



International Networking Projects and the Web

Interview with Marie-Paule Jungblut

→ MARIE-PAULE JUNGBLUT

Marie-Paule Jungblut is an historian and philologist. She studied History and German literature at the University of Luxembourg and at the University of Göttingen. From 2004 to 2011 she was chair of the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Archaeology and History (ICMAH) and of the International Association of Museums of History (AIMH). She is associate lecturer in museology at the Université de Liège and since 1991 she has been working as a historian and curator at the Musée d'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg, serving as deputy director of the two museums of the city of Luxembourg (the Musée d'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg and the Villa Vauban – Musée d'Art de la Ville de Luxembourg). In particular being responsible for the first permanent exhibition of the museum and the temporary exhibitions program. In February 2012, she was elected director of the Historisches Museum Basel.

The Musée d'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg opened in 1996. It is housed in four restored residential houses dating from the 17th to the 19th century, still bearing archaeological traces from the Middle Ages. The aim of the restoration project, which turned this historical building into the city museum's venue was, on the one hand to study the historical evolution of the buildings, bringing into light and enhancing its archaeological remains, while at the same time enriching the architecture and the museological aspect of the premises and provide the museum with all the modern facilities needed by such an institution. A “floating” glass façade and a panoramic lift that passes through the entire height of the museum is a characteristic feature. The lift, thanks to its transparent walls and re-

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5.27 — The Luxembourg City History Museum. Architecture by Conny Lentz (Luxembourg); structural project by Gehl & Jacoby et Ass.; museographical project and exhibition design by Adeline Rispal (Repérages Architects, Paris).

duced velocity, allow visitors to see the rock foundations on the lower levels and to enjoy a panoramic view of the Grund district and Rham plateau on the upper levels, providing the visitor with an overview of the city's development, from its first settlement to the country's independence in 1839 and thus becoming a part of the exhibition path itself. The exhibition illustrates the more recent history of the city through five themes: City and Power, City in Motion, City and Environment, City and Facilities and City in Europe, all of which form a link between past and present.

The Luxembourg City History Museum “understands its mission of representing history as the visualisation of the political, cultural and social development of the city, in order to stimulate the public to dialogue with its cultural heritage.” Since its opening, the museum has extensively worked with temporary exhibitions according to this vision and as a strategy to deal with difficult and contentious topics, aimed at fostering dialogue between history and the present. Most of them have also been used to explore different curatorial approaches and experiment with new media, ICT, and new working strategies, as transnational networking and other forms of interdisciplinary cooperation.

In this interview, Marie-Paule Jungblut, former deputy director of the museum, talks about this experience, its benefit and potential.

What's the role today, in your opinion, of a contemporary city history museum like the Musée d'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg?

The mission of the Luxembourg City History Museum is to preserve the city's history, making it accessible to people today and preserving it for future generations. It is committed to serving audiences of all ages with educational exhibitions and programs that are both thought provoking and entertaining. The Museum focuses primarily on the city of Luxembourg, and also seeks to place the city and its people in an international context reflecting its location at the centre of Europe, and connecting the local story to the stories of humans worldwide.

Why should city history museums use the Internet and other new Information and communication technologies?

One of the main duties of history museums today is to combine the safeguarding of cultural heritage, inextricably linked to such an institution, with contemporary and innovative presentations and communication forms. Collections should thus be freed from the “dust of history” and historical objects should be revealed in their significance for the present.

With the use of timely forms of communication (such as Web 2.0 or Augmented Reality) and new thought approaches, museums can open up to whole new audiences. Contemporary products enhance the image of history museums and provide them with the additional advantage of being able to offer sponsors an attractive platform for their presence.

Some of the exhibitions promoted by the museum have recently been developed in cooperation with other history and city museums around Europe and world-wide, and sometimes also with multidisciplinary teams. Why cooperate? What are the benefits of such a working strategy?

