

Media Strategies for the Humboldt Forum

Bettina Probst, Alan Prohm, and Nathalie Keurmeur

Humboldt Forum Staff Unit, Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, Germany

ABSTRACT:

The purpose of media in the large-scale cultural project of creating the Humboldt Forum in the rebuilt Berlin Palace, and especially for the museums moving into it, is to serve cultural understanding and to underline the idea of multiperspectivity, providing diverse bases for encounter between a world of objects, issues and ideas, and a world of people – Berliners and world citizens alike – who from 2019 will be coming to the Humboldt Forum to encounter this world.

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of the Humboldt Forum is to bring the world into the reconstructed Berlin City Palace. A world of objects within the museums, gathered from America, Africa, Oceania and Asia, a world of people, coming from around the world, to encounter these things and each other and to discuss different topics and issues concerning all of us. The purpose of media, within the larger project of creating the Humboldt Forum, is to make this encounter possible and to serve cultural understanding as well as the histories of objects and collections, being told in a way to show different opinions, layers of meaning and points of views.

A world in the palace, and a palace for the world, are catch-phrases we have heard. To become a reality, the complex of museums (including the Ethnological Museum, the Museum of Asian Art, as well as two other museums dedicated to Berlin and the history of the site), changing exhibitions, event spaces, the Humboldt University Lab, a library, shops and restaurants, all coming together in this enormous project, need to hold together and function as a single complex but coherent whole. And the visitor, coming into it, needs to be able to get around in this world, find things, engage them, experience them, and get a world out of them, so to speak. The potential contained in the idea of the Humboldt Forum lies not in its walls and floors, and not in the objects that make up the collections that fill

these, but in the meanings, histories and relations these contain and embody. Communicating the world contained and embodied in this new place, is the mission media are there to fulfil.

2. MEDIA CONCEPT

The Humboldt Forum Staff Unit is charged with designing and planning the overarching media concept for the Humboldt Forum, and with developing, together with the curators, detail media concepts for the individual exhibitions of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, which fill the upper two floors of the complex.

At the level of the overall Forum, our focus is on orientation. Visitors need to find their way around, find specific things and places. But when they find these things and places, they also need to find what they are really looking for there, the meaning, the information, the experience, the insight, aura, some excitement or - last but not least - a sense of connection.

We are developing for this an orientation application to provide both easy, intuitive, and engaging navigation of the rooms and floors of the Humboldt Forum building, and easy, intuitive and engaging navigation of the house's contents, its cultural import and interest. Our solution aims to deliver on the idea of a world in the palace and a palace for the world, by placing the palace, and the world

it contains, in the palm of your hand, and at your fingertips.

Beyond just getting people to different contents and different partner institutions in the Humboldt Forum, however, our solutions have the ambition of helping these connect, and network. The promise of a Forum rests to a large extent on how the various voices in this public space can be helped to communicate, coordinate and exchange. Media has a vital role to play in facilitating this.

3. MUSEUM CONTENT

Within the exhibition space of the two large museums, the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, our work goes much deeper into the conceptualization and presentation of content. Our role with media in the specific exhibition modules is to support the physical presentation of the objects via the digital presentation of information. On the one hand this means the physical objects, which can be medially displayed, highlighted and commented. On the other it means topics, practices, perspectives, bodies of knowledge, things that can't be seen, and the challenge of making these perceptible, graspable, imaginable via media.

Our second most important focus in the overall media concept for the Humboldt Forum is on "accompaniment", how we can best "accompany" visitors through the entirety of their encounter. We set ourselves the task of imagining what we would want to put into a person's hand entering the Humboldt Forum for the first time that would lead them to everything they wanted to find, help them keep it all together, and take it all home with them when they go. This is the dream of every museum faced with the potentials of digital media. What is unique about the Humboldt Forum is the legacy of collecting, exploration and scholarship that is behind it. For us, accompaniment is not a matter speaking explanations into another person's ear, but of supporting visitors in an exploration of their own.

We're imagining a solution with three basic function sets: Compass, Companion and Collector. Compass gives you an instant, first-glance view of your location, or a clear arrow pointer to your known or probable destination. Companion offers you, first of all, basic object

and exhibition information for all content you encounter in the museum, and on top of that a range of tours that bring this content to life in different ways and, most importantly, in different voices.

Delivering information and content along the way is one vital dimension of medial support for a museum visitor. Connecting that information, those meanings and ideas, and thickening that to something richer are another basic focus of our media concept "linkage". We are planning based on content tagging, semantic mapping, and search algorithms, on the one hand, and on Bluetooth Beacon and sensor technology on the other, for a system that is able to create a record of your museum visit, and at the same time enrich it through intelligent processing of the material you have selected or expressed interest in. This is the basis of the third function set in our medial accompaniment application: Collector. This allows the simply curious to gather and sort all kinds of material related to the visit, and with the same basic interface it allows a serious visiting researcher to use their visit (whether physical or online) for constructive, creative research.