

Displaying Spaces

Spatial Design, Experience, and Authenticity in Museums

Märit Simonsson

Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt försvar i Hörsal B, Samhällsvetarhuset, fredagen den 28 november, kl. 10:00.
Avhandlingen kommer att försvaras på svenska.

Fakultetsopponent: Lektor (fil. dr) Vaike Fors,
Sektionen för hälsa och samhälle, Högskolan i Halmstad.



Institutionen för kultur- och medievvetenskaper
Umeå universitet
Umeå 2014

Organization
Umeå University
Department of Culture
and Media Studies

Document type
Doctoral dissertation

Date of publication
November 7 2014

Author
Märil Simonsson

Title
Displaying Spaces – Spatial Design, Experience, and Authenticity in Museums

Abstract

This dissertation aims to analyse how spatial design affects experiences and meaning making in museums. The overarching question is what the spatial elements and forms within museums communicate to those who visit them. This is specifically explored in five museums in Rome: Museo dell'Ara Pacis, Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Centrale Montemartini, and MAXXI. The method used for analysing the museum spaces was based on observations that followed a method plan consisting of visiting the spaces on several occasions and describing the spaces and my own experiences of them with a focus on spatial aspects such as layout, disposition of exhibitions, material, volume, light, and colours. This also included conversations with first-time visitors, one in each of the five museums, about their experiences of the visit. My own experiences and the five visitors' descriptions are analysed in dialogue with theoretical perspectives. The theoretical framework consists of perspectives from diverse academic disciplines. The most essential of these are museological aspects on museum experiences, authenticity, and spatial matters. Multimodality, semiotics, hermeneutics, and art-architecture theory are applied in relation to analysis of spatial factors and symbolic meanings as well as to authentic experiences and understanding of history. Phenomenological approaches to the body as the medium through which we perceive the world is central in this study. The five museums are treated and analysed individually in each of their chapters and the results reveal that although they are radically different from each other in terms of their contents and display concepts, they have corresponding factors in common. In the final chapter, the museums are discussed in relation to perspectives on spatial design in museums in a broader sense and the conclusions are drawn on a more general level. The discussions include aspects of authentic experiences of both historical and contemporary factors as well as on the issue of balance and imbalance in relation to museum spaces.

Museum spaces are inseparable from their contents. Space and exhibition elements influence each other and meaning is formed in their relationship. When imbalanced, museum spaces might evoke sensations of confusion and frustration. When balanced, on the other hand, they can create atmospheres that evoke sensations of excitement, comfort, and curiosity. Museum spaces can stimulate the motivation to understand the exhibition context or encourage visitors to imagine themselves situated in another time and place. Different kinds of experiences occur when we are present in a museum, but it is not always obvious to us that spatial design is a contributing factor. The impact that spatial design has on our experiences and meaning making is considerable and as this study argues, there is reason to further acknowledge space as an essential element in museums.

Keywords

Space, museum, experience, meaning making, spatial design, authenticity, phenomenology, Rome, exhibition, museology

Language
English

ISBN
978-91-7601-141-6

ISSN
1103-0100

Number of pages
214 pages