that the museum was always founded around real things, exhibited strictly





for themselves and not as an image of something else. Similarly Georges Henri Rivière, the brilliant creator of the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires (MNATP), talked about a museology intending to exhibit the objects «en soi et pour soi» [2]. George Brown Goode, on the other hand, the founder of the great museographic School of the Smithsonian Institution, criticized certain exhibitions as simultaneously impersonal and yet overwhelmed by taxonomy, claiming that many museums are only «a well-arranged collection of labels, illustrated by specimens» [3].

That said, it is not so easy to design museum exhibitions whilst remaining completely faithful to these theoretical positions, but we cannot adhere to the conviction that the objects in an exhibition speak for themselves.

The design of an exhibition is therefore the design of interpretative spaces. It is a dialectical process which brings together a simultaneous dialogue between verbal and conceptual techniques of rhetoric and techniques of visual representation. The exhibition designer uses diverse tools (e.g. space, light, colors, materials and media of all kinds), to give back to the onlooker the objects in all their authenticity, displaying them in the same way that they were designed, manufactured, used, and, sometimes, also exhibited. The exhibition is therefore the result of an interpretation and an 'ethical' and responsible action involving an accurate selection of the most appropriate language to convey the message of both individual objects and the entire collection. In this interpretive process, the aspect of communication must be constantly analysed and updated, especially in our historical era ('Digital Era') in which technological evolution is gaining ever more pace and the general public is demanding ever greater involvement.

#### A NARRATIVE EXHIBITION

An emblematic example to help understand the process supporting the design of an exhibition in accordance with the Anglo-Saxon practice is the approach used for the creation of the Museum of London (MoL), as regards the history of a city, acknowledged to be one of the foremost museums in the world. The first phase in the process involved an analysis and evaluation of content, intentions, state of the objects, visitors, educational and pedagogical theories, spatial characteristics and communication tools. During this conceptual phase the professionals (exhibition designers, graphic designers, educators) provided a more profound analysis of the role of the objects, their information, their didactic, museological presentations, their mise-en-scène, their three-dimensional visualisation and their communicability. These professionals conducted an analysis of the communicative resources available, such as text, images, graphics, color, light, sound and multimedia. The subsequent phase of the design process provided for the involvement of the potential visitor, documenting his/her needs and expectations through interviews. Following the requisite reflection regarding the information gathered, the process proceeded to the practical phase of designing the exhibitions and the various installations [4].



Fig. 1- Exterior view of the museum from the ramp

In accordance with the British School, the Museum of London (MoL) is one of the best examples of a City Museum, understood as an authentic narrative exhibition of the history of a city and its inhabitants. The British museums devoted to the history of a city are based on several clear principles: firstly, actually being physically and metaphorically inside the city; secondly, motivating the sense of self-awareness; thirdly, interacting with the city itself; fourthly, becoming part of social promotion and, lastly, above all, involving the general public [5]. For this reason, attracting local visitors and communicating with them are considered a priority. In order to achieve these aims, museums employ as many communication tools as possible (particularly dramatization), adopted in almost all of the numerous British City Museums. In this scenario, as its founding principle, the Museum of London (MoL) aims to give London back to Londoners.

Three basic strategies characterise this kind of museum, which almost always includes archaeological sections: giving maximum emphasis to the human and symbolic aspects of the material culture as expressed through the museum collection; underlining with all available communication tools, the intense relationship between the past, its sedimentation in the present and the future of the city; stimulating all forms of public involvement in the process of interpretation of the artifacts.



Fig. 2 - Overall view of the room devoted to prehistory, *London before London*. The choice of inserting in the exhibition traditional strategies for communication (panels, showcases) is closely related to the difficulty of dealing with prehistoric finds, especially with the human figure.

The latter should be entrusted as far as possible to the visitors themselves, while stressing that any interpretation by the museum is only one of the possible interpretations, chosen by the curator on the basis of his preconceived ideas and experiences. Nevertheless, the human factor is the central element in story-telling. On the one hand, this choice renders every narration strategy of the museum

attractive; on the other hand, in this way, the public abandons its fears as regards objects which are obsolete, unknown and often barely comprehensible [6].

The MoL is defined by critics as «the most retiring public building in London». If it were not for the large letters on the façade we would hardly know that it was there. Situated on the edge of the oldest part of London (today the main business district) the MoL is a few minutes' walk north from St Paul's Cathedral, which itself looks out over the remains of the Roman city wall.

The museum was designed by the modernist architects Powell, Moya & Partners and was opened in 1976. It stands at the southwest corner of the Barbican, a large complex of buildings built between the 1960s and 1970s as part of a development program for the bomb-damaged area of the City of London, an area destroyed during the Second War and today entirely restored. Then, in 2010, a substantial £20 million redevelopment programme provided for the complete renovation of the building and the creation of four new indoor galleries [7].

The project focused on what had been an ancient Medieval suburb of the city, from which valuable ancient vestiges emerged during the actual construction of the museum. These Medieval ruins stand in the green spaces surrounding the building and are now perfectly visible through cleverly designed windows, which consent a visual connection between history as retold in the museum and the actual history, i.e. of London rebuilt over itself several times.

