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Observational Study

**From Local Library to National Museum: The El Paso Public Library and The National
Museum of the American Indian**

For my observational study, I chose two personally familiar locations: the main branch of my hometown library, the El Paso Public Library (EPPL), and the New York branch of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), which was the secondary branch of the museum's main location in Washington D.C., where I had participated in two post-graduate internships. Despite my established experience with both sites, I chose the EPPL and NMAI because they are easily accessible public locations, with no admissions fee placed upon patrons to enter and access their collections. The main objection for my study was to understand how the public visitors utilize both institutions, and what these institutions in turn provide for the public. For observational methodology, I positioned myself and moved through both institutions as a visitor so I could observe the behaviors of the other visitors, as well as examine and understand my own visitational inclinations.

The El Paso Public Library (EPPL)

I visited the El Paso Public Library's main branch on a Wednesday evening during Spring Break at 6pm, just an hour before it closed. Despite the un-ideal timing to observe the library, there was more activity than I had anticipated. Located in the heart of downtown El Paso, Texas, there are two entrances to access the EPPL, both with uniquely contrasting facades. The eastern entrance is decorated in an unassuming tiled-rock exterior, which is commonly used

in El Paso landscaping, while the western entrance, which shares an outdoor square with the El Paso Museum of History, is defined by separated sections of stucco, glass, sheet metal, and rusted copper that cover the building. When entering from the east side of the library, visitors are immediately taken to the front informational desk, whereas the west entrance leads visitors into a large lobby with various tables, chairs, and a few vending machines. Establishing that there is no pre-determined path on how visitors should move within the library itself, and reflecting this idea through its exterior, EPPL visitors are provided the choice of either directly entering the library on the east side, encouraging known-item searches of the collection, or a more informal entrance on the west side, where a browser-based search allows visitors to progress from one neighboring cultural institution to other.

Because I was lucky enough to find free metered parking after 6pm, I began my visit by entering on the east side. As I approached the front desk/information services, I veered off to my right, towards a section with the aisles labeled “Southwest/RAZA,” the RAZA journal being a special collection housed within the El Paso library system, which were coupled with empty study tables. Reaching these study tables, I noticed a make-shift exhibit of the photographic history of El Paso during the early 20th century. In this mid-back section, two of the three walls were lined with catalog filing cabinets and on top of the cabinets were various photographs of downtown El Paso from the 1900s-1920s. Above the photos, hanging on the wall were an artist’s print series of the supposed evolution and history of a general Texas explorer, from “The Wanderer” to “The Soldier.” The 3rd wall on the left was a pony wall which housed a glass display case of more early photographs of El Paso. The short distance between the “Southwest/RAZA” section and this small historical exhibit relates how the library views and positions itself

as cultural institution for the local community, which represents the history and culture of west Texas, southern New Mexico, and northern Mexico.

Exiting the historical photographic exhibit, I finally noticed the first set of patrons in the library, who subsequently became the only non-librarian demographic within EPPL: white/hispanic adult men, ranging in age from their mid-30's to early 60s/70s. Just behind the history exhibit is the library's audiovisual collection, which is sandwiched between the rest of the library and the lobby located at the western entrance. In these two spaces, visitors were either browsing through the audiovisual collection, which ranged from CDs, videos, DVDs, english language audiobooks, and new releases, or they were relaxing with their cellphones in the western lobby. After circumnavigating the first floor of the library, which included passing a bulletin board, situated over a "pay-to-print" printer, with flyers advertising the Main Library's "March Madness" events (including upcoming movie nights), I arrived at a sign near the east entrance which indicated the Spanish and English language books in the library's basement. Following the narrow steps down the basement, I was immediately met by three older white men sitting quietly at individual tables reading newspapers and situated in a maze-like array of metal posts, which apparently supported the first floor of the library. I was shocked to see the back-half of the basement with the lights turned off and the aisles half-stocked with newspapers and books. Walking towards the darkened space, the lights began to automatically turn on, and stumbling upon the Spanish Reference section, I was surprised by a 40-year-old Hispanic man listening to music while reading at a lone table.

Finally rerouting myself upstairs to exit through the east entrance, I noticed I had earlier bypassed a sign that advertised the EPPL's seed library program called the "Sow.Grow.ReapEat

Program.” With a list of available seeds, the library encourages patrons to “check-out” up to 5 of the 52 available types seeds with their library cards and in return for planting and growing the seeds, the EPPL simply asks that visitors return with their harvested seeds to help restock the seed library. Concluding my visit, I immediately recognized that there were no interactive displays, no audio tours, no café, and no gift shop, which was expected. El Paso is typically listed as one of the safest cities in America, so no guards were on duty, but a multitude of librarians scattered throughout the library both provided assistance in collection searches and enforce the typical library rules: no eating, drinking, or disruptive talking. The EPPL is both a site of public education and a center for public resources, asking visitors to take advantage of what is offered, from seed libraries to quiet spaces, and in return it asks visitors to maintain a relationship with their local library. By moving through the library myself, I believe I was able to better acknowledge the variety of services that the library aims to provide my community.

The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)

On Saturday at 12:30pm on St. Patrick’s Day, I visited the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian in Lower Manhattan across from Battery Park. This branch of NMAI is housed in the historic Alexander Hamilton U.S. Customs House, a grandiose building with an exterior that mimics traditional Greek & Roman architecture. The main entrance to the museum is a grand set of stairs that leads directly to the second floor where the main collection exhibits reside. Since the Smithsonian is a quasi-federal institution, guests are immediately met by a handful of security guards that inform visitors to remove all kinds of metal before heading through the metal detector. After a slightly uncomfortable scramble to get my coat and watch, I headed to the main rotunda of the museum. Although impressively designed, I

always feel slightly uncomfortable entering the space due to the ironic fact that, in a museum that honors the history and culture of indigenous people across the Americas, the rotunda's ceiling art houses depictions of explorers and "founders" of the Americas. While in the rotunda, I noticed that the demographics of the NMAI visitors were variations of couples, groups, and small families, with various ages and ethnicities.

