

Beyond learning: Exploring visitors' perceptions of the value and benefits of museum experiences

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Abstract

This paper explores the beneficial outcomes that visitors seek and obtain from a museum visit, in terms that are not related to learning outcomes. It uses a deductive qualitative approach to investigate the meaning and value of a museum visit from the visitors' perspective. Three different levels of the meaning of the experience are considered: the attributes of the setting that visitors value; the experiences they engage in; and the benefits they derive. The findings confirm the importance of the "satisfying experiences" framework for understanding visitor experiences in museums, and extend this understanding in relation to the beneficial outcomes these experiences produce. The study also highlights the importance of "restoration" as an outcome of a museum visit. It is argued that the concept of the museum as a restorative environment, which enables visitors to relax and recover from the stresses of life, is worthy of further research attention. These insights will enable museum practitioners to better understand and meet their visitors' multiple needs and expectations.

Understanding Visitor Experiences

The public benefits of educational leisure settings such as museums are typically conceptualized in terms of their contribution to community lifelong learning, and there is increasing pressure on such organizations to demonstrate their effectiveness in this regard. However, even the most broadly defined learning outcomes may not be sufficient to explain the value and benefits of the museum experience. In seeking to demonstrate the social worth of museums, researchers are starting to look beyond their undeniable educational value, to a range of other beneficial outcomes for visitors. This shift is due, in part, to changes in the emphases museums place on different aspects of their role, from a focus on collecting, preserving and exhibiting objects, and educating the public, to understanding and meeting visitors' multiple needs. Doering suggests that these different emphases lead to different attitudes and approaches to visitors (1999): Visitors may be viewed as strangers (who are privileged to be admitted), guests (who gratefully receive what the museum has to offer), or clients (whom the museum is obliged to serve). One of the consequences of viewing visitors as clients, according to Doering, is that we need to understand the meaning and value of a museum visit from the visitor's perspective.

To this end, Doering and her colleagues developed an empirical list of "satisfying experiences" that individuals seek—and generally find—in museums (Doering 1999; Pekarik, Doering and Karns 1999). They classified these experiences into the following four categories (Pekarik, Doering and Karns 1999):

- *Object experiences* focus on something outside the visitor, and include seeing "the real thing," seeing rare or valuable objects, and being moved by beauty.

- *Cognitive experiences* focus on the interpretive or intellectual aspects of the experience, and include gaining information or knowledge, or enriching understanding.
- *Introspective experiences* focus on private feelings and experiences, such as imagining, reflecting, reminiscing and connecting.
- *Social experiences* focus on interactions with friends, family, other visitors or museum staff.

Different types of museums, and different exhibitions within museums, appear to elicit these experiences to varying extents, according to research conducted in the Smithsonian Institution (Pekarik, Doering and Karns 1999). For example, Pekarik, Doering and Karns found that although object experiences were dominant in most museums, they were particularly so in the Renwick Gallery (American Crafts). Cognitive experiences were more common in the Museum of Natural History. Introspective experiences were more likely in the Museum of American History, and social experiences in the National Zoological Park. Age, gender, and familiarity with the museum also influenced the type of experience visitors were likely to report as their most satisfying.

Doering also discusses visitor needs in relation to “setting”: “A museum that is accountable to visitors for certain kinds of experiences will provide settings that support and enhance those experiences and will remove barriers or constraints that interfere with or detract from them” (Doering 1999, 83). She draws on Bitner’s concept of “servicescape” (1992) to characterize aspects of the museum environment that impact on visitors’ experiences. According to Bitner (1992), the servicescape, or service environment, includes ambient conditions such as temperature, lighting and noise; spatial layout and functionality; and signs and symbols such as the quality of furnishings which explicitly and implicitly convey expectations and “image.” She suggests that these features influence customers’ (or visitors’) cognitive, emotional and physiological responses to the environment.

Doering’s analysis of visitors’ experiences and the settings that support them does not attempt to go beyond experiences to the next level: benefits. Doering does note that museum-going, a leisure-time activity, is likely to hold a deeper meaning for participants than the momentary focus on the quality of the experience. According to Prentice (1996), in order to understand the meaning of visitors’ experiences, it is necessary to consider four levels of demand: recreational *activities* (such as a museum visit) are undertaken in a *setting* that has particular attributes; in order to *experience* certain consequences; and so derive desired *benefits*. It is at the level of ultimate benefits that the meaning of the experience emerges. Driver, Brown, and Peterson attempted to document the benefits of leisure in general (1991), arguing that such knowledge is important both for policymakers and individual consumers. They defined benefit as a “change that is viewed to be advantageous—an improvement in condition, or a gain to an individual, a group, to society, or to another entity” (1991, 4). Similarly, in the context of museums, Weil states that “the primary measure used to evaluate a museum’s worthiness is the positive and intended differences that it makes in the lives of the individuals and communities that constitute its target audiences” (2003, para 6). What, then, are the potential outcomes of a museum visit? What difference does it make? What beneficial changes are brought about?

Investigating beneficial experiences—Numerous examples of visitor research have explored this question from the perspective of visitor learning in relation to the facts

and information that visitors take away with them, the new understandings they gain, and the personal meanings they develop or elaborate as a result of a museum visit (Falk and Dierking 2000; Hein 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 1999). But these outcomes depend, to a certain extent, on visitors' engagement in a cognitive experience. As Pekarik, Doering and Karns have demonstrated, cognitive experiences are not the most prominent type of experience in any of the museums that they investigated (1999). What benefits might be derived from an object experience, an introspective experience, or a social experience, and how important are these benefits to visitors?