The MoL building has a modernist composition, its façade being characterised by a cladding of white tiles, by the dark brick of the square in front and by the dark bronze of the office tower. The interior was designed in a flexible way in order to be easily adaptable for changes. The open interior space is characterized by a spiral-shaped tour itinerary, which accompanies the visitor through two floors of exhibition.

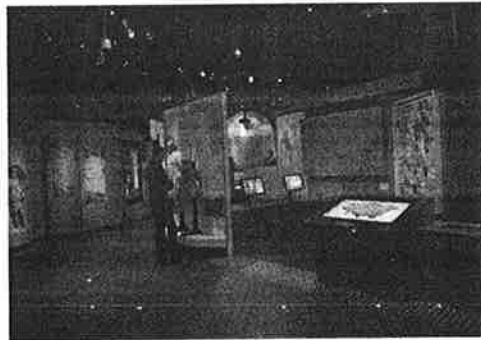


Fig. 3 - Overall view of the first gallery of the museum, *Roman Gallery*, dedicated to *Londinium*. The exhibits combine several communication tools, e.g. panels, screen, audiovisual systems.

The clear itinerary shows precisely the design approach of the firm of Powell&Moya in accordance with their overall view of the museum, i.e. a linear sequence that entails continuity, from the prehistoric age to the galleries regarding the city's contemporary history.

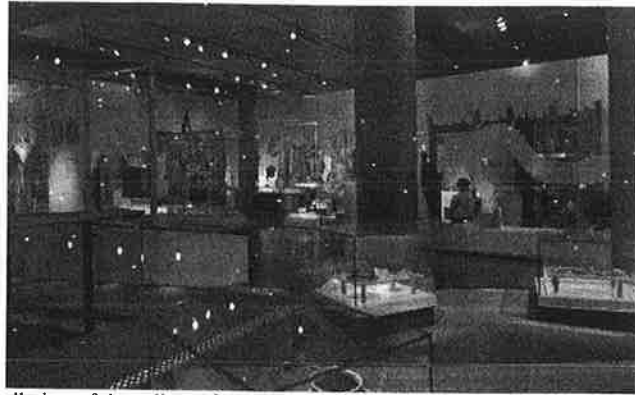


Fig. 4 - Overall view of the gallery of the museum dedicated to the medieval London. The design of the exhibition is simple and elegant.

The museum collection includes objects from two previous museums, the Guildhall Museum, founded in 1826, and the London Museum, founded in 1912. Ten different sections comprise the exhibition lay-out, each one relating to a specific period of history [8]. The museum illustrates the history of the City from Prehistory to the contemporary age, with each section designed in a different way, using diverse exhibition strategies. The museum has a series of chronological galleries housing original objects, models, pictures and diagrams, with a particular emphasis on archaeological discoveries, the built-up city, urban development and the social and cultural life of London through interactive displays and activities for all historical periods.

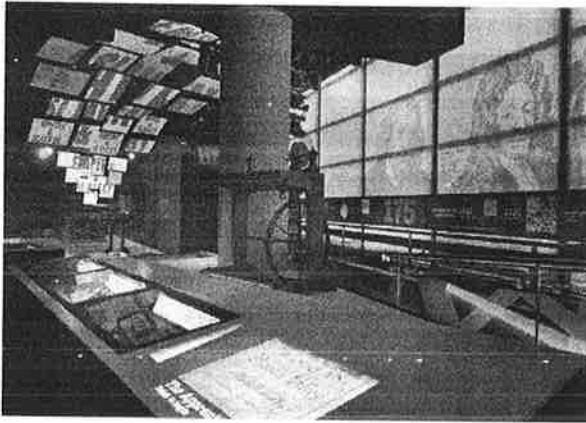


Fig. 5 - Exhibit dedicated to the history of London in Eighteenth Century. A timeline with dates and pictures scans the highlights events of that period.

The visit begins with an area devoted to prehistory, called 'London before London', a new gallery which takes the visitor back in time to around half a

million years ago when early humans began to inhabit the valley of the Thames up until the arrival of the Romans in London.

The aim of this gallery is to illustrate the attitudes of prehistoric man, i.e. the ancestor of today's Londoners, showing how evolution drove Man to transform himself from hunter to farmer to trader, how these people organized themselves into communities where organized worship and special burial rituals took place.

Another aspect emerging in this section of the exhibition is how climate change modified the face of the city of London, something that maintains a link with current issues. It is shown how the course of the River Thames was different and how it played a fundamental role for the inhabitants of the valley being a source of water and food as well as a place replete with religious significance. In this gallery there are about 400 exhibits (mostly everyday utensils and items related to funeral rites), which were found in the valley of the Thames; among these objects there is also a human skeleton with a reconstruction of the head displayed.

Then the visit continues with a section devoted to the Roman conquest of Londinium. The Roman occupation of Britain marked the foundation of London as a settlement, which was followed in 43 AD by the annexation of the whole of Britannia as a province of the Roman Empire. The new settlement spread over both banks of the Thames (the present-day districts of 'The City' and 'Southwark') and subsequently Londinium became the administrative and commercial centre of the expanding Province [9].

