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GENEALOGY
OF DESIGN'S
MUSEOLOGY AT
THE UNIVERSITY
OF AVEIRO

GENEALOGIA DA
MUSEOLOGIA
DO DESIGN NA
UNIVERSIDADE
DE AVEIRO

PRECEDENTES

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TOWARDS VIRTUAL MUSEUM OF DESIGN (2002)

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ABSTRACT

All artefacts are but memory institutions in terms of the values they carry along. If an artifact can by itself be the proof of an institution, it needs a space where it may live and be set within the context of its own time as a reconstitution and, by these means, giving rise to another institution where that set of artefacts would be displayed: the museum.

The Museum of Design aims at safeguarding that memory in order to enable the understanding of new ways of life and thinking according to another perspective. Technology renders imperative the museum mutation so that it may be consonant with a new reading, new actions and perspectives made possible in the cyber-society that is now being built. Thus, the virtual museum of design is the new way of viewing, thinking and organizing the values and ideas assembled in the items produced. With various examples, the virtual museum brings into existence and develops the display of new riches. In this paper we describe our efforts and strategies to create a virtual museum of design, based on a new kind of interaction driven by design theory.

INTRODUCTION

"In December 1996 I counted how many museums were listed in the virtual Library and found 630. In June 1997 I counted again and found 1200 (...). These views certainly changed the way I saw things (...). Obviously, museums, and organizations that fund, own and control them, agree that information Age will be highly significant for them" (Keene, 1998: xix)

At present, the Virtual Library consists of 9107 museum sites. The explosion of information resulting from digitalisation and communication technologies raises new challenges, providing a new vision of the world; however, in this universe of apparent optimism, the sensation that everything is available to us is illusory. To have access to knowledge is not enough; it is necessary to put it into perspective, correlate it and put it in order. The museum, one of the agents of this effort in the physical world, continues to have a role to play in the virtual techno-cosmos of information society. Nevertheless, this role, being in essence the same of the past, should be rethought to maintain active pertinence in the present, in accordance with a strategy reflecting contemporaneity by encouraging values, ideas and objects, which act as fragments in society. With this outlook, our research proposes studying the role of the museum within the virtual context.

Derrick Kerckhove reflecting over the most conventional museological models – the depository museum and the point-of-view museum, it builds critical thought on which he brings the need of a new virtual museum into view.

"(...) in the Renaissance, museums were "(...) closed to themselves, just like the human mind: a world within a world, a tranquil area to meditate where history, learning and culture would interconnected with each others dreams."; on the other hand, "the tyranny of the point of view", "was the cognitive technique used to classify and organise all the personal information into objective hierarchical categories, which later was to mobilise our mental "theatres". The point of view is also a technique to which many conservatives are profoundly committed because it strengthens their idea of a museum as a box, of artefacts as inert matter and of public (...) whose education should continue to be a way to explain-and-show." (Kerckhove, 1998: 176–179).

On-line museums of reference, such as the Louvre, are in some way passive. The aim of the virtualisation of their collection is not to compete with the original, but rather to publicise it and make it indispensable to a satisfactory sensorial experience. This outlook may be in itself positive but it limiting to the search of potentialities for digital mediation. On speaking of a virtual museum, one indicates its potentialities: cancelling of its time and space conditionings in accessing total repository and enlargement of the field of communication.

In the approach proposed, a museum curator in the classical sense of the term is not indicated. In this context, the curator figure is outdated by its semantic connotation, associated to the outlook of an eminently depository museum or "from the point-of-view" that is pre-built. We suggest, therefore, the concept of observer/interactive commissioner. In other words, a museum capable of offering the user actual organisation of the information, commissioning him by the guidance of either his desire or interest, including different levels of interaction. The collection shall not be treated in a static, definitive and archival manner, but rather in a way that is dynamic and interpreter of the publics' feedback.

