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**Community and Communication:
An Observational Study of a Neighborhood Library and a Community-Based Museum**

Introduction

Unlike certain iconic institutions whose collections are designed to attract visitors from all over the world, community-based cultural institutions design their own collections (exhibitions), environments and services to meet the needs of people who are from certain neighborhoods or communities. In order to understand how different types of cultural institutions work with the populations they serve, this study observes and compares two community-based cultural institutions, the Park Slope Library and the Museum of Chinese in America, through the people who visit them and the ways they operate. Based on observations of visitors and interviews, this study tries to gain a sense of the on-sites experiences of visitors and the effectiveness of the two institutions at meeting their aims. Physical factors like locations, architectures, collections and facilities, as well as the services the two venues provide, are also observed and taken into account in relation to their visitors' compositions, behaviors and needs. This report may help us to understand the current functions of small, community-based cultural institutions and their future ways of development.

The methodology of this observational study varies based on circumstances. Although I constantly moved in both of the venues in order to observe their details as closely as possible, in the case of the library I observed the libraries' patrons from a fixed position in various reading rooms, while in the case of the museum I followed them through the exhibitions.

Summary of Observational Results of Visitors

Located in the residential area of Park Slope in Brooklyn, the Park Slope Library (PSL), as one of 59 branches of the Brooklyn Public Library, has been serving local residents for over 100 years. The three visits for the observational study happened from 2 to 2:50 PM Wednesday, Feb. 8th, from 3:20 to 4:00 PM Thursday Feb. 16th and from 10:55 to 11:40 AM Wednesday Feb. 22nd in 2017. See the data statistics of visitors in Table 1 of Appendix. The Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), located in Chinatown of Manhattan, presents the history and culture of Chinese descents in the United States through two series of exhibitions. The permanent/core one introduces the Chinese immigrants' history, while the temporary one, which usually is related to arts and culture in some way, is currently titled "Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy: Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America." The times of three visits in the MOCA was from 1:30 - 4:00 PM Saturday Feb. 12th, from 3:00 - 5:30 PM Saturday Feb. 18th (guided tour time) and from 2:20 - 3:00 PM Friday Feb. 24th in 2017. See the data of visitors' observation for latter two visits in Table 2 and 3 of Appendix.

Though relatively modest in number, the patrons of the PSL were quite stable in composition. Whether individual or family, the patrons I observed in each of my three visits were from multiple racial groups, including Caucasian, African-American, Asian, and Hispanic. Given that several of the faces were visible in all three visits, it seems that the PSL has a number of regular, perhaps even daily, patrons. Young children and their guardians made up the most numerous demographic. In contrast, while the number of MOCA's visitors also has a modest number of visitors, it varies from day to day, and it also has fewer visitors on weekdays than on

weekends. Compared with the PSL, MOCA had fewer minors but more adult visitors, especially more young adults during the times I was observing. Visitors tended to come here in groups and to spend around 2 hours. Asian visitors were more common than visitors from any other racial group.

The visitors' activities in the two institutions are dissimilar. In the PSL, children's activities have to distinguished from those of adults. Young children read children's books with their guardians, or used computers in the children's reading room. For infants, the library is a playground, while for the guardians it is a relaxing place to stop and socialize. Around the lunch time, the number of visitors fell rapidly, along with the noise level. Few school kids appeared until after-school hours, and they preferred to read books in the adults reading room. Thus, it is reasonable to infer that the off-peak hours of PSL are mealtimes, while the peak hours are the late mornings and afternoons. Adult readers, in general, visited the PSL singly and had less interest in spending a long time here. A few of visitors only used the PSL as a rest stop. The readers of printed books often borrowed or returned them quickly before leaving, but newspapers/magazines readers often stayed on the mezzanine, where the collection is. The patrons who stayed the longest usually were the users of electronic devices. In the adult reading room, the 12 computers were fully occupied most of the time, and were mainly used for either online researching or for viewing DVDs and other forms of entertainments. Young adults, however, were inclined to work in the library on their own laptops even the library lacks Wi-Fi. Visitors would like to talk with the librarians sitting at the informational desk when they needed assistances, such as registering or a library card and searching a resource.