Londinium, after being completely destroyed in 60 AD, was completely rebuilt forty years later, becoming the largest and most influential city in the whole area.

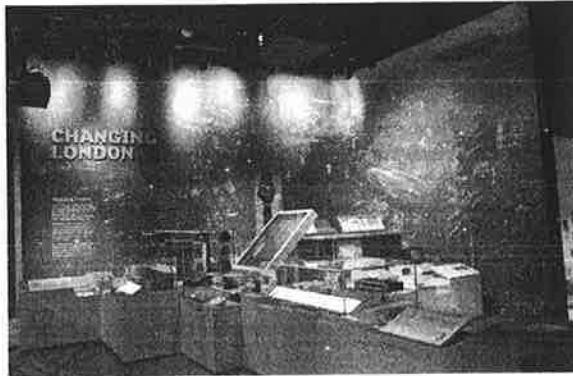


Fig. 6 - Final exhibition of the museum about the London of today. On the background the possible in the future city.

The settlement included a thriving port, a forum, a basilica, baths, and a military fort. In addition, there was an amphitheater (of which the oldest traces remain under the nearby square of the Guildhall), temples and a religious complex; these provided a meeting-place for Romans/Londoners from various parts of the Empire.

This section is the largest in the entire museum. It describes the different cultural aspects of Londinium, from daily life to religious practices, from urban growth to building techniques. A wide variety of communication systems are adopted in the exhibition: panels with graphics and text, models, full-scale reconstructions of Roman houses and audio visual workstations. An important role is assigned to graphics, with the illustrated timelines accompanying the tour itinerary marking out the time of the historical evolution of London.

The visit continues with the exhibition devoted to the Medieval collection. It covers an extended historical period, from Anglo-Saxon settlement of the fifth century, through the age of the Vikings and the Norman conquest of 1066, up to the splendor of the city under the Tudors around 1350.

During this period London's merchants and craftsmen established their social position as privileged citizens by creating a system of self-administration that is still valid today. London grew as a trading centre with a considerable, simultaneous, population increase. Furthermore, London changed its appearance. The medieval houses were tall, narrow and built of wood, in accordance with the construction techniques of wattle and daub (i.e. wooden poles intertwined with twigs and branches, covered with clay, mud and reeds). This was the historical moment in which the city was filled with ecclesiastical buildings, including the Cathedral of St. Paul, the largest in the entire UK [10].

The exhibition is generally characterised by well-balanced composition. In this area the objects are exhibited mostly in showcases of simple and elegant design. Light and contemporary graphics are employed alongside the exhibits, as support for the objects.

Multimedia tools with audio and video content enrich the visitor's knowledge with a range of contents related to the different cultural aspects. Throughout the exhibition there are diverse hands-on exhibits with which the general public, especially the younger ones, can interact.

The itinerary proceeds to the London of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the city was under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I; this was the age of Shakespeare and the Great Fire of 1666 which changed the entire appearance of London.

The years following the Great Fire drove the city towards significant reconstruction, and it was from this time that London was turned into one of the largest and most powerful capitals. Queen Victoria reigned through this historical period and London held the Great Exhibition, promoting England as a great trading power. The city was enriched with gardens, theatres and business districts, and began to take the shape of the current city [11]. Victorian London is strongly evoked in one of the sections of the museum. The visitor, by following the imposed itinerary, arrives at a typical street of Victorian London, a museological reconstruction (e.g. period room or period street); along the 'walk' the visitor find shops, public houses and even a bank.

The visit continues inside the 'People's City 1850-1950' which describes how, during that century, the city expanded at the urban level, with a significant increase in population, which, however, increased social divisions. Here there is a display of motor cars, clothes and planimetries. All the objects are supported by video testimonies from Londoners of that time. The tour ends with the last section regarding the city from the Fifties to today, highlighting the distinguishing characteristics of one of the most important capitals in the world.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we might say that the MoL is a harmonious collection of several display systems, ranging from the most traditional, such as cabinets for valuable items or contextualized display cases for small objects, models (many of which have been created recently on the basis of the latest archaeological acquisitions), and period rooms (some totally authentic, others completely rebuilt), to the most innovative systems such as touch screen, interactive message boards, and multimedia games. Furthermore there are rooms (such as the one devoted to the London docks) which recreate an atmosphere that is both unexpected and exciting. The reason why the MoL is often included in articles dealing critically with the relationship between the museum and history, is not only to be sought in these aspects; however they certainly all contribute to creating an effective context that can flexibly adopt all the cleverest exhibition strategies suitable for transforming a simple display of objects into the narration of a fascinating and moving (more human than urban) history, aimed not only at tourists, but, above all, at Londoners. The objects 'inhabit' the rooms of the museum like a familiar presence; they are connected to all the spaces and, at the same time, to extremely effective communication tools. In a strongly integrative dialectic between the ancient and the new, the museum attenuates every distance between past and present. The MoL is, in the words of the architect and expert on exhibition-design, Alfredo Forti, a beautiful and modern museum, run by astute management and capable of 'bringing history alive'[12].

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