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

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 this narrative of the development of London which underscored continual progress with Imperial London as the golden-age; its apogee.