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Museum of Mathematics / Museum of Sex

Introduction

Libraries, archives, and museums are all institutions that work for the promotion and proliferation of culture. These so called “cultural institutions” differ greatly from each other based on many factors, including the type of institution, and the mission of the institution. For example, a small town public library offers very few services that a government archive also would. In order to clearly note the similarities and differences between two very different institutions, I have chosen two museums to observe. These two museums were selected because they are not so fundamentally different, unlike the aforementioned public library and government archive. Both are easily accessible, open to the public, and have their services revolve around visitors and museum patrons. That being said, they are also two fundamentally different museums with very different patron appeal and content matter. Lastly and perhaps most interestingly, these museums are a block away from each other, which poses an interesting lens through which to consider the visitors of the museum - patrons do not choose one museum over the other based on transportation issues or proximity to other destinations. This study will discuss the similarities and differences of both the museums and those that visit them.

Methodology

In order to best compare these two museums, I ensured that both institutions were visited on sunny and clear Saturdays at 11:30am. This time was chosen as to preempt any lunch plans, and ensure that the demographic of visitors would not be altered by work or school schedules or skewed away from the rain-phobic.

Once inside the museums, I employed several techniques in order to prevent my own bias from affecting my observations, and to prevent the museum patrons from being uncomfortable with my observations. Once entering the museum, I slowly walked through all exhibits, as there is no art-museum style observational seating in either museum. Since deep thought and still contemplation is not as common in either of these museums as is in art museums, I made sure to blend in with the other visitors. In both the Museum of Math (MoMath) and the Museum of Sex (MoSex), third party interaction was not necessarily encouraged. At MoMath, with the majority of visitors ranging between the ages of 6 and 11, approaching seemed inappropriate. Although naturally with fewer children, MoSex similarly does not encourage third-party interaction. For similar reasons, active and intent

observation of the visitors seemed inappropriate, and I was forced to keep track of metrics (such as time spent at one section of the museum) by approximations instead of absolutes.

About the Museums

As previously mentioned, MoMath and MoSex are approximately one block apart, located right off Madison Sq Park (5th avenue and 26th street / 27th street, respectively). They are both privately funded museums that charge significant admission fees, and a chart of their weekend prices can be seen below:

| | MoMath | MoSex |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Adult | \$15.00, all included | \$20.50, not including special exhibitions |
| Child | \$9.00, all included | N/A, MoSex is 18+ |
| Senior / Student | \$9.00, all included | \$18.50, not including special exhibitions |

One interesting component of the ticketing is that MoMath happily accepted museum employee reciprocity benefits (providing free admission with the presentation of a museum ID card), while MoSex did not, stating “We’re a private museum so we don’t do that.” This is intriguing, considering that both MoSex and MoMath are private museums. It is therefore more the mission and culture of the museum itself that would prohibit museum reciprocity.

This difference can also be seen in the museum websites. MoMath is more focused on educational aspects and interesting programming, while MoSex is clearly more interested in the cool-factor of their materials:



Above: Museum of Sex homepage slider images feature current exhibitions, and showcases a group of attractive young adults in a bouncy castle.



Above: Museum of Math is more focused on informational content. The homepage also features attractive young adults, but instead they are riding tricycles with square wheels.

From this it becomes very clear that both museums intend to appeal to different groups, and allocate their funds very differently.

Inside the Museums

Once you start to consider the way the contents of the museums are structured, they become even more dissimilar. MoMath is composed almost exclusively of interactive exhibits. These range in topic from puzzles to demonstrations of mathematical principles, and in size from the palm of your hand to 20 feet tall. In addition, there is a small traditional gallery-like space in the rear of the museum, which does present materials in a non-interactive way. Examples of this can be seen below!



Above: MoMath has many large interactive exhibits.



Above: MoMath also has a small gallery space in the back, where they display some mathematical history.

In this gallery space, there is also a moving image display that is designed to be watched in several minute intervals. Although it is not entirely isolated and light-protected, it is used as a feature of the space.