When it came to viewing the exhibitions at the MOCA, most of the visitors spent much time on reading labels, yet the kids had more interests in the objects they were allowed to touch. Historical moving images and interactive audio programs were also very popular. Adult and children visitors both loved to discuss the exhibits with their companions. In the chronological permanent exhibition, the visitors typically kept moving, and viewed exhibits on the designed pathway. However, it was not a strict route since visitors were firstly attracted by the largest or central objects in each gallery. (It was different for visitors who had participated in the guided tour. Since they had already explored the exhibition with the instructor, they would choose whatever they were interested in viewing again instead of following chronological order.) At the end of the exhibition, a huge message board allows visitors to leave their thoughts, and although few of them did so, most took a close look at the messages that had been left by others.

The temporary exhibition is set up in two separate rooms on either side of the gate to the permanent one. In these exhibits, Chinese cooking tools with labels written by their owners were gathered in one room, and visitors reacts them in much the way they reacted to the permanent exhibition. In another room, clips of interviews of 33 Chinese cuisine chefs were being played in a loop. Many of the visitors showed a strong interest in these interviews, even sitting on the seats for more than 20 minutes to view them. After having finished viewing, visitors usually explored the gift shop and would rest on the seats in the area, which is also where the ticket office is.

Comprehensive Analysis

The following comparisons will show the differences between the PSL and MOCA, and represent not only the differences between the two groups of visitors in composition and behavior but also variations in their respective collections, facilities, architectures and even locations.

1. Difference in Visitor Activities

The main activities at the PSL are reading, lending books & DVDs, surfing the internet, viewing DVDs or streaming videos, and playing or reading with children. The activities in the MOCA, including viewing labels and films, listening to audio introductions or discussing with one's companions, share one common direction: learning something about the history of Chinese immigrants. This actually reveals one essential way in which the main services of the two institutions diverge: the PSL provides its collections and facilities to help patrons meet their own goals, while the MOCA organizes its exhibits and facilities for an educational purpose determined by itself.

How is this essential divergence being constructed by different uses of the collections and facilities? The PSL has only a small number of books and DVDs for lending, but patrons can locate and get materials from all branches of the Brooklyn Public Library through its internet database and delivery service. The collection of children's books, placed on lower shelves in the children's reading room, allows children to find books by themselves. Electronic devices like computers, scanners, photocopiers and printers are also free for every patron. The mezzanine, a comfortable zone with sofas and coffee tables, offers relaxation. The collections and facilities, in short, are designed to serve a variety of goals. At the MOCA, however, the exhibits and facilities work toward one goal: to go deeper into the history of Chinese immigrants. Each photography, historical object, documentation, film, and devices like iPads or projectors presents at least one important aspect of the history of Chinese immigrants. For example, one of the exhibits is an old-fashioned flatiron weighing eight pounds, and the label asks visitors to lift it in order to feel the hardship of laundry work, the most common job of earlier Chinese immigrants. Through a tactile experience like this, visitors gain an impressive and comprehensive understanding of this history. This may explain why the collections and facilities at the MOCA are not be used as freely by visitors as at the PSL - they serve for the themes of the exhibitions.

This divergence is represented through the architectures of the two venues as well. The PSL is a freestanding building with a T-shaped layout, allowing for two large wings as separate reading rooms for children and independent readers. However, these reading rooms are not subdivided at all with walls or screens, and this, along with large windows, makes the space bright for comfortable reading. It also enables visitors to quickly locate the stacks, electronic devices and information desk without leaving their positions. Such a design is extremely appropriate to a library's purpose, to provide an open platform helping users access abundant resources. In contrast, the MOCA uses a lot of screens to set out a particular pathway and separate the space into several galleries, so that visitors are encouraged to follow the designed route to view the exhibitions. It has also set up numerous reflector lamps surrounded by dark, leading visitors to focus on the lighted exhibits and labels. Every detail of the architectural design encourages visitors to forget themselves and pay attention to the stories the museum wants to tell, except for the message board, which ultimately offer a space to release their thoughts and emotions, though it is actually transformed as another part of the exhibition for guiding the visitors.

2. Divergences in Types of Visitors

The composition of the PSL's visitors and MOCA's is very different from that of the MOCA. The visitors to the PSL, since it is a neighborhood library, mainly consist of residents living nearby in Park Slope, a typical suburban residential neighborhood. The MOCA's visitors, meanwhile, are less limited by geography. Due to its goals and themes, however, a significant proportion of its visitors are adult and Asian, especially Chinese. This difference actually points

to something the two places have in common: unlike more famous institutions, these mainly serve people from certain groups instead of everyone. Their respective locations already strongly embody this characteristic. The PSL is located in the center of Park Slope and surrounded by institutions such as a public school, senior center, YMCA, and church, which explains why young children, school kids and seniors are numerous here. The MOCA has never left Chinatown in its nearly 40 years, which is consistent with its goal of presenting the history of Chinese immigrants. It gradually become a must-see site for visitors to Chinatown.

