

# 4 the museum

Investigation of museum typology in general  
and the Ditsong Museum specifically



Even though the Ditsong Museum and the insect collection were chosen only for the application of experience, the concerns existing in the museum at the moment become important for further motivation as to why experience within the museum, and museums in South Africa in general, are a relevant and important problem to be solved.

The exhibition in the Bird Hall dates from 1972, the Genesis 1 exhibition from 1978 and the Genesis 2 exhibition partly from 1987, with a newer addition added in 1998 (Vermaak 2010). The collections of the museum are old and outdated as far as the objects on display are concerned. The interactive displays are not up to date with technology and are broken in some cases. The displays are very repetitive and the user is often bombarded with too much information. The stagnation of the exhibition is problematic, because change and adaptation ensures that users return to the museum.

#### 4.1 Existing vs Experience

The international Council of Museums states that the definition of what a museum is has changed seven times since 1946 (Grobler 2006: 34). One would think that something as static, and almost straightforward, as a museum would stay constant in its goal and description. It is clear though that a

change in definition is needed for the Ditsong Museum.

Traditionally objects in museums are viewed from a distance with, in most cases, glass as a separation between object and observer. Hein (2000:80) calls it “distanced contemplation”. According to Hein (2000:5) the objects in museums, previously plain objects, are being reconstituted as “sites of experience” and that museums see it as their responsibility to deliver experience. These museums take authority to educate through stimulation and encouraged inquiry. This creates environments where the object appears less as an end, than the means to get to the end, which is to generate an illuminating and satisfying museum experience (Hein 2000:6). This, however, is not the case in the Ditsong Museum. There still exists the “static monumentality” (Hein 2000:8) facilitated by the repetition and permanence of the objects on display.

“Museums are places of inquiry and exploration” (Hein 2000:150). The meaning of “museum experience”, according to Hein (2000:7), is determined by the answer to the question: “Is the designated experience of the object exclusively for its own sake, or does the object serve as occasional stimulus for a broader, more encompassing experience?” She goes further to say that the answer deter-

mines our thinking about museums as “object centred” or “story centred”.

When the object becomes more the means to an end than the elevated object itself, experience can become the encompassing factor that ensures the stimulation and further inquiry of the user. The argument can then develop as to whether the experience is “real” enough. This is an important argument, because of the existing museum being object centred and set on the “realness” of the object. Phenomenology suggests that experience is genuine, even when, for example created through illusion. Hein (2000:8) states that “experiential reality is phenomenologically self-contained and divorced from both its causes and consequences.” This does not suggest that false representations are being made, but rather that the objective is not aimed exclusively at assembling collectables, but that the collections become the driving force behind the creation of authentic experience (Hein 2000:8). To create an authentic experience does not necessarily mean that the devices used must be authentic or real. The impact of the experience is real, even though it is manufactured and therefore artificial. Specific feelings are intentionally provoked and with those feelings comes a new dimension of authenticity (Hein 2000:84). The emphasis is shifting from product to process (Hein 2000:67). The “real thing” pinned to the wall behind glass, is substituted by real experience.

When a living organism is taken from its natural habitat, killed and preserved to become an exhibition, it becomes artificial. This implies that no matter how “real” the butterfly on the wall is, it is still out of place and artificial, and except for a closer look at its colour and patterns, cannot be experienced as a butterfly in its full glory. Now, the question is: “Can this ever happen in a restricted, structured museum

environment?” The answer would be no, but to create a more encompassing, stimulating experience that includes the user, his senses and mind would surely come closer. Interactivity and experience within exhibition space heighten and intensify the engagement of the user with the exhibition (Hein 2000:80). An important point to remember is that the experience should not happen at the expense of the object that makes it possible (Hein 2000:147).

The users of the space would be everyone and anyone that visits the museum, which means the age of users stretches from pre-school to adult. This complicates the program in terms of the perception and understanding of different age groups. Ideally the experiences created must communicate to both young and old. The young and pre-iterate are an audience of “doers” and not “viewers” (Hein 2000:34). This, fortunately, may apply to adults of this technologically driven, “button pressing” age as well. The part of the community that the contemporary museum has to address, according to Hein (2000:85), covers a broader social spectrum than was traditionally true for museum visitors. This means that where certain perceptual and behavioural characteristics could have been seen as general or uniform in the past, the enlargement of the user group today does not allow for such uniformities. The aim is to create an experience that is universal.

#### 4.2 The insect

The insect collection was chosen as the subject for the experience exhibition. This collection is only the vehicle to assist in the exploration of experience. The experience stays at the core of the investigation, with the collection secondary to that.



The intervention in the steel structure will be additional to the existing insect collection and not a repetition or replacement of the current exhibition.