McIntosh argues that "the *beneficial experiences* gained by visitors, as valued by them and expressed in their own words," are the core product of cultural tourism attractions (1999, 43). These include not only the immediate benefits of the visit, but also other positive outcomes that accrue over time, both for the individual and society at large. Understanding these perceived benefits is therefore important both in meeting visitors' needs, and in demonstrating the contribution that museums and other cultural attractions can make in adding perspective and meaning to people's lives.

Of course, in museums, as in many other leisure pursuits, the immediate experience itself may be all the visitor desires. Rounds makes this point in his analysis of some of the problems associated with goal- or outcome-based evaluations in museums (2001). In many cases, he suggests, the goal is satisfied in the taking of action itself, regardless of the eventual outcomes. In particular, he argues that the value of a museum visit has more to do with maintaining a sense of personal identity than with the expectation of specific benefits. Similarly, Bedford argues that an aesthetic encounter in the museum is a valuable outcome in its own right, regardless of the extent to which cognitive learning outcomes are demonstrated (2004). Even from the perspective of visitor learning, a case can be made for the importance of the *experience* rather than the *outcomes* of learning (Packer 2006). However, this argument does not excuse us from trying to understand and maximize the benefits that may be derived from the satisfying experiences in which museum visitors engage.

Two theoretical approaches may potentially shed some light on the positive benefits of museum visitation, beyond learning. One is the concept of "psychological well-being," which has developed out of the positive psychology movement, and the other is the concept of "mental restoration," which has developed in the field of environmental psychology.

Psychological well-being—The emerging field of positive psychology seeks to understand and build the strengths and virtues that improve quality of life and enable individuals and communities to thrive rather than merely survive (Seligman 2002; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Psychological well-being is one of the major areas of research in this field. Ryan and Deci's review of the literature on research into well-being identifies two general perspectives: the hedonic approach, which defines well-being in terms of pleasure or happiness; and the eudaimonic approach, which defines well-being in terms of self-realization and personal growth (2001). Others have used the terms "subjective well-being" and "psychological well-being," respectively, to characterize these approaches to positive psychological functioning (Keyes, Shmotkin, and Ryff 2002).

"Subjective well-being" or "happiness" is often described as the balance between positive and negative affect. It has been used in research as an indicator of quality of life and life satisfaction, and is generally considered a product of internal predispositions (Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, 1999; Diener, Suh, and Oishi 1997; Keyes, Shmotkin, and Ryff 2002; Ryff 1989).

“Psychological well-being” has been conceptualized in terms of six elements: autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, purpose in life, positive relations, and self-acceptance (Ryff and Keyes 1995). Psychological well-being has been found to be an important variable in studies of aging, mental health, adolescence, illness and disabilities, migrant studies, and correctional studies. For example, positive judgements of well-being have been linked with faster hospital patient recovery rates, individual coping strategies and levels of resilience (Keyes, Shmotkin, and Ryff 2002; Pressman and Cohen 2005).

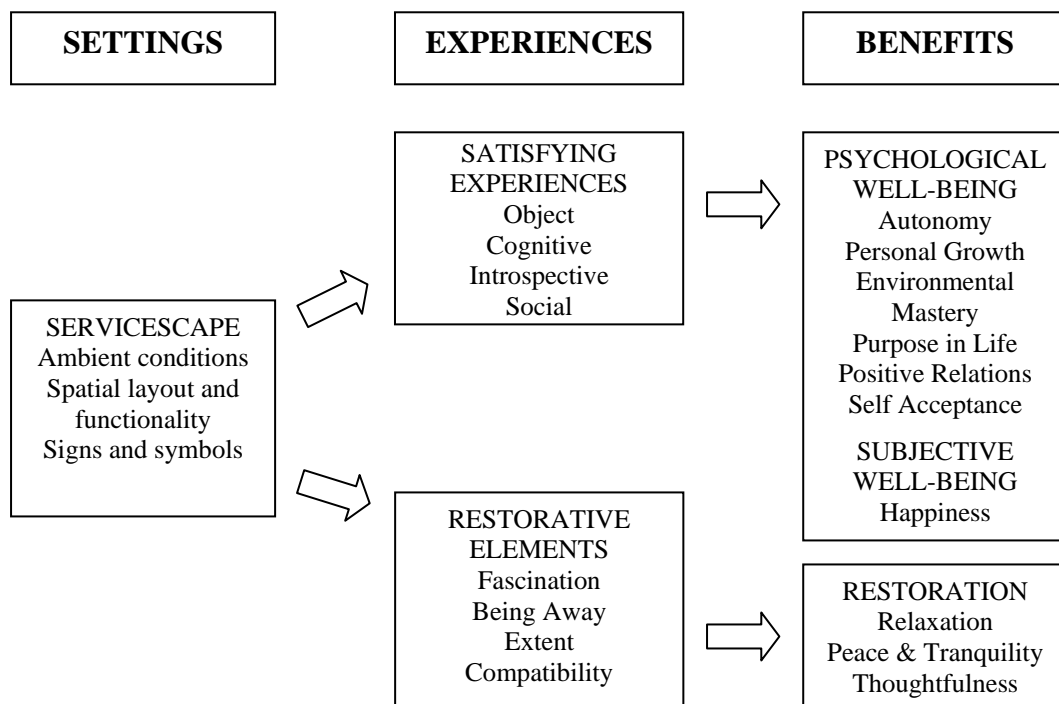
Mental restoration—According to Attention Restoration Theory, the capacity to continually focus attention on a particular activity can be reduced or lost through mental exhaustion, leading to a state known as “directed attention fatigue” (see Kaplan and Talbot 1983; Kaplan 1995; Kaplan and Kaplan 1989). To recover from this state, according to Kaplan, it is important that the individual’s attention is engaged involuntarily or effortlessly, rather than intentionally, thus enabling directed attention to rest (Kaplan 1995). Four conditions have been identified as integral to the recovery or restoration process: fascination (being engaged without effort); being away (being physically or mentally removed from one’s everyday environment); the perception of “extent” (the environment has sufficient content and structure that it can occupy the mind for an extended period); and compatibility (providing a good fit with one’s purposes or inclinations).

