GEORGOUTSI I., BYSTROVA T. Yu.

Muynak's Aral Sea museums: Design as a Factor of Place Making



Georgoutsi Ilektra

Master's graduate of Silk Road International University of Tourism and Cultural Heritage, Samarkand, Uzbekistan

e-mail: ilektra1911@outlook.com.gr



Bystrova Tatyana

Doctor of Philosophical Sciences, Professor, Ural Federal University named after the first President of Russia B. N. Yeltsin (UrFU), Chief scientific officer, Branch of FSBI «CIRD of the Ministry of Construction of Russia» UralNIIprojekt, Yekaterinburg, Russian Federation

e-mail: taby27@yandex.ru

The article presents data from a field study of the local history museum in Muynak (Uzbekistan) near the Aral Sea and State Museum of Arts named after I. V. Savitsky. Museum design is considered as a factor in enhancing the attractiveness of a museum for visitors (including tourists) in a place located in difficult climatic, ecological and socio-economic conditions. The aim of the text is to suggest and give examples about the implementation of a modern ad visitor friendly design and exhibition facilities which in combination with digital exhibition technology will aid both institutions to complete their vision and mission, contribute to the place development.

Keywords: Aral Sea, Muynak, museum design, visitor friendly design, exhibition, museology, digital technology.

Георгуци И., Быстрова Т.Ю. Музеи Аральского моря в Муйнаке: дизайн как фактор создания места

В статье представлены данные полевого исследования краеведческого музея в Муйнаке (Узбекистан) недалеко от Аральского моря и Государственного музея искусств им. И.В. Савицкого. Музейный дизайн рассматривается как фактор повышения привлекательности музея для посетителей (включая туристов) в месте, расположенном в сложных климатических, экологических и социально-экономических условиях. Цель текста— предложить и привести примеры внедрения современного дружественного к посетителям дизайна и экспозиционного оборудования, которые в сочетании с цифровыми технологиями экспонирования помогут обоим учреждениям реализовать свое видение и миссию, способствовать развитию места.

Ключевые слова: Аральское море, Муйнак, музейный дизайн, дружелюбный дизайн, выставка, музеология, цифровые технологии.

Introduction

Regional History and Aral Museum and Historical Museum of Aral Sea are state cultural institutions supervised by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Both of them are located in the town of Muynak, once a prosperous city/port of the Aral Sea, in Karakalpakstan, the autonomous region in northern Uzbekistan. Through the collections and exhibitions of those specific museums most of the tangible cultural heritage of the Aral Sea region is preserved, documented, interpreted and exhibited in order to spread awareness about the ecological disaster (Illustrations 1, 2) and provide information regarding the everyday life and professional activities of the local community, when the Aral Sea still existed and the city of Muynak was thriving. In the context of the degradation of the settlement caused by an environmental disaster and remoteness from large cities or tourist routes, it is necessary to pay attention not only to the content of the exhibits, but also to their presentation to visitors in both physical and digital formats. Especially the Historical Museum of Aral Sea which

is located on a cliff next to the Aral Sea monument and in great proximity to the Ship graveyard holds this special advantage to become the history bearer of the local community, the natural cultural heritage and the lost inland sea.

The complete absence of digital technologies, the obsolete museography and poor design and the even poorest interpretation of the exhibits are sticking at a glance in this museum. There are in the article some suggestions on the basis of the New Museology concept formulated that improve the current condition.

The ideas of the New Museology first appeared in the 1980s, but in different regions of the world they were spread with varying degrees of intensity and received their own interpretations. Thus, the editor of the collective monograph on the New Museology P. Vergo from the University of Essex in Great Britain, in the late 1980s, characterizes the new museology, emphasizing the involvement of visitors in museum practices and the increasing social role of museums, work with local communities. His colleagues emphasize the importance of the exhibit, its life cycle, the



Illustration 1. The Ship graveyard of the Aral Sea in Muynak, as it is nowadays. It has been declared an open air museum and is protected by the Uzbek government. Photo: I. Georgoutsi. 2024

authentic presentation of artifacts, understandable to visitors without additional effort [18, 20–21]. We can see similar definition 15 years later in [16].