The exhibition itself will be the third layer of the scheme. First is the intervention, its reaction to the exterior, to the existing space within the steel structure and facades of the existing building. Second is the interior space that forms the basis of the exhibition. These spaces will guide the curator in decision making for the exhibition that will change once a year. Every new exhibition will follow the guidelines formed by the interior in terms of human senses. To see how the exhibition will be supported and informed by the spaces, exhibition for parts of the insect collection will be designed.

Insects comprise an estimated 85% of all animals on earth and there are over a million known species (Prinsloo 2010). Hein (2000:85) states, "Some phenomena are too big, small, far away, fast, slow, complex, or incidental to be observed by normal perception or under normal conditions." In a lot of

ways, normal perception falls short in understanding insects because of their size and complexity. This adds to the interest, because by changing the perception of the user, the insect or its behaviour can be experienced, something that cannot be achieved only by looking at it through a microscope or glass partition.

### 4.3 Future of Ditsong Museum

Considering that the museum is planning on changing the current exhibitions, the process that is followed should be evaluated. According to Erna Vermaak, educational co-ordinator at the museum (2010), the museum employed five artists that worked on the exhibitions full time during the time of the assembly of the current exhibitions.

Currently there are no artists or curators employed at the museum, because of financial restrictions. Erna Vermaak is supplied with information about the subjects to be exhibited from scientists, after which she writes the story line of the exhibition. This is presented to a board of scientists who approves the story line and its content, before it goes out for tender to companies who handle everything regarding the exhibition (figure 4.1). Problems of this process include the fact that the educational co-ordinator, the scientists and the contractor all think differently and that there is no one party taking the exhibition from start to finish.

The intentions of the story and proper application of the facts would be clearer if someone with an exhibition or interior design background could assist throughout the process. Through collaboration and inter-disciplinary work, the future exhibitions of the Ditsong Museum can become more experience based with the spaces allocated to the exhibitions considered from the beginning.

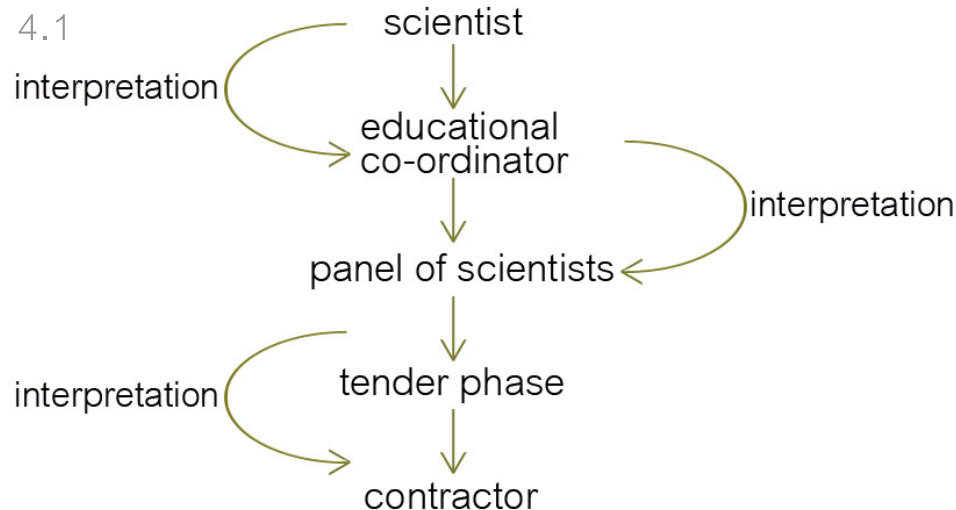


Figure 4.1: Diagram showing process followed for a new exhibition

Natural light, for example, can become a consideration in terms of the specific placement of certain subjects or artefacts, so that the building and existing spaces contributes to the exhibition and do not become a box inserted into the interior, as it is at present.

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Change in the museum in terms of interactive and experience based exhibition is desperately needed. Museums exist to promote and portray knowledge to the public, but if the user does not engage with the exhibition, stimulation, and therefore knowledge transfer, will not happen. It is crucial that the object of the collection evolves into experience so that the user becomes a participant in the space and not only a spectator. The objects should become collections of experience.

Focus Terra Exhibition  
Holzer Kobler Architects  
Zurich, Switzerland 2009



Figure 4.2 and 4.3: Focus Terra Exhibition by Holzer and Kolber Architects (e-architect [sa])

The Focus Terra exhibition in the Natural Sciences Building in Zurich, Switzerland is an example of an exhibition where the designers worked in close collaboration with the scientists from start to finish. Holzer Kobler Architects played the role of curator and designer, with an integrated, well-planned and executed exhibition as end result (e-architect [sa]).