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

The project on a Virtual Museum of Portuguese Design is set within the group of activities intending to operationalise the Museum of Portuguese Design.¹

In fact, this is a fundamental environment not only to echo its set of accomplishments, but rather to make fragmented total assets accessible and public which shall be established from collections necessarily dispersed in space, distributed by sectorial museological initiatives, either regional or resulting from research on the Portuguese heritage of artifacts.

Nevertheless, we are not dealing with simple gathering and classification of these artifacts. What is at issue is its interpretation, that is, its oblivion with a productive discourse on either the future building of design or of design with a future. In this sense, the Virtual Museum of Portuguese Design cannot be submitted to the portal and/or catalogue condition, but to aspire becomes a relational environment

where various analytical outlooks may be crossed. The approach proposed, embarks from a theoretical model developed by designer Francisco Providência at the University of Aveiro, which is based on a triangular figure to establish a design solution and this triangle has brief, technology and the author as its vertices (figure 1).

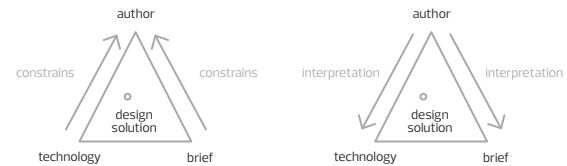


Fig. 1 Design triangle.

Positioning of the solution in the triangle shall be characterised by the influence of each of the vertices. For example, a solution registered on the base of the triangle shall have null effect on the values of poetics carried by the authorship, that is, it will only be a technological solution. In the same way, a solution on the author/technology side shall merely correspond to an artistic solution since there are no conditionalism on a brief to limit it.

Similarly, one deduces from the model that the project on design is a sense building process (of meaning) interpreting (through drawing) the set of constraints, which on the one hand, arise from the order that is suggested to it, and on the other, from the technological moment circumscribing the possibility of a solution. Experience, culture and attention to social signals characterising a time and space, contribute towards this interpretation.

In this way, a new aim emerged which established the search for solutions to unite this (or another) model of thought on design with the unavoidable analytical axis (space and time) omnipresent in the museological discourse.

The methodology that is being followed is typical of any project management, evolving from the clarification of the problem for analysing precedents to an assessment of the concept developed, with a view to its subsequent refinement. This article is a denouncer of the current phase of the respective project, that is, the need to confront the model developed with the critical reflection of specialists.

ANALYSIS OF SOME VIRTUAL MUSEUMS

The study developed at this phase, intended to understand how the traditional museum has been using the World Wide Web and how the development of the different respective sites turned out throughout the experience. Considering that there are considerable differences between them and these differences are extended from the graphical presentation of the site to the techniques used to transmit the information, one decided to create a grid of assessment in order to analyse qualitative and quantitative aspects in accordance with the respective set of parameters, such as its usability, for example. This assessment permitted a graphical treatment of data and the alignment of some conclusions (figure 2).

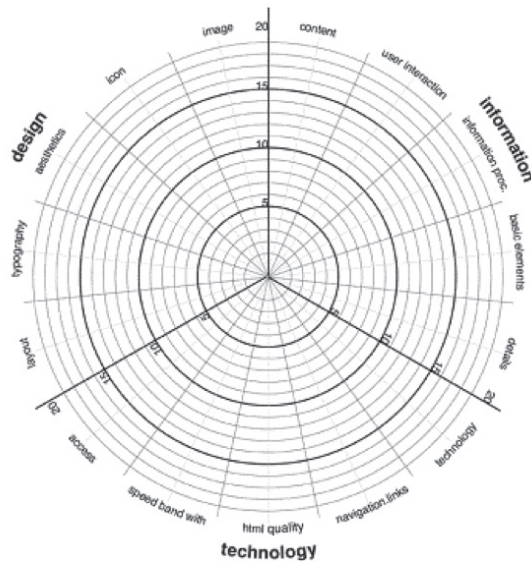


Fig. 2 Evaluation grid: graphical representation

One intended to extrapolate parameters with a sufficient degree of generality in order to insure its immunity face of the diversity of solutions proposed for the interface/interaction binomial.

In order to select the criteria of assessment, both the work developed by World Best Network and the criteria used by the National Visual Arts Standards were consulted.