Kaplan and Kaplan argue that these four factors are most commonly found in natural environments (1989). However, there is some evidence that educational leisure settings may also possess these restorative elements. Kaplan, Bardwell, and Slakter re-analyzed focus group comments collected for a different purpose, to determine whether—in talking about their art museum experience—participants raised any of the themes theoretically related to the restorative concept (1993). The researchers found evidence of the four conditions outlined above (fascination; being away; extent; and compatibility), as well as two categories they identified as outcomes of a restorative experience (a calm, peaceful positive state; and engagement in reflection). A variety of other restorative outcome measures were used in the second stage of research, including feeling refreshed, restored, thoughtful, reflective, calm and relaxed, and not feeling tired, harried, and preoccupied with other concerns (Kaplan, Bardwell, and Slakter 1993). This second stage, using a questionnaire survey, confirmed that most visitors felt they had a restorative experience in the museum. Kaplan, Bardwell, and Slakter identified two factors that contribute to the restorative potential of the setting: feeling comfortable or at ease in the setting; and being able to find one’s way around.

Two other studies provide evidence in support of the restorative benefits of museum environments. Scopelliti and Giuliani listed historical towns and museums as the urban environments most frequently described as restorative by their 60-85-year-old study participants (2005). Packer (2006) reported that museum and aquarium visitors, in responding to interview questions about their experience of learning, volunteered information that was consistent with Kaplan’s characterization of restorative environments. In particular, they alluded to the presence of fascination or attention that requires no effort; an environment that is rich and coherent; and compatibility between the environment and one’s purposes or inclinations. Indeed, these are considered to be among the unique characteristics of educational leisure settings (Packer 2006; Packer and Ballantyne 2004).

Research aims and conceptual framework —The qualitative research reported here was designed to investigate the value and benefits of museum visitation, from the visitors’ perspective, and in particular to explore the perceived impact of a museum visit in terms that are not related to learning outcomes. The scope of the research is limited to the immediate benefits of the visit, rather than longer term benefits, or benefits to society in general. The research was guided by a synthesis of theoretical frameworks, illustrated graphically in figure 1. Qualitative research is usually conducted inductively (starting from the data and allowing themes, concepts and grounded theory to emerge). However, a deductive approach—commencing with a theoretical framework that organizes and directs the data analysis—is also considered a valid option (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2007; Yin 2003). A deductive approach was used in this research in order to investigate the extent to which the existing bodies of knowledge discussed above are consistent with visitors’ perceptions of the museum experience. The aim of the research, then, was to evaluate the adequacy of the theoretical framework in figure 1 as a means of explaining visitors’ responses to open-ended questions (with non-directive probing) regarding the value and benefits of their visit.

Figure 1. Synthesis of theoretical frameworks



Method

Research site— The research was conducted at the Queensland Museum, a museum of natural history, cultural heritage, science and human achievement. The museum is situated a short distance from the central business district of Brisbane, is located in a modern facility which has been recently refurbished, and offers free entry to a range of permanent exhibitions. During the research period, a special exhibition, *Life and Death in Ancient Egypt: Keku’s Story*, was hosted by the museum. This exhibition included a range of Egyptian artifacts, including mummified human and animal

remains, amulets, linen wrappings, food bowls, papyrus funerary texts, jewelery and extravagantly decorated sarcophagi. However, only one-third of the participants had attended this special exhibition, for which there was an admission fee. Because of the wide range of content and types of exhibition in this museum, it was considered that there would be opportunities for visitors to experience all four of the “satisfying experiences” categories (Pekarik, Doering, and Karns 1999).

Participants—A total of 44 brief (average of 15 minutes) semi-structured interviews were conducted with adult visitors as they exited the museum. Some interviews (16 of the 44) were conducted with couples, resulting in a total of 60 visitors (21 males and 39 females) who participated in the interviews. Approximately 80 percent of visitors who were approached agreed to participate in the interview. Demographic characteristics of the participants are reported in table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants [N=60]

| Characteristic | | Number | Percent |
|----------------------|-----------------|--------|---------|
| Gender | Male | 21 | 35 |
| | Female | 39 | 65 |
| Origin | Local Residents | 29 | 48 |
| | Tourists | 31 | 52 |
| Age | Under 35 | 27 | 45 |
| | Over 35 | 33 | 55 |
| Previous visits | First time | 11 | 18 |
| | Repeat | 49 | 82 |
| Attended <i>Keku</i> | Yes | 20 | 33 |
| | No | 40 | 67 |

Interview questions—The interviews were based on the following ten questions. Non-directive probing was used to clarify and elaborate visitors’ responses where necessary. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

1. What do you feel you have gained from the visit?
2. If you think about yourself now, and yourself when you first arrived, what would you say has changed? (“I am more . . . ; I am less . . .”)
3. Would you say your mood has changed at all?
4. Did you learn anything about yourself during the visit?
5. Has it changed the way you feel or think about yourself?
6. Has it changed the way you understand your place within the world?
7. Was there anything about the visit that made you feel good (or bad) about yourself or about the world?
8. Did the visit enhance your relationship with your companion(s) in any way?
9. Was there any part of your museum visit that spoiled your experience in any way?
10. In general, what do you value most about visiting museums? Why is this important to you? (If necessary, participants were prompted in relation to the entertainment, relaxation, discovery, and social interaction aspects of the visit—categories established as important in earlier quantitative research into visitor motivations. See Packer and Ballantyne 2002.)