The demographic characteristics of the visitors are also reflected in the collections and facilities of the two venues. In the case of the PSL, the free parenting & education magazines, many children's books, and the low shelves represent its consideration of the large number of families with kids in this neighborhood, while the fact that its books are in multiple languages, with leaflets in Spanish, Chinese, French and so on, as well as materials related to immigration, reflects the way the residents of the neighborhood cover multiple races and numerous immigrants. In the case of the MOCA, all the labels are both in English and Chinese, a clear sign of who it considers its target audience to be.

The demographics of the two institutions' visitors also influence their public programming. Like all cultural institutions, the PSL and MOCA value their educational functions a lot, but they give them different kinds of emphasis. The MOCA pays relatively more attentions to schools and colleges in terms of educating about Chinese immigrants' history, but parent-child workshops are also regular events there, possibly mainly serving for families living in Chinatown.

The PSL's education programs are even more general in coverage, going from young children to adults, and from early education to basic legal knowledge education. Early education for both children and parents is an important part of the regular programs of the PSL, including parent-child activities and family entertainments. What's more, immigrants and unemployed persons can access information about immigration and skills training here, and the library may provide classes and one-on-one services to offer further helps. You even can fill out your tax forms here with the help of the library staff. It is also a safe, warm place for homeless people in the daytime. Such services go beyond the scope of basic library offerings, and place a burden on the administration.

Through these programs and services, the PSL and MOCA make close connections with their visitors, which is rare in larger cultural institutions. One of my interviewees said that she liked visiting the PSL more than the central branch of the Brooklyn Public Library that is even closer to her house. Visitors feel a personal connection to the institutions by communicating with the staff instead of merely taking in the books or exhibits. The MOCA even rents its galleries for personal events. Intimate and stable relationships between visitors and cultural institutions can increase the numbers of return visits and even improve their financial situations. In fact, the PSL and MOCA, like many community-based cultural institutions, are integral parts of their communities, and work for these and the people living there.

Conclusion

The observations, comparisons and analyses given here of visitors to the PSL and MOCA show that the different purposes and functions of the two institutions are not abstract concepts but concretely embodied in their different collections, facilities and designs. Admittedly, these are small institutions with relatively limited numbers of visitors. However, their geographical convenience, as well as flexible adjustments of their collections and events, allow them to offer better services to visitors from certain groups, and promote more intimate relationships with these

than many large cultural institutions can. The cases of the PSL and MOCA may provide helpful models to small or community-based institutions currently in development. A further study of alternative institution-visitor relationships may also be beneficial to large cultural institutions, especially museums, due to their increasing interest in “user experiences” and “public relationships.”

Appendix

Table 1. Number of Visitors in the Park Slope Library, by Age and Type, 2017

Time \ Visitor	Amount	Young Kids & Guardians	Infants & Guardians	Independent Readers (School Children)	Independent Readers (Adult)	Independent Readers (Seniors)	Amount
2:00 PM Wednesday, Feb. 8th, 2017	22	2	4	0	13	3	22
3:20 PM Thursday Feb. 16 th , 2017	45	18	8	6	11	2	45
10:55 AM Wednesday Feb 22th, 2017	63	36	8	0	12	7	63
11:30 AM Wednesday Feb 22th, 2017	39	14	6	0	13	6	39

Table 2: Number of Visitors in the Museum of Chinese in America, by Age, 2017

Time \ Visitor	Total	Children	Adults	Total
3:00 - 4:30 PM Saturday, Feb. 18th, 2017	26	1	25	26
2:20 - 3:00 PM Friday, Feb.24th, 2017	12	4	8	12

Table 3: Number of Visitors in the Museum of Chinese in America, by the Form of Participation, 2017

Time \ Visitor	Total	Families and Kids	Couples /Friends	Single	Total
3:00 - 4:30 PM Saturday, Feb. 18th, 2017	26	2	21	3	26
2:20 - 3:00 PM Friday, Feb.24th, 2017	12	7	4	1	12