The authors of the article summarize the consequences of the implementation of the new museology. These are:

- a decrease in the status of a museum object as a self-sufficient object with an increasing role of concepts and ideas; in this case, the concept is «subjectified», it can relate to the nature of the experience of a fact or exhibit by a modern visitor, take into account his realities, his expectations, etc. Work with emotions and impressions takes place;
- an «emotive turn» and the fact that empathy and intellectual response of the visitor are the most significant result of museum activity;
- the emergence of collections of «simple things», including in connection with the implementation of another concept — «everyday culture»:
- an increasing role of the curator with a decrease in the role of traditional caretakers:
- the involvement of museums in the work to overcome difficulties that arose in the past, for example, postcolonial problems in a number of regions of the world [2]. «A new type of museum is a phenomenon that brings to the forefront the connection with contemporary people and current political issues, instead of dispassionate reflections on the long-gone past», emphasizes J. Harris [5, 31];
- expanding the inclusiveness of museums, emphasized, among other things, in the new ICOM definition of 2022;
- working with marginalized groups, such as migrants;
- developing mediation as a special type of educational activity aimed at organizing contact between a collection or an individual exhibit and a visitor [Key concepts, 38–39];



Illustration 2. Muynak fishermen. Author A. Kurbanbaev. Tempera on paper. State Museum of Arts named after I.V. Savitsky. Source: https://www.gazeta. uz/ru/2022/08/12/aral-sea/

 reducing the «power» of museums in favor of visitors, their searches or questions, their activities.

All this is accompanied by the development and transformation of museum design, which helps to solve the problems of organizing content and interacting with visitors. To implement a new museum paradigm, mutual work of professionals from different fields is necessary — not only museum workers, cultural scientists, sociologists, but also designers. Design tools allow to open up new possibilities for the embodiment of ideas, to expand the communication field of the museum. The designer strives to create not only a new external form, but also to reveal the properties, meanings and characteristics of already existing things. Graphic design allows to make changes at all stages of work with the visitor. Attracting attention and informing the visitor about the museum, holding attention during direct acquaintance with the exposition and fixing in the visitor's memory information about the museum and positive impressions from the visit.

The genesis of museum design is described by E.V. Volkova, it shows the change of techniques, technologies and expressive means depending on the understanding of the museum's mission. At the stage of museography, with its passion for the description and presentation of a museum object to a visitor, design was interpreted only as a «frame» [3, 86], contributing to «power» (J. Lacan). At the stage of implementing the New Museology (new museum paradigm), design organizes perception, mastering of the exposition, scenarios of interaction with the site as a whole and with other people. Digital technologies are widely used. From the simple digitalization of resources in the earlier stages, museums are moving towards digital transformation, where computer technologies are incorporated into the museum's products, processes and strategies. Digital transformation can take many forms: from allowing museum visitors to use smartphones or tablets on the site to enhance their experience, to digitizing the collection and making it available online, to engaging with people online before or after their visit to the museum [7, 158–172; 15, 3–4]. Knowing this and having the initial data on the museum in Muynak, it is possible to develop recommendations for a design that meets the needs of today's visitors.

Methods

Since there are very few theoretical sources on museum design, it is necessary to first clarify the authors' understanding of this kind of projecting. When evaluating museum exhibits and other products, we proceeded from the fact that design is a rational type of project thinking, opposed to «free» and more subjective artistic creativity. This means that in the design process there is a technical assignment with a clearly defined goal of the project, object or system of objects. Form-making in design, especially classical, is devoid of chance and voluntarism [1]. At the same time, it is a mistake to reduce museum design only to a set of technical means. Modern design has well assimilated the general principles of communication culture and operates with ideas about emotionalization, play, interaction, etc. To implement them, there are special methods of form-making, when the design «prompts» the visitor with a model of behavior or perception of an obiect.

This research in general curried out by using key words in order to find on line articles, books, reviews related with contemporary technology and its implementation into cultural institutions, definitions about concepts regarding cultural heritage. The same method was followed in order to find online information about the Aral Sea.

Visitations on the grounds of historical research regarding the avande grand art movement of the 20th century, the Soviet era painting and their geographical connections to Muynak city and generally the Aral Sea area, in the Savitsky Museum, an exceptional cultural institution in the capital city of Karakalpakstan, Nukus.