Data analysis—Interview transcripts were divided into meaningful segments; each segment contained one main idea, or linked sequence of ideas. Segments were then coded using the theoretical categories outlined in figure 1. Multiple codes were used for single segments when necessary. In one case, a new category was added when it became evident that a large number of respondents were referring to an aspect of the experience that was not adequately encapsulated in the existing categories (see Restorative Elements—Unhurried).

Results

Results are presented according to the theoretical framework illustrated in figure 1. Evidence for the importance of each of the theoretical categories is presented in terms of the percentage of interviews (out of 44) in which the category was referred to. (These percentages are indicative only and should not be considered as precise measures that are in any way generalizable outside of the current sample.) Illustrative segments from the interview transcripts are cited to represent the voices of participants. Finally, evidence is presented for some of the linkages between the setting, the experience, and the beneficial outcomes. Such linkages were identified whenever at least five participants displayed conceptual links between two categories, within a single segment of the transcript.

Setting (servicescape) attributes (mentioned in 61 percent of interviews)—Setting characteristics were frequently mentioned in response to probes about aspects of the visit that led to positive outcomes. These were classified according to Bitner’s servicescape categories: ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, and signs and symbols (1992).

Ambient conditions (43 percent)—The ambient conditions were remarkably important to museum visitors. They offered general comments about the “atmosphere” or ambience, and specifically identified elements such as lighting, space, temperature and noise.

This is a nice building to walk in to. The overall effect is quite open and light and you have a lot of space to move around and choose what it is that you want to see.

The ceilings are very high so you feel like you’re in a really big space. It’s like the feeling you have when you enter a church.

Interestingly, the ambient conditions were so important to the museum experience, that the most often-cited detractor was the crowding and noise associated with visiting school groups. (This was mentioned in 18 percent of interviews in response to the question “Was there any part of your museum visit that spoiled your experience in any way?” Most of these interviews were with visitors who had attended the special *Keku* exhibition.)

Spatial layout and functionality (43 percent)—The layout and functions most valued by museum visitors related to comfort and wayfinding:

It provides seating areas . . . which I think is an absolute must in a place like this.

You don't feel like you're actually disturbing anyone, you can go up around different exhibits and there's enough room.

Easy to find our way around.

A number of visitors specifically mentioned the structure of the experience, or the way exhibits "flowed" from one to another:

Well, your layout is good, like . . . it's in specific areas. Like, you move from one area to the next area, to the next area. It flows, it has a nice flow.

The only detractor in relation to the layout and functionality of the museum was the location of the museum store.

As soon as we got here, the first thing my son wanted to do was to run into the shop and buy things So if that's less prominent when they come through the door, you probably stand more chance of learning something in there and enjoying that experience.

Signs, symbols, and image (11 percent)—Exhibit designers will be pleased to know that some visitors noticed and appreciated the effort that had been devoted to putting exhibits together. This, together with the availability of friendly staff, conveyed the image of a museum that was interested in visitor needs.

Seeing all the fantastic things and the way people have displayed them. I just admire the amount of time some people spend so that other people can enjoy them.

Everything has been well constructed. There are good notes. There are always people I can ask questions if I should need to.

It's friendly, it makes you want to come back and you don't feel uncomfortable.

The pleasant physical environment reinforced, and in some cases changed, visitors' perceptions and image of the museum.

It's welcoming, it's clean I remember taking the kids there a zillion years ago, so probably the old style museum sticks in my brain. So I was probably pleasantly surprised—it's more up-to-date, it's clean, it's modern.

Satisfying experiences (mentioned in 93 percent of interviews)—There was ample evidence of the four categories of satisfying experiences defined by Pekarik, Doering and Karns. The majority of interviews mentioned at least one. Some visitor responses in support of these categories are given below.

Object experiences (68 percent)—Approximately two-thirds of visitors mentioned aspects relating to museum objects as being important to their visit. Most visitors particularly enjoyed seeing things that were out of the ordinary. Being able to see “in real life” what they had previously only read or heard about was an important aspect of the object experience.

I think seeing things that I normally wouldn't be able to see. So things that I may have read in books or studied but actually to see in real life is what I came for really . . . , it was good to actually see artifacts and go wow, that's real and it's thousands of years old.

Despite this emphasis on the unusual, some visitors were also attracted by familiar objects.

I don't think there's any exhibit that he didn't have something that he recognized and mostly for him, it's not about seeing new things, it's about seeing things that he recognizes. [young mother with two-year-old child]

We lived in outback Queensland two years ago, and when we walked into the Queenslander section, we kind of went, oh it's our backyard.

Visitors appreciated the way objects had been ordered or placed to create a visual impression, and enjoyed exhibits that were visually stimulating. This was particularly important for those visiting with children.

You walk in straight through the front door and you see a big dinosaur skeleton—just puts you in the right mood straight from the start, I think. For the kids, obviously it's a big wow factor.