The building is designed in a U-shape, with three possible starting points to explore the main exhibits: to the left, the newest exhibit, *Transformer*; straight ahead, NMAI's permanent exhibit, *Infinity of Nations*; and to the right, the Mexican art exhibit, *Cerámica de los Ancestros*. Going from left to right, I began my observations at the *Transformer* exhibit. Although not my first visit to the exhibit, I was immediately greeted by a guard who presented me with an audio guide that I had previously missed. To listen to the tour with this audio guide, I had to approach a description of the displayed art piece, the device would beep, and then the audio description of that art piece would begin. With no pre-determined path or number system to guide me through the exhibit, I was able to create my own personal tour. *Transformer* displays various experimental media based artworks by indigenous artists, which either asked visitors to roam around the pieces or take a seat to watch them, either on a single long bench or a large swivel chair. In this exhibit, I observed older couples and a group of teenage friends, but specifically, a mother and her young daughter listening to the audio tour. At a particular piece titled "Father, Son, Holy Ghost," which incorporates bison heads with neon lighting, this mother-daughter duo listened intently to their audio tour, and when the audio discussed the materials of the piece, the daughter exclaimed "I love buffalo" and "I also love neon lights!"

Following *Transformer*, a small corner of the museum transitions visitors into the permanent exhibit, *Infinity of Nations*. However, before entering *Infinity of Nations* from *Transformers*, a long table with various types of hats, baskets, and wooden material surrounded by chairs was situated in this transitional corner. This was a “Meet the Artist” event where parents and their children could listen to the history and practice of wooden basket-making by a visiting indigenous artist. Because of the commotion that it had generated I forgot to ask the artist’s name and tribe, but I was excited to see many young visitors eagerly watching and listening to the stories and symbolism behind the creation of these baskets.

Infinity of Nations is a long and narrow exhibit, running alongside the back of the museum with display cases on both sides of the wall full of art and artifacts from many indigenous groups across the Americas and Caribbean. This exhibit acts as a pathway to the other exhibits on opposing sides of the museums, and also as a “traffic light” exhibit. Basically, if visitors are making their way through the museum, *Infinity of Nations* is “coincidentally” designed to slow visitors down on their way to the next exhibit, entice them to stop and view a personally intriguing displayed artifact, to pause and read the description, and then continue through the exhibit. Although there were various interactive displays that would allow visitors to further investigate selected pieces from the exhibit, most of these small displays were bypassed.

One of the most interesting behaviors that I noticed during my visit at NMAI was a homeless man with his belongings stuffed in two grocery bags sleeping on one of the multiple benches tucked away within *Infinity of Nations*. I quickly looked around to see if any security guards had noticed the man as well, which they had. The guards seemed surprised to find the man there, but when they realized he was sleeping, they neither woke him up nor told him to

leave the museum. Instead they kept a watchful eye on him from the exhibit's main entrance. Although initially caught off guard by his presence, I wasn't shocked by the homeless man's presence because the exhibit was a warm refuge from the cold and windy weather outside. However, seeing that he had taken shelter in a government building, I was pleasantly surprised that the guards left him alone.

Realizing I had been at the museum for close to an hour, I decided to make my way through the final exhibit on the 2nd floor, *Cerámica de los Ancestros*. As I breezed through the exhibit, I noticed that there were relatively fewer visitors walking through the exhibit, with only 2 security guards on duty. After exiting the exhibit I decided to head down to the 1st/Ground floor to view the temporary *Manifestipi* installation within the *Circle of Dance* exhibit. However, when I reached downstairs, I was informed that a children's shadow puppet show would be taking place all afternoon. Slightly disappointed that I was too old to appropriately enjoy a shadow puppet show with an indigenous artist and 5-12 year olds, I climbed back upstairs to explore the museum's newly renovated gift shop.

To be honest, NMAI's gift shops, both in D.C. and New York, are some of the most relaxing and exciting places to be. With bright lights and high ceilings, beautiful artwork on display, various books about native life, food, and history, and indigenous music gently played over the the speaker system, this gift shop, which retains the interior design of an old bank, allows visitors to explore the museum and indigenous culture even further. When I visited the gift shop it was practically empty, with one employee working the jewelry register. I slowly made my way through the shop, exploring, examining, and absorbing the multitude of items for sale. Every time I visit the gift shop, I always possess the deep desire to buy something, and

fortunately for me and my wallet, the price tags always stop me dead in my tracks. While a handful of items are fairly priced, it's easy to spend over a hundred dollars on one or two items due to the fact that the Smithsonian doesn't charge an admission fee or emphasize donations upon visitation, which immediately suggests that the gift shop is an important source of income to keep the museum functioning financially and logistically.

Concluding Comparison

Despite fulfilling their inherent nature as distinct and different cultural institutions, the El Paso Public Library and National Museum of the American Indian prove that they function in very similar ways when concerned with public access and education. Both EPPL and NMAI promote engagement with their visitors through educational programming, such as promoting seed libraries and the passing of traditional indigenous stories respectively, but they also promote their accessibility by allowing the public to move, read, explore, and sleep freely within their walls. As cultural institutions, EPPL and NMAI re-enforce their status as sites for public and communal gathering on both the local and national scale.