Nevertheless, all the work-study developed had Designing Web Usability de Jakob Nielsen as a basis of reference.

Usability was part of the development of the assessment of museum sites. Usability, already with an allocated standard, ISO 9241, implies presentation of an interactive system, which will operate with efficacy and will be pleasurable in a specific context of integration, where users may accomplish their initiatives.

The set of criteria established were organised according to three vectors intended to measure the efficacy of each site, whether from a level of Technological use or the transmission of information, and finally, from the perspective of Design.

The site's contribution is quantified according to each one of those axis by responding to a set of 5 criteria, allowing to define a point within this three dimensional area of assessment for each site. The result is represented in a two dimensional graphic, which by rapid inspection, permits one to understand which are the contours of design decisions that had influenced the conception of the site (figures 3, 4, 5).

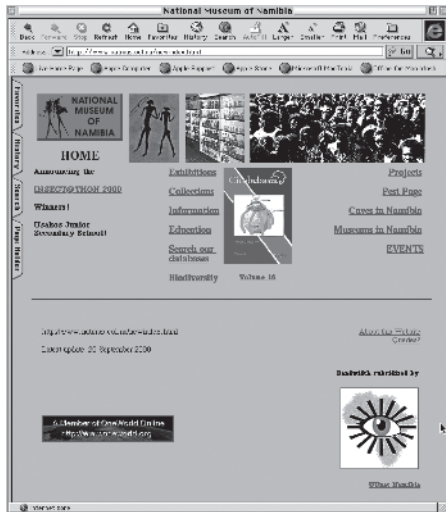


Fig. 3 Analysis of Namibian National Museum

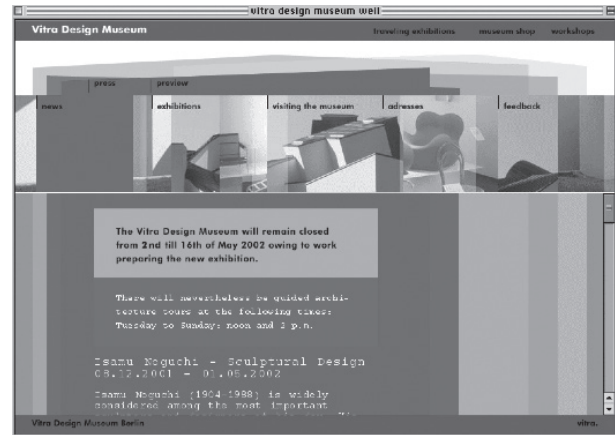
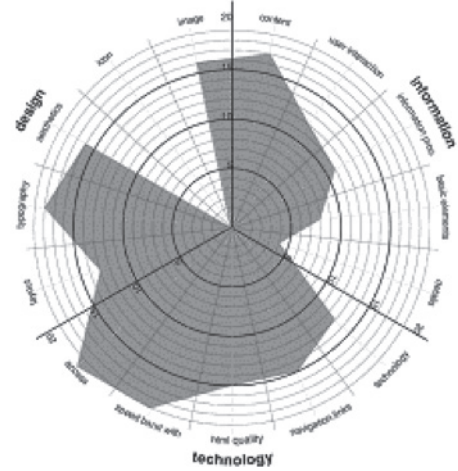
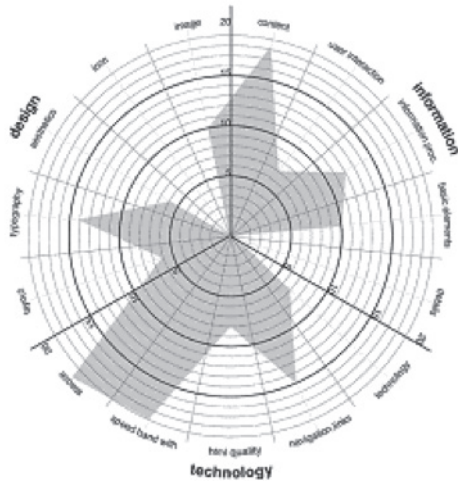