Above: The moving image display in MoMath

In comparison, MoSex is much more traditionally oriented, and notably more darkly lit. There are several consecutive rooms with arrows directing you through each one, which is very different than the free-form, pick-your-own-path design behind MoMath. Out of all the exhibits, there were only two interactive components. The first is the bouncy castle displayed on the website (which is an additional fee for entry), and the second is a bicycle contraption, pictured here:



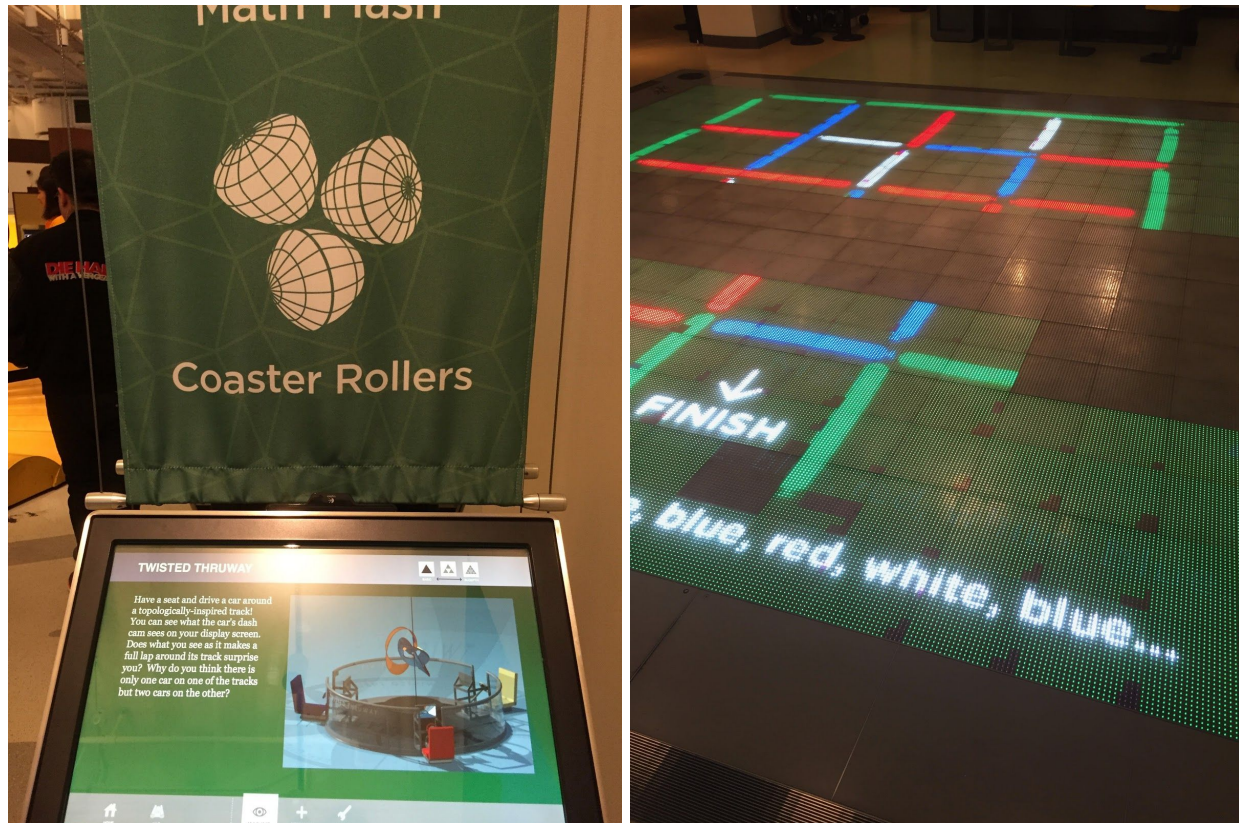
Above: MoSex interactive bicycle contraption in exhibition space.

Although there were no outlined moving image spaces, MoSex contained sporadically placed screens, which displayed footage that pertained to the exhibit at hand. One can be seen above in the bicycle contraption image, to the far left.

One commonality that both museums had was that neither had audio-tours available, seating, security guards, or any kind of photography or cell phone limitations - features that we associate with many public or large museums. MoMath did have some visible staff in more of a safety based role to prevent injury, but there were no staff present anywhere within the exhibits at MoSex. I believe that part of the no visible staff in MoSex has to do with the format of the exhibition spaces. As you can see above in the bicycle contraption photo, there are visible lines on the plastic cases that exist between the visitor and the items. Some preliminary research hasn't shed light onto what these visible lines may be, so it is possible that they are an added protection for the artifacts involved.