That was a good learning experience for children because there was texture in the environment. You had sand and you had whale bones and they had it set up so that it looked like the whale had rotted away on the beach there.

Cognitive Experiences (70 percent)—In this museum, and particularly among those who attended the *Keku* exhibition, cognitive experiences were equally as important as object experiences, and were mentioned by two-thirds of visitors. Again, visitors enjoyed information that was unusual.

It's important that there's interesting information. Something different about an animal or something different about an artifact. Just something that's a new twist or a new kind of story on it.

Again, as for object experiences, visitors appreciated the way information was structured and ordered.

I liked the way it flowed on, like it sort of started with . . . the process of embalming . . . and then at the end they talked about the . . . story of the afterlife.

I enjoyed the classification part because they had all the different classifications of animals and birds and things like that.

Overwhelmingly, visitors who referred to the cognitive experience reported that learning was something they found enjoyable and exciting.

It's an interesting place. It just stimulates your mind, doesn't it? And that's an enjoyable experience!

For me, every time I have a chance to visit the museum, it's very exciting . . . It's my curiosity to try to learn other cultures, other customs, and for me it's exciting.

Introspective experiences (55 percent)—Introspective experiences were reported in just over half of the interviews. Participants talked about how the exhibits led them to “imagine,” “think,” “appreciate,” “reflect,” or “see a different perspective.”

The fish, even the turtle, I didn't know was so big . . . and I was just imagining if I was diving and see one of them close to me.

If you wander through the Aboriginal part, then it makes you think about how far away we are from nature . . . we're not in contact with nature at all.

Introspective experiences did not occur independently of object and cognitive experiences. In fact, most (70 percent of) participants who described introspective experiences reported having *both* object and cognitive experiences.

Social Experiences (43 percent)—The social experiences reported by participants were not limited to their own companions and family members, but extended to interactions with other visitors. For some, just being in the presence of others in a positive environment appeared to be a satisfying experience.

We've been talking about it ever since we came out . . . you're looking and sharing experiences, and not the shallow experiences one does in normal day to day life.

I've spoken to strangers today that obviously have never seen me before in their lives and vice-versa, and they're quite happy to talk.

What you've got here is a whole range of people, you know, like there's us, there's lots of other couples here, there's lots of kids, families, older people, younger people, that's nice in itself.

Restorative elements (mentioned in 73 percent of interviews)—The four conditions identified by Kaplan and colleagues as important elements of a restorative environment were clearly manifest in participants' descriptions of their museum experience. A fifth element, labelled here as “unhurried,” was also identified in participants' responses. In some of Kaplan's work, feeling rushed or harried is presented as an *outcome* variable, the absence of which is indicative of a restorative experience (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989; Kaplan, Bardwell, and Slakter 1993). However,

participants' responses in the present study are more consistent with the conceptualization that being unhurried is a characteristic of a restorative *environment*—a necessary condition for restoration to occur. Further quantitative studies are necessary to explore the relationship between this proposed new condition and other elements of restoration theory.

Fascination (25 percent)—There is a similarity between object experiences and fascination. The defining feature of fascination, from the perspective of Attention Restoration Theory, is being engaged without effort. A number of participants reported this sort of engagement in their descriptions of their visit.

You get absorbed in what you're looking at and you do tend to forget about your immediate circumstances and where you've come from. They are very absorbing places. I guess because there's just so much around you that takes your attention . . . you're concentrating on it, so you're not really thinking about anything else I think if it was it hard work and taxing, I wouldn't come.

You can shut off all the noise around you and just concentrate on what you read, what you're looking at. I can do that with most things if I'm enjoying what I'm doing.

Being away (34 percent)—One-third of participants referred to the importance of the museum as a place to “get away” from everyday life. They saw it as a place of escape or refuge, almost like taking a holiday from their everyday life.

I work full time at home, look after an elderly mother, look after a family, and I've left them all to it and I've gone away.

You're getting away from the stresses and hassles of life in general to somewhere where you can just relax and look and enjoy.

More than just a place of escape, however, the museum offered a new world in which they could immerse themselves.

It's kind of closed off from the rest of the traffic and outside city. It's a bit of a sanctuary from the city outside . . . you're just focusing on other worlds, rather than the outside reality.

It's almost a little bit of escapism in some ways I suppose you just realize there's more out there than just worrying about the fortnightly wage and the mortgage and jobs and all the rest of that junk that you think about everyday. And just have a think about the environment and people, history and everything that's in a museum. It just takes your mind off all that type of thing.

Extent (23 percent)—“Extent” refers to the capacity of an environment, through its content and structure, to occupy the mind for an extended period. A museum clearly has this capacity. Nearly one-quarter of the interviews identified this element as an important aspect of the visit.

You just sort of amble along, you don't realize how much you've seen. You don't realize how much time you've spent just roaming around.

Just interesting to look around and to lose yourself in what you're doing, I think.

In particular, visitors valued the experience of feeling immersed in the exhibits:

It allows you to experience the information as well as just read it . . . you can set yourself within it in some ways . . . I like that the displays are often large and three dimensional so that you can immerse yourself in them a little bit.

Compatibility (34 percent)—The museum was perceived by visitors as a place where they could achieve their own purposes and satisfy their own interests.

You can wander at your own pace and look at what you want to look at and that's why I come by myself usually. Because I can just stop for half an hour if I want to look at one thing in particular and then zip through the other stuff that's not holding my interest.

It was particularly important to those visiting with a companion that they were not necessarily restricted by the other person's agenda.