Fig. 4 Analysis of Vitro Design Museum



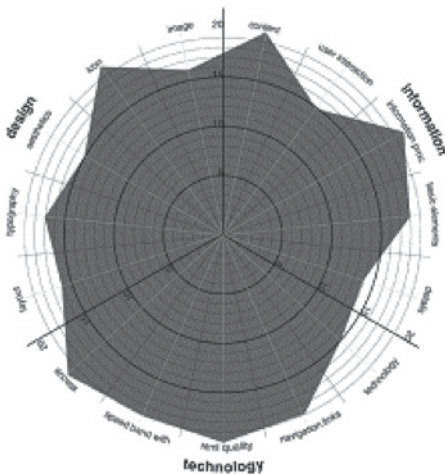


Fig. 5 Analysis of Louvre Museum

The selection of the sample of on-line museums that were analysed was carried out from the information made available by relevant bodies in the museological milieu: at an international level, the source was ICOM (International Council of Museums), a body that develops an array of activities of world interest to preserve and improve the different museum typologies; from a national context, IPM – (Portuguese Institute for Museums) was the entity consulted.

This grid of assessment based on relatively standard criteria permits detecting parcelled weakness in the design of museological sites, but does not uncover fragilities in their holistic conception normally resulting from the designer's submission to technical paradigms and content imposed on him. In fact, the latter's activity tends to only be on a graphical plane, appearing to give up exploring all the consequences of digital mediation.

A MODEL FOR MVDP – MUSEU VIRTUAL DO DESIGN PORTUGUÊS (VIRTUAL MUSEUM OF PORTUGUESE DESIGN)

Concisely, MVDP may be described as a receptacle, a device of articulation and virtual exhibition (on-line and off-line) of Portuguese artefacts chosen by different entities based on a protocol. The aim of this protocol shall be to pragmatise the concept of virtual museum of Portuguese design by means of the definition of typology of information incorporated in each "virtual meta artifacts" as well as its technical standardisation.

This model's big advantage is that it brings together a collective effort of research and information and material cataloguing into a single area called the virtual museum. Its respective collection, lacking the constraint of physical space that divides total repository into exhibited and archived, will continually grow and be accessible both universally via the web and locally through technical devices for visualisation of either immersive or mixed virtual reality (such as "augmented reality").

These technologies permit a sensorial experience that is stronger and closer to the real, but with greater capacity to dynamically articulate the correlative information with the logic of the museological visit which the observer defines and intends to complete. In fact, the concept of the visit to the museum should be substituted by the non-linear exploitation of its collection, nevertheless, under various contexts. This exploitation may be focused not only on the object but also on information associated to each object: texts, videos, audio, images and hyperlinks.

The museum may be observed from several perspectives as well as be changed in real time. Which transforms the

observer into an "interactive commissioner", that is, capable of defining "his museum" through of the introduction of criteria and personal filters that will restructure and highlight the information deemed as most relevant.

The interface of the site, namely, Revealing Things of the Smithsonian Institute (based on Thinkmap technology) permits in some way an observation within these moulds, even though it does not explore absolutely its potential from design point of view.²

Actual resolution of the representation of objects merely permits their referencing but never to "feel them" nor explore them within an appreciable dimension. In the virtual world, resolution is the equivalent to the scale of the real world. Furthermore, the resolution here of the actual interface and the representation of artefacts is reduced.

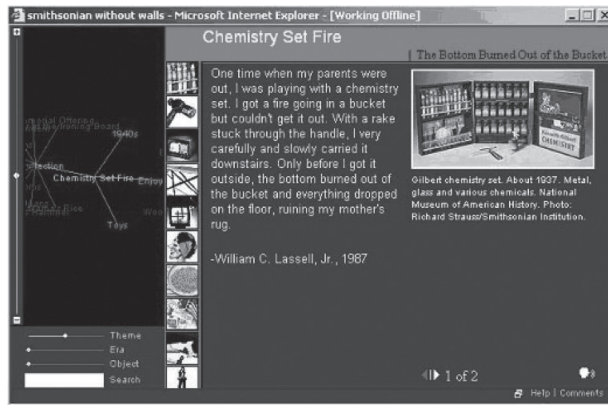


Fig. 6 Revealing Things: Smithsonian Institute (Put exactly here)

Over and above that, complementary information is limited and is in itself a "death end". On the other hand, the control one has over the dynamic structure with which related topics, concepts and objects emerge is limited to the choice between seeing more related objects, more topics or more epochs. There is no real capacity to organise itself according to a concept and to explore the multidimensional and transdisciplinary wealth of each object.

