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The impact of architecture and space on understanding historical progress at the Museum of London

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Thesis: The Museum of London 1976-2007: Reimagining Metropolitan Narratives in Postcolonial London

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LONDON THE IMPERIAL CITY

In 1991, Francis Sheppard, the Museum of London's biographer, described the Museum of London's permanent galleries as 'the first big comprehensive exhibition of the development of a geographical area from the earliest times to the present.' [1] The Museum's narrative of London's development strongly resembled a 'Whig' interpretation of history, a phrase coined by the Cambridge don, Herbert Butterfield, in his 1931 volume entitled *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Such interpretation emphasized '...principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the [...] glorification of the present.' The 1976 Museum of London permanent galleries took the visitor on a journey which emphasised progress from London's pre-history to early twentieth century. *The Imperial London gallery - with its popular imperial imagery and interpretation - stood as the apogee within this teleological narrative; a golden-age.* Displays such as 'Victorian Imperialism' in which can be seen an officer's uniform, a bust of Queen Victoria and decorated with Union Jack flags, cemented the idea of London as an Imperial city and one which grew to become a city 'larger and wealthier than many sovereign states'. *This journey of progress from London's pre-history to London as a powerful imperial centre was shaped in-part by the layout and architecture of the Museum. How does space and architecture assert power over the visitor viewing experience and understanding of history at the Museum?*



Figure 13: 'Victorian Imperialism' display, 'Imperial London' gallery, 1976. Source: Francis Sheppard, *A Treasury of London's Past* (London: HMSO, 1991), p. 160. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.

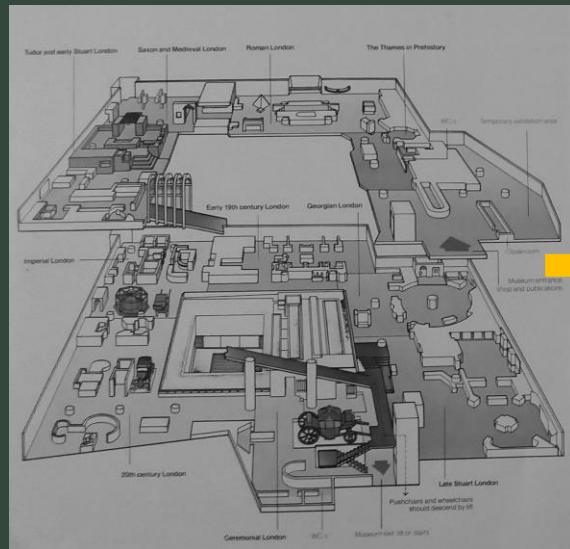


Figure 9: Museum of London permanent galleries floor plan, 1976. Source: London Metropolitan Archives CLA/076/01/016, Museum of London: Guide 1976.

HOW SPACE AND LAYOUT AFFECT THE VIEWING EXPERIENCE.

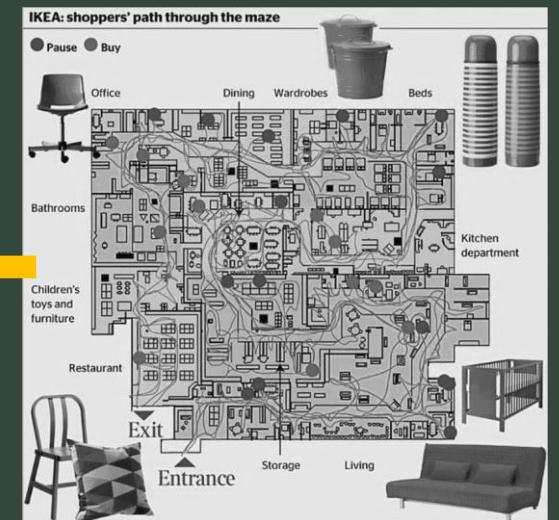
1. The *timeline has been a 'natural' and 'intuitive' way of presenting the past*, 'As you move from the beginning to then end of an exhibition, you move, in a metaphorical way, from [...] the beginning of a story to the end. The timeline provides a powerful framework for presenting history.' [2]
2. *'The experiential narrative that a museum embodies is inseparable from its physical condition - its architecture.* Architecture [...] constructs the framework of the visitors' experience.' [3]

A SIDEWAY GLANCE AT IKEA...

Many of us have experienced Ikea. Ikea's visitor route is designed like that of a museum, '...to keep customers inside the store for the maximum time possible. They achieve this by setting a route round the store from which it's difficult to deviate. Taking the shortcuts (which are only there to conform with fire regulations) often leaves you adrift in a sea of lampshades.' [4]

THE MUSEUM OF LONDON LAYOUT AND SPACE

The upper level of the Museum was experienced as an L-shaped plan, circulating the visitor to the main descent route to the lower level, which is structured as a complete circuit. This architectural approach was 'simple and clear [...] and fully recognises the essential characteristic of museum viewing: that it is a linear sequence, which demands continuity.' [5] Similar to Ikea, visitors would have found it difficult to deviate from the set route, encouraged to follow London's historical progress in a linear way. *The way in which the architecture and space engendered a Whiggish narrative further emphasised a history of the development of London which underscored continual progress with Imperial London as the golden-age; its apogee.*



Ikea visitor route within the maze-like Ikea store. Source: Steven Poon, 'Designing Brand Culture Based on the Advertising's New Medium of Human Experience: Integrating the Application in Lifestyle Retailing Strategy' International Journal of Media, Journalism and Mass Communications (IJJMJC) Volume 2, Issue 2, 2016, PP 8-15.

[1] Francis Sheppard, *A Treasury of London's Past* (HMSO: London, 1991).

[2] Steven Lubar, 'Timelines in Exhibitions', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 2, (April 2013), p. 169.

[3] Susanna Sirefman, 'Formed and Forming: Contemporary Museum Architecture', *Daedalus*, Vol. 128, No. 3, (1999), p. 297.

[4] Ian Tucker, 'Adrift in a shopping maze: it's a successful no-exit strategy', *The Guardian* (January 2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2011/jan/30/ikea-like-a-maze-ian-tucker>, accessed 01st May 2020.

[5] Michael Brawne, '1977 July: The Museum of London by Powell and Moya', *The Architectural Review*, Online, (24th February 2012), [online], <<https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/viewpoints/1977-july-the-museum-of-london-by-powell-and-moya/8626069.article>>, accessed 05th May 2020.