You can actually wander around each at your own pace without disturbing the other, like one can walk off and look at something instead of having to be with them each step of the way.

Some participants specifically referred to the non-directed nature of the learning experience as being important in achieving a greater element of compatibility.

The fact that you're not directed— . . . when you go and you read a book . . . it's always directing the information. When you come here and look for a piece yourself, it's not directing the information; it's allowing you to go and find your own answers to it or bring up other questions that you want to know about.

You can draw your own conclusions, take away what it is that you find interesting about it all. Nobody's out to sell you an idea, or pressure you into anything.

Unhurried (55 percent)—The fifth restorative element— mentioned as an important aspect of the visit in over half of the interviews—was the unhurried nature of the experience, the absence of pressure, stress and busy-ness, often referred to as “no rush.”

It's away from the noise and the crowds . . . when you look around at other people, they're all moving very slowly, it's not like a shopping mall or some sort of event . . . There's a place to sit and there's not a noise and nobody's

under any pressure, and you can come and go as you like Nobody's hurrying, they're all wandering and looking and it's very calming.

It's just quiet and there's nothing that it demands of you, it just is.

There's a low stress environment and everyone seems to be having fun No one is rushing Everyone is just taking their time and you're doing your own thing.

One exception to the general perception of the museum as an unhurried environment came from a tourist visiting from out of town, who reported "trying to see as much as we can because we're here for a short time." This may explain why previous studies have reported that local residents place more importance on the restorative aspects of their visit than tourists do (Packer and Ballantyne 2002).

Benefits and Outcomes

This section looks past the experiences visitors described in order to understand the outcomes or benefits of those experiences. How had the visit affected them? What could they take away? It should be noted that although the interviews attempted to explore outcomes other than learning, at least half of the participants did refer to some aspect of learning as an important benefit: gaining new knowledge, reinforcing or challenging prior knowledge, and/or developing a greater cultural awareness. These are not reported here, since the focus of this paper is on outcomes and benefits other than learning.

Psychological well-being (mentioned in 59 percent of interviews)—Evidence was found for the relevance of five of the six elements of psychological well-being: personal growth, environmental mastery, purpose in life, positive relations, and self-acceptance.

The element that was not mentioned as an outcome was "autonomy" (independence and self-determination), although it should be noted that freedom of choice, which could be considered an aspect of autonomy, was frequently mentioned as an important part of the experience of visiting and is discussed above as part of the Restorative Element "compatibility."

Personal growth (23 percent)—Although the aspects of learning mentioned above (gaining new knowledge, reinforcing or challenging prior knowledge, and developing a greater cultural awareness) could probably be considered indicators of personal growth, this category was reserved for instances in which participants reported an ongoing openness or commitment to personal growth or development as a result of their visit.

Apart from the actual things that I would learn, it just adds to . . . the richness of that experience It sort of adds to the memories . . . for me, I think that's the thing that you think about on reflection, you know, in six months time or when you look back, and this experience with a whole range of others adds up and that changes you over a period of time.

When you're seeing new things you're learning a lot and it kind of does inspire things deep down inside to want to learn more and to be more aware of different issues.

Environmental mastery (14 percent)—Environmental mastery is about feeling competent and able to manage one's life. In the context of a museum visit, this was expressed in terms of new knowledge or experiences that were perceived as having value to the participants' everyday lives, and which in many cases were not available in any other way.

It's just the insight into parts of the world that you live in that you don't see. . . It can be inspiring, it can be educational, a little bit eye-opening.

There was a sheet there saying what you could do to help the environment. I thought that was interesting, because not everybody would have thought of all those things.

Purpose in life (11 percent)—A museum visit was seen to contribute to purpose in life in two ways: First, by connecting people with their history and their environment, thus allowing them to gain an understanding of their own place in the world:

If you can't look at history, and museums are a way of expressing that, you can't learn anything for the future. Your history teaches you something about where the whole civilization is going, or it should do. I guess it gives you a feeling that you're just a little way along this trail and you've got responsibilities.

Second, by sparking an interest in pushing the boundaries of their existence:

You daydream a little bit I suppose, about how you'd like to change things in your life a little bit if you could . . . For instance, when I was up looking at Torres Strait Islands and then thinking, gee it would great to be able to go up to that area and spend a bit of time just having a look around.

Positive relations (18 percent)—The contribution of museum visitation to positive relations was most commonly reported in terms of intergenerational relationships. In particular, historical exhibitions provided opportunities for different generations to share experiences in a real and tangible way.

Well I think if you're looking at museums and you see historical things, it may help you relate to your children because you might have been in that era or your grandparents were in that era . . . so perhaps make you talk more about your family. It's a link to them to perhaps join with their older family.

A museum visit was also seen as a positive way for families to spend quality time together.

I feel good because I made an effort to actually go and do something today . . . something that my son enjoyed . . . I'll go home and think, well that was good, I'm glad I did it.

Self-acceptance (25 percent)—Even without the element of doing something with or for their family, many participants considered that a museum visit was a worthwhile use of their time, and felt better about themselves for having done it.

It's a good way to spend a Saturday.

It enhances you.

A sense of fulfilment that I've done it.

Subjective well-being (mentioned in 11 percent of interviews)—Concepts related to subjective well-being (feeling good or feeling happy as a result of the visit) were mentioned less frequently than psychological well-being. Visitors' comments also suggest that these outcomes are likely to be more transitory than those related to psychological well-being.

When you really enjoy art, it's the moment that you feel happy and relieved.