Research on the field: During the 4-day visitation by I. Georgoutsi to the town of Muynak, its cultural institutions.

After the almost complete extinction of the Aral Sea, another UNESCO book was published in 2020 in Tashkent under the title: Aral Sea and the Aral Region¹, portraying the consequences of the ecological disaster and focusing in the socioeconomic recovery of the region

1~ Aral Sea and the Aral Region // UNESCO Library. URL: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374223.

and how to take effective measures to restore the lost sea. In the first chapter of the publication an informative historical and geological chronology of the Aral Sea is being referred to. Also in this book the Aral Sea problem is described beyond the Uzbek-Kazakh borders where actually Aral Sea was located, but it is generalized as a central Asian issue of environmental sustainability and water resources management. The same edition of the book is available in Russian in the small library maintained into the Regional History and Aral Museum. Information about museums and heritage of Karakalpakstan (Uzbekistan) can be found in [14].

Analysis of the current design of Muynak museums

Since there is no single theoretical model of museum design, we will characterize individual components of museums according to the tasks (functions) that the design solves. The most significant of the functions is communicative [1; 4]. Basically, the museums of Uzbekistan use a communication model that does not imply any response actions or pronounced reactions from the visitor. This model is outdated and ineffective. To activate contact, it is necessary to see and study the result of the impact, which is described in the structure of the communication model by G. Lasswell. It takes into account the method of transmitting a message to a person, options for different perceptions. By means of graphic design, it is possible to organize and rationalize the space in such a way that it becomes more attractive. and adapt the complex text of museum expositions into a more convenient, structured one for the average person who is not deeply immersed in the topic of the exhibition. So, the Montreal Design Declaration (2017) states that design «is thought of precisely as interaction»². Graphic design tools allow you to create an accessible, holistic, attractive environment for the visitor and involve him in the learning process, thereby obtaining the desired result — effective museum communication, which today is becoming an independent museum product and a criterion for evaluating many museum projects.

An analysis of specialized literature on design has shown that the ways to achieve communicative goals are the use of more vivid and impressive images by the designer [4, 44]; the integrity of the solution, ensuring the

simplicity of its perception [1, 104]; aesthetic expressiveness, enhancing the originality, and therefore the memorability of the object or environment [1, 96]; the correspondence of the external form to the semantic content of museum objects.

The part of the permanent exhibition of the famous State Museum of Arts named after I.V. Savitsky called «Memory of the Water»³. The exhibition's theme was the landscapes, nature, and human activities of the Aral Sea and especially Muynak during the years before the sea's extinction. Aral Sea was a source of inspiration for many different artists through the years, but now those artifacts can be considered as primary sources that Aral Sea once existed.

The mobile exhibition project «Aral Dream» which took place in many major cities of Uzbekistan during 2022 by exhibiting artifacts which were produced in Muynak's Ship Graveyard also kept Aral's legacy alive and informed the visitors about its tragic story. The exhibition presented about 30 paintings and graphic works created by 7 Uzbek artists on the Aral Sea coast and in Muynak. By depicting the landscapes of the past the city of Muynak could become a new artistic and touristic point. It is worth noting that this specific exhibition used social media as communication channels.

The local scale temporary exhibition called «Footprints on the Sand, Contemporary Artists for Aralkum desert 'is still open to the public of Samarkand in 2024. It was organized and hosted by the Silk Road International University of Tourism and Cultural heritage in Samarkand in the context of an International art symposium. Ten artists from different countries of the world (Uzbekistan, Britain, Georgia, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Latvia, and South Korea) unified their creative ideas and after a short trip to Muynak in order to witness the drama of the region after the drainage of the Aral Sea created paintings and artifacts that eloquently describe the ecological disaster (Illustration 3).

The wonderful artistic initiatives are accompanied by a rather modest graphic design. However, the semantic content of the expositions is such that the design really plays a secondary role. Its main task is to strengthen the identity of the events and the museum, which is almost unnoticeable in the presented poster. The reason may be the one-time execution of the design without a systematic connection with other graphic elements of the Muynak museum identity.