This is the idea that one intends to invest on: by joining an interface to the concept of "Napster"³ of artefacts, whose dynamic structure and variable geometry permits the

analysis of objects or groups of objects by means of the vision proposed by various subjects: from Design to Anthropology, including Art, Engineering and History.

For this purpose, "visualisation dynamic paths" to access the total assets must be developed both according to the co-ordinates calibrated by the user and through the proposition of a museological concept inherent to the project regarding MVDP.

Essentially, the idea regarding MVDP rests upon the principle of the triangle for analysis of the project of design whose main vertices are authorship, the programme and technology. Inevitable spatial and temporal dimensions without which one would not be able to organise the objects in a satisfactory manner, must be added to these three axes. Of course, one would eventually be able to display more vertices: for example, authorship in symbolic and aesthetic dimensions; the programme from the perspectives of corporate identity and functionality; technology in technical sub-divisions inherent to each typology of artifacts.

The need to transform new museums into experience-place to the detriment of the traditional "depository" museum or allegedly pedagogic "point-of-view" museum is emphasised here just as suggested Kerckhove. Nevertheless, we have the conviction that if the museum completely abdicates from proposing points of reference and active organisation it will face the risk of merely becoming a "zapping" museum. If the possibility of zapping neither is bad nor is excluded from a system of this nature, then it may continually establish itself by mere alienating experience. In this context, zapping is suggested in the hope and in the conviction that an open "channel" that will satisfy the particular interests of the observer without these being imposed. Over and above this, he will have the tools to syntonize according to his needs.

MUSEOLOGICAL PROTOCOL

Protocolled concepts of "virtual meta artefact" and versatile and increasable "visualisation dynamic paths" permit creating a dynamic museum in constant construction from both the point of view of its total collections and the ways to articulate it by individual experience. Nevertheless, if challenges at a level of technology and interface design faced by this system are ambitious, then the same may be said about the Museological Protocol.

Technical standardisation must anticipate the future to not run the risk of rapidly becoming out-of-date. For this purpose, resolutions for the digitalisation of artefacts must be generous and must be based on versatile technical systems. A three dimensional virtual version of high resolution, permitting both the creation of a small model for on-line visualisation and allowing incorporation into a strict VR (Virtual Reality) immersive system by using the same database, should be created whenever this is justified.

The information associated to each artefact must be diversified, transdisciplinary and built with the prospect of being amplified and crossed with information on other artefacts as well as align itself with "visualisation dynamic paths". Over and above cataloguing basic information such as location, date, author, brand name, production, objective, and quantity, illustrated analysis by specialists in design, anthropology, sociology, history, art or engineering must also, however, be developed according to each object.

CONCLUSION

The presented model for the virtual museum of design is in the validation phase. One of the identified problems is the need to quantify parameters that are usually in a qualitative dimension.

How to quantify the value of poetics in an artefact?

The idea of "travelling" in a patrimony of artefacts that are dynamically related with a personal theoretical interpretation doesn't seem to have a easy implementation. This requires further research.

FOOTNOTES

¹ See article *The Portuguese Design Museum* also present at this conference.

² The technology Thinkmap (www.thikmap.com) is developed by the company Plumb Design (www.plumbdesign.com).

³ Napster its a famous site (and polemic one, because the authors rights problem) which principle is based in the centralization of one group of users that made available a musical collection on-line. This whole gives shape to a enormous access of data and musical shared files based on the MP3 technology.

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