It's a bit like going to a movie. You have to come away with some sort, whether it's a good feeling or a bad feeling, but it has to leave with you a feeling. You have to take something away.

Restoration (mentioned in 57 percent of interviews)—Evidence of restorative outcomes was sought in visitors' reports of having attained a sense of relaxation, peace and tranquility, or thoughtfulness as a result of their visit.

Relaxation (55 percent)—Some visitors reported that they visited the museum predominantly as a form of relaxation.

Well, the reason why I'm here is because I work just around the corner, so sometimes just to relax I come here for an hour.

Relaxing—if I'm in town and I've got a few hours with nothing to do I'll certainly either come to the museum or the art gallery and hang out . . . just quiet . . . I'm certainly more relaxed than when I walked in.

Others explained how aspects of the visit had a relaxing or restorative effect. Interestingly, visitors referred to the value of a restorative experience in terms of their renewed ability to deal positively with life, thus providing further evidence for the relevance of Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan and Talbot 1983; Kaplan 1995; Kaplan and Kaplan 1989) in the context of a museum visit.

It took my mind off of things. We'd done an awful lot. It made me feel rejuvenated.

In a sense, by doing this [participating in the interview] it proves that we are more relaxed and that we don't mind sitting down and having a conversation with someone . . . We'll go home refreshed and relaxed because we've seen something different.

It gives you time to sort of tune out from what you're doing in your daily life and see something different, see a different perspective Probably cleared my head a bit, like just because I wasn't thinking about work and I was sort of a bit more stress free and I was thinking about other stuff and I've sort of got more motivation to go and do something else now.

Although the majority of visitors reported that their visit had been “relaxing,” some (11 percent) preferred to emphasize the stimulating, adventurous nature of the experience.

Oh you know, this is a big adventure for the day, I don't think it's really a relaxation exercise So it's not relaxing, in that you've got to walk around and all that, but it's not stressful.

Peace and tranquility (16 percent)—Some visitors used terms such as “peaceful” and “calm” to describe their response to the experience. Further quantitative research will be required to establish whether this is conceptually distinct from relaxation.

It's actually left me very, rather than say relaxed, I feel quite calm. It's been very calm.

They're peaceful places, aren't they? You can shut off all the noise around you and just concentrate on what you read, what you're looking at.

Thoughtfulness (34 percent)—Engagement in reflection has been used as an indicator of restorative outcomes in some previous research (Kaplan, Bardwell, and Slakter 1993). In the present study, engagement in reflection was taken as an indicator of an introspective experience, as it was considered more a characteristic of the experience itself than a “take-away” outcome. However, some instances where new thoughts that had been stimulated by the visit were reportedly the subject of ongoing reflection were categorized here as restorative outcomes.

I am more thoughtful . . . just because everything's so organized and so laid back and just so peaceful, it just lets me think clearly and it's really good.

Well, it gets you thinking about what you're looking at, it gets you feeling like you want more . . . there are things that we read and learned today that I'll be thinking about when I go to bed tonight.

Evidence for linkages between the setting, the experience, and the beneficial outcomes—Figure 2 presents the most frequently-mentioned categories in each group, and the relationships between them. (The arrows represent conceptual links between categories that were made by at least five participants). Some examples of these conceptual links are presented below, with reference to the arrow labels in figure 2.

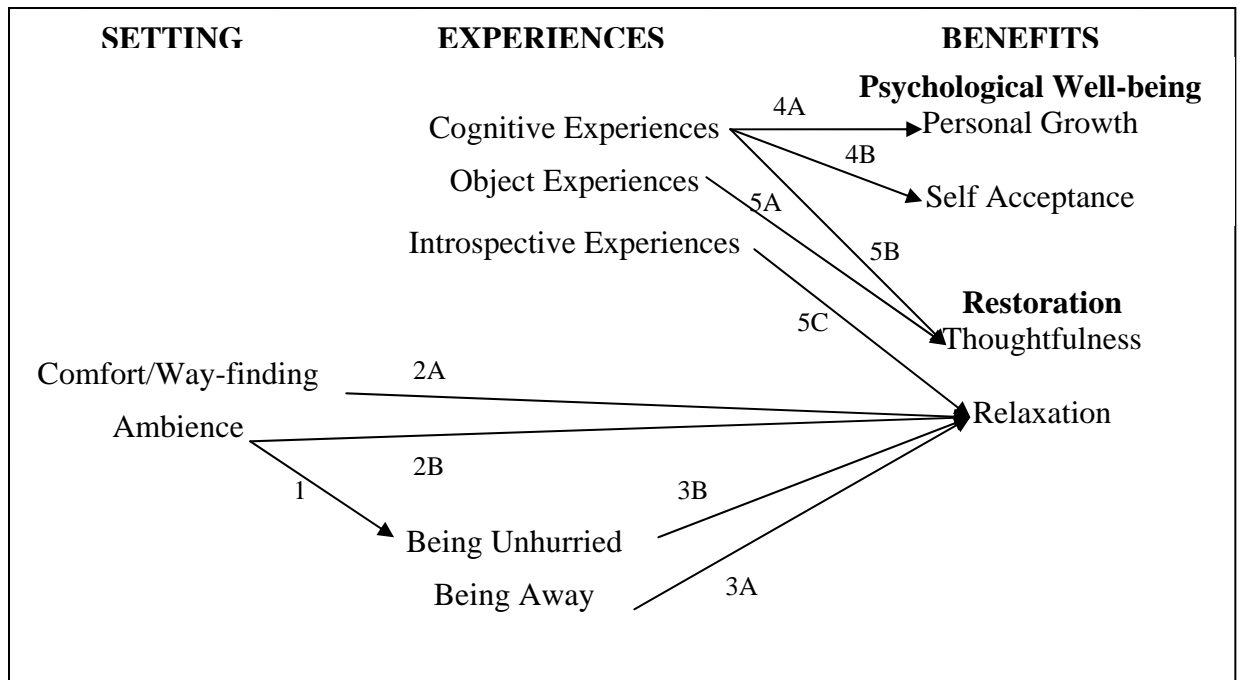


Figure 2. Depiction of the relationships between the most frequently confirmed and connected categories

1. Visitors reported how the ambience of the environment supported the unhurried nature of the experience.

It's not all hustle and bustle like it is out on the street. It's quiet and the air is still.