Illustration 3. The official promoting poster of the exhibition «Footprints in the Sand». 2024. Picture from the official Telegram account of Silk Road University



Illustration 4. Lecture given at the Historical Museum of Aral Sea about the sea's and the local community's history.
Photo: I. Georgoutsi. 2024

«Stihia» is a festival of electronic music, art and science, as easily can someone be informed by the event's official website4. It is an independent artistic project incepted in 2017 in Uzbekistan with an aim to raise awareness about the environmental catastrophe of the Aral Sea which combines harmoniously techno music and visual arts with scientific lectures and ecological activism. The happening lasts for three days and takes place around the old light house of Muynak's port exact opposite the Aral Sea monument and the Historical Museum of Aral Sea. Stihia (στοιχεία) is actually a greek word meaning both «elements» and «evidence», both meanings apply in the vision of the festival. Aral Sea was an element of nature and nowadays there are only some evidence of its existence left, and those «Stihia» including the ship graveyard are presented through art to the festival participants and the entire world in order to contribute to Aral's restoration and with the hope that someday it would be achieved. At the festival, design is used mainly in its technological aspect (Illustration 4).

² The Montreal Design Declaration // Design Declaration Summit: Official web-site. URL: https://www.designdeclaration.org/declaration/ (assess data: 01.09.2024).

³ Information in Russian about the exhibition «Memory of the Water». URL: https://makarenko.uz/water-memory.

⁴ Официальный сайт фестиваля «Стихия». URL: https://stihia.org/.



Illustration 5. One of the stages of «Stihia» festival, which was called Aq Keme (white ship) and was located in the Ship's Graveyard. Photo: I. Georgoutsi. 2024



Illustration 6. An informative sign about the Aral Sea on a wall of the Aquarium of the Park «Magic City» in Tashkent. Photo: I. Georgoutsi. 2024



Illustration 7. Yurt in the interior of the art museum. Muynak, Uzbekistan. Photo: I. Georgoutsi. 2024. The designer's poor choice of location means that the second floor (*art**, *museum**) looms threateningly over the traditional dwelling. The essence of museum object is not showed [Dudley]

The ships and other contextual elements form an impressive basis for any site or installation, which should be taken into account in future museum activities (Illustration 5). Such a technique as the active work of a natural or cultural context as a main expressive element of design is quite rarely used in museum design, but in this case the experience of a previous cultural event shows that it

is quite appropriate. The interior space of the museum needs to become more authentic and recognizable through a well-chosen color scheme, navigation elements, compliant labels and visual identity.

Design is capable of comprehending the museum space as a whole, transmitting certain values and images of the place. For now, we see installation objects taken out of context and low-informative showcases (Illustrations 6, 7).

Information about the Aral Sea and its history are present in cities outside Karakalpakstan region such as Tashkent and Bukhara and in places which are not directly connected with cultural heritage or museal exhibitions. There is no unified design, so it is difficult for tourists (and it is to them that such information is mainly addressed) to get their bearings and, especially, to come to any specific actions (Illustration 6). It seems that one or two expressive and constantly transmitted images could link the sites of the two museums in Munyak — the local history and art museums - and also more clearly position the natural and cultural processes taking place there in the external space. The text can be better read if it is laid out correctly with narrow columns and with a contrast between the color of the letters and the background. Along with the dark palette telling about the catastrophe, it is necessary to show the past and future of the territory, taking into account its cultural, social, technical and artistic heritage.

Digital technologies and their implementation in Muynak's museums

For a long time, museum space (and, accordingly, museum design space) was considered to be the physical boundaries of the premises, which has long ceased to correspond to the state of affairs. Digitalization has significantly expanded museums due to their virtual part, and new participatory practices and orientation towards visitors require products that position the museum in an external context.

Nowadays we can speak about not only using of digital technologies, that digital transformation of museum. is the incorporation of computer-based technologies into an organization's products, processes, and strategies. Digital transformation can take many forms, from enabling museum visitors to use smartphones or tablets throughout the site to enhance their experience, to digitising the collection and making it available online, to engaging with people before or after their visits via

online channels [9]. Digital technologies can become the key factor for a link between museums and society [11; 12]. Application of advanced technologies into museums has significantly enhanced how these institutions engage with their audiences and improve their user experience and how all the types of new technologies can meet up with the communication needs of contemporary museums with their audience [6; 7].