An additional similarity is the abundance of worn out or broken materials at both museums. MoMath opted to use interactive displays as directions and explanation for their exhibits, and I found that 1 out of 4 were frozen or in disrepair. There was additionally a large screen-based-piece at the bottom floor of MoMath that was only semi-functioning.

Similarly, the bicycle contraption, as the only interactive component I was able to see, was entirely non-functioning.



Above Left: a frozen instructional display screen at MoMath

Above Right: A malfunctioning floor exhibit. Each tile is 1ft wide, for scale.

Lastly, I was intrigued by the non-exhibition spaces within each museum. MoMath contains a small gift shop featuring mathematic toys and branded MoMath tshirts and hats. MoSex similarly had a gift shop, but it is instead far more extensive. It contained anything sex-related, including sex-toys, magnets that say “sex” on them, and materials entirely unrelated to sex such as lollipops and socks with sayings on them. Both gift shops serve as an entry and exit, but the MoSex gift shop is so prominent that I mistook it as the ticket counter. In fact, I saw many times more people in this gift shop than inside the museum. MoSex also contains a downstairs bar, but I am under the impression that they are not yet serving alcoholic beverages at 11:30am.

Museum Visitors

It is abundantly clear and even visible in the photos that have been discussed thus far, that both museums are designed and attract very different visitor bases. MoMath is designed as a child and family-friendly educational space, while MoSex does not permit children to even enter the museum. Naturally, this design reflects upon the actual visitor

demographic. Within MoMath, There was not one adult in the museum who was unaccompanied by at least one child. These children mostly ranged between the approximate ages of 6 and 11, and the older children who were not within that range were usually a sibling of one who was between 6 and 11.

At MoSex, however, the majority of visitors (about $\frac{3}{4}$ of all patrons) appeared to be between the ages of 18 and 23, and similarly traveled in groups. There were no visitors who had come to see the museum as an individual. It is also worth noting that the 11:30am is likely not the busiest time of day to visit, and it is possible that these demographics are not representative of the larger-scale MoSex visitor base.

Both museums seemed to have a mix of tourists and New Yorkers, and both were museums where English was the predominantly spoken language. At MoSex English was the only language spoken, but at MoMath there was also one family who spoke a Slavic language, and another who spoke Spanish. Both museums also seemed to have visitors from the upper-middle to upper-class end of the spectrum, as indicated by designer clothing and accessories. This is likely due in part to the area of town the museums are located and the high admissions prices.

The behavior of the visitors in either museum differed greatly. At MoSex, I saw one visitor engaged with the material, but all others were either talking about unrelated subjects or playing with their phones. They stayed in one room for a very short period of time, not appearing to pay any attention to the materials at all. In fact, as the observation progressed, I began to suspect that these visitors came to the museum so that they could say they had been, and not because they were at all interested in the material at hand. This is, naturally, pure speculation, but reflects the level of disinterest in which the visitors regarded the museum items.

In contrast, the visitors at MoMath were very engaged with the material. Some adults were viewing the materials cooperatively with their children (the experience appeared to be more of a group problem-solving than a chaperone-child relationship), and were as engaged in the items as their children were. In other circumstances, adults were engaged with different materials than their children, and the children were halfway across the room, deeply interested in an entirely different object. They were so enthralled that the visitors at MoMath stayed focused on one object around 10 times longer than at MoSex. You can see the contrast between behaviors at these two museums below.



Above left: A father and his two children cooperatively build fractals with magnets.

Above right: Visitors at MoSex do not pay much attention to, or discuss the objects or information on display.

Conclusion

Based on my observation, MoMath and MoSex are two very dissimilar museums, who appeal to entirely different demographics, and structure themselves in different ways. MoMath strives to be accessible, family-friendly, and physically engaging, while MoSex is very much oriented towards a cool-factor, complex displays, and an emphasis on commercialism. Although they are based on entirely different demographics, structures, and subject matters, both museums share the common goal to entertain their visitors, barely a block apart.