2. Participants linked the ambience and layout/functionality of the setting directly with restoration benefits, especially in terms of relaxation.

2A. For me, it's been open, easy to find our way around and that makes for a very relaxing walk around.

2B. It was dimly lit in *Keku*, so it was nice and relaxing... And in the areas where there's a lot of people the ceilings are very high so you feel like you're in a really big space. It's not overcrowded... Definitely more relaxed.

3. Being away and being unhurried helped visitors relax.

3A. When you come to a museum . . . we shut out that outside rat race that's out there, and really become more centered and more focused on what is around us . . . So therefore it becomes a de-stresser, I suppose you could call it.

3B. Things are there for you to see at your own pace, which is obviously going to relax you more than if you're on a tour or something like that where you need to rush through, because you may not have as much time . . . it's really

relaxing because you do it in your own pace and I think that's one of the most important things.

4. Cognitive Experiences were linked with both personal growth and self-acceptance.

4A. I found since going to museums, I definitely appreciate animals a bit more and I'd be quite interested in learning more about animals, birds and fish It makes you feel more interested in learning about them.

4B. I think I've just spent a couple of hours nurturing my brain. I can't think of anything I would have rather have been doing.

5. Visitors made some interesting connections between satisfying experiences and restorative outcomes.

5A. [Object experiences and thoughtfulness]: When I walk away from something that I've seen that is new and it's just something to think about and to dwell on.

5B. [Cognitive experiences and thoughtfulness]: Usually coming in here it's a little bit more of a thinking experience for me. I kind of come in to look at things that either make me think or make me reflect on particular social changes that are going on.

5C. [Introspective experiences and relaxation]: I'm certainly more relaxed than when I walked in. I was in quite a reverent space during the exhibition . . . it's a sort of serious situation in that it's talking about Keku's life and death and possible procession through the afterlife.

Conclusions

This analysis confirms the importance of the Satisfying Experiences identified by Pekarik and Doering as a framework for understanding visitor experiences in museums. It has extended this understanding in two significant ways. First, it has demonstrated that Satisfying Experiences in museums provide benefits for visitors beyond the experience itself—benefits that impact on visitors' ongoing well-being as they leave the museum and return to their everyday lives. Second, it has highlighted the relevance and importance of the restorative nature of a museum visit. The importance of restoration as an outcome of a museum visit has been given little attention in the research literature to date, but is clearly a major factor for a significant proportion of visitors. The analysis has also identified a fifth element that appears to contribute to the restorative nature of museum visitation, and which may also be of relevance in other restorative environments: the unhurried nature of the visit.

This research has a number of limitations, which need to be kept in mind when interpreting the results. First, the study was conducted in only one museum, and there is a very real possibility that the satisfying experiences and restorative elements that were identified in this particular museum may not be present to the same extent in other museums. Second, interviews were held immediately after the visit, so it was not possible to detect benefits that may have emerged some time later. This focus on immediate benefits is likely to have favored restorative benefits and undervalued

psychological well-being effects. Identifying the benefits of the museum to the well-being of the community as a whole is also beyond the scope of a study such as this.

Further research in a range of environments, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, is necessary to determine the generalizability of these findings and to further refine the conceptualizations suggested by this exploratory research. For example, quantitative research is needed to explore the relationships between the categories and the internal consistency within the categories. A follow-up quantitative pilot study is already underway and will be reported in a future paper.

To conclude, the most frequently mentioned beneficial aspects of a museum visit are encapsulated in the following excerpt from our interview with a middle-aged woman from another state, who had visited the museum and the *Keku* exhibition with her adult daughter. Here, she explains how the ambience and layout of the setting support the visitor experience and contribute to a sense of relaxation and well-being.

[Interviewer]: So in terms of your visit today, do you think that you've gained anything in particular? In addition to the educational side of the exhibition, was there anything else that you feel that you'll take from today?

[Visitor]: I think for me, in particular, it's the ambience. You've actually got, when you come to a museum—with ourselves, we particularly devote time, and getting that chunk of time is very important, so it's something that we shut out that outside rat race that's out there, and really become more centered and more focused on what is around us. The ambience actually lowered the stress level, and therefore made me relax more, therefore I was able to appreciate the exhibits more.

[Interviewer]: If you could sum up what makes your experience at the museum enjoyable, how would you sum that up?

[Visitor]: Well, definitely time away from the rat race that's outside. So therefore it becomes a de-stresser, I suppose you could call it, that and being able to further our knowledge. This museum in particular, I love the layout, it's great.

[Interviewer]: Why, what is it about the layout?

[Visitor]: I think being more modern and more contemporary and open, you don't get that closed-in feeling that you often get. I love these high ceilings. This foyer's beautiful.

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