Museums have adjusted in the new era of digital technologies being implemented in their exhibition. cultural institutions Increasingly utilize digital technologies to stay relevant in contemporary times. The use of technology in museums can be divided into two domains: digitalization digitization. Digitalization refers to using technology such as virtual reality, augmented reality and artificial intelligence to promote visitor engagement, increase quality of experience and knowledge in museums. Digitization refers to conversion of physical catalogues (such as artifacts and books) to digital for storage, accessibility, or general use. By embracing these technologies, museums are not only preserving and showcasing cultural heritage but also making it more accessible, engaging, and informative for visitors around the world. Several papers, books and articles are referring to and analyze how important are digital technologies to the support of museum's educational role and memory making to its visitors [13].

Contemporary museums must follow new digital technologies and adopt supportive digital tools in their exhibitions, supporting an attractive and playful approach to their educational role, although at the same time not to fall into the trap of «Disneyfication» meaning losing their educative role and instead of the useful information the can communicate to their visitors through their objects and collections, becoming mere amusement parks [8].

In order to make the museum section about Aral Sea more visitor friendly and its exhibition more contemporary and interesting, in addition to the application of digital technologies, the museographic structure of the exhibition must change. The digital tools implemented in the exhibition must follow and being meaningfully related to the physical exhibition's thematic divisions. The use of an audiovisual projection, reproducing a video of a fisherman working on a ship and this would be projected on a metal piece of the ship to show to the museum's audience how the fisherman's job was when this metal skeleton used to be a ship. Thus, similar to the «Stihia» project, the source material taken from the immediate surroundings of the museum will become part of the museum space, not alienated from visitors [10].

A digital tool, which can also be used as means to showcase exhibition objects related to human activities in the former sea is a digital interactive on which each time a different video will be projected, presenting moments from the fishermen's professional life and activities through the years. This interactive video can feature an imaginary fishing boat's captain's dairy, showcasing through the years the fishing industry of the city and the further decline of the sea, based on the memories of the captain.

Realizing the informative and aesthetic functions of museum design, augmented reality can be an important tool for the digital revival of the Aral Sea. In the eastern wall of the Historical Museum of Aral Sea, there is a common, wooden door, which when it is opened offers a panoramic view to the former Aral seashore and the ship graveyard. It is proposed to change the material and the design of this door, in order to resemble a metal ship like door, with the characteristic round window in the middle. By this, the impression of being onto a ship will be created on the museum audience. Combined with the use of augmented reality digital glasses, can offer to the audience a valuable experience to be able to see the Aral Sea and the ships as they used to be, instead of the degrading ships.

Of course, according to the New Museology concept, these actions should be complemented by involving residents in museum activities through social networks, organizing events, and creating a community, as oral, as by using of digital tools.

Conclusion

The use of digitalization and digitation in the cultural section led museums innovating the way they present artifacts to engage with museum visitors. Technology aids to reconstruct the past and create memories out of it even to people who didn't experience it. This extends possibilities and responsibilities of museum designer.

As far as the future of Muynak and the Aral Sea region in general is concerned the modernization of the museums and «Stihia» festival can engage the local community to the cultural institutions by becoming digitally donors to the museums and contributors of their memories to its digital part of the exhibition. As a result, it would be able to tell its troublesome story through the museum's digital tools and applications. By improving the design quality of the local cultural institutions they will be more social significant, attractive and economic effective.

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Георгуци Илектра

магистр музеологии, Международный университет туризма и культурного наследия «Шелковый путь», Самарканд, Узбекистан

e-mail: ilektra1911@outlook.com.gr

Быстрова Татьяна Юрьевна

доктор философских наук, профессор, Уральский федеральный университет им. первого Президента России Б. Н. Ельцина (УрФУ), главный научный сотрудник, филиал ФГБУ «ЦНИИП Минстроя России» УралНИИпроект, Екатеринбург, Российская Федерация e-mail: taby27@yandex.ru

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6713-6867