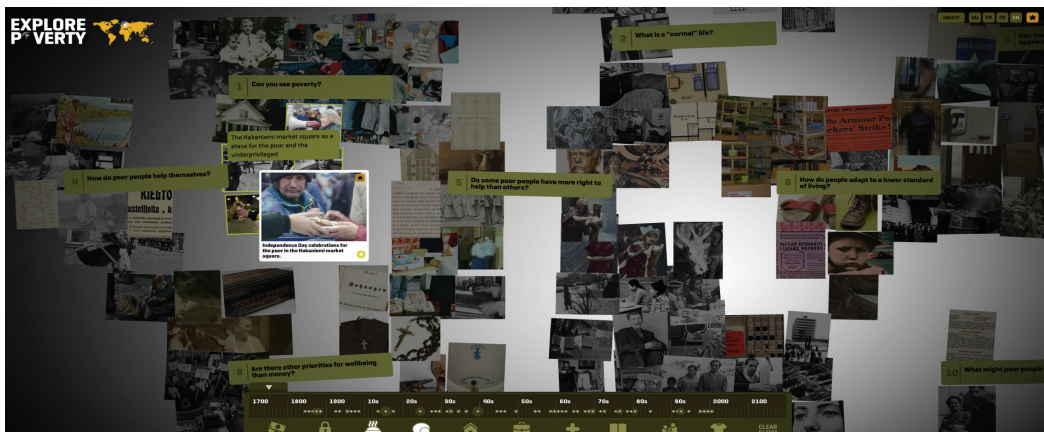
In view of the sophisticated commercial products that are on today's market, curators of history museums are often not confident enough in developing digital products themselves. The result is that either they won't contemplate the idea for want of money or, should funds not be an issue, they entrust the development of digital products entirely to commercial companies. The risk then is that the end product clearly bears the hallmarks of the enlisted production company.

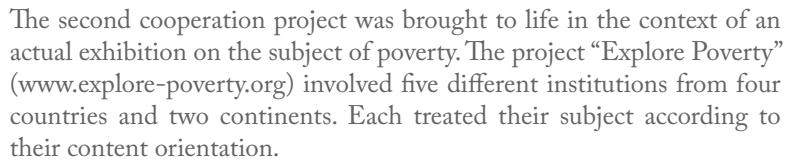
Alternatives are national and transnational co-productions between history museums and interdisciplinary partnerships with educational establishments. These bring about not only an added value in terms of content of the products and a reduction in costs, but also significantly enhance the external image of the participating houses. The individual museums are able to position themselves on an international stage. Furthermore, cooperation projects give curators the chance to further their professional development through exchange with colleagues.

Since its opening, the Luxembourg City History Museum has amassed a wealth of experience in transnational cooperation projects, in terms of both "real" travelling exhibitions and web-based projects. Could you talk to us about some of these experiences?

The first digital product that the Luxembourg Museum launched together with the Helsinki City Museum and the DASA Working World Exhibition between 2003 and 2006 tackled the question of what makes a good European citizen, namely "The Real Citizen." The participating curators set themselves the challenge of developing a product that would address the questions of young people. An additional technical challenge was also to make the product suitable for the visually impaired. This resulted in a range of technical constraints that led to the product being rather static in design.

IMG. 5.28 — "Explore Poverty," a on-line exhibition conceived by the Luxembourg City History Museum in collaboration with the Minnesota Historical Society, the Helsinki City Museum, the DASA Arbeitswelt Ausstellung, and implemented by the Koln International School of Design. <http://www.explore-poverty.org>.





The curators from the Helsinki City Museum, from DASA and the Luxembourg City History Museum knew each other from several previous cooperation projects, which also included the website, “The Real Citizen.” They had already developed a working method in the context of this previous project, which they transferred to the new project.

Each museum appointed a so-called producer, who was to be responsible for the preparation of images, films and texts within each house. They also chose a project manager, who was to be in charge of coordinating the project. The responsibility of the project manager consisted of sourcing the material from the producers and conveying it to the students of the Cologne Design School. The challenges the manager faced varied in nature. On the one hand, the manager had to build up trust over thousands of kilometres, while also organising the communication between participants and overcoming cultural differences. On the other hand, there were technical difficulties that needed to be solved with regard to data communication.

In your experience, what aspects are fundamental for successful cooperation?

First of all, trust. In a transnational cooperation with partners with heterogeneous content, the different partners need to be able to rely on each other to raise the agreed money, to provide the material in good time and, most importantly, to place their trust in the leadership of the manager.

In the case of “Explore Poverty,” the four museums reached an agreement, which contained a rough concept regarding contents and which also laid down the distribution of roles, a time schedule and the financial framework for the project. Since three of the four partners were from Europe, it was agreed that the design would also be developed in Europe. As it was decided not to work with a professional company, but to “risk” working with design students, trust played a very important role. The work with 20 students gave access to a broader creative repertoire, but the partners did not know at the beginning what they were going to get and therefore needed to trust one another that the decision that was made would overall prove advantageous to the project.

Then “communication” is another fundamental aspect to create trust and motivation and to keep this up over a longer period of time, in addition to exchanging emails and creating an Internet platform for the transfer of digitised material and video conferences, “real” meetings are vital. This was confirmed in both the transnational Internet projects that Luxembourg City History Museum, DASA and the Helsinki City Museum have been involved in. While there is no doubt that the Internet these days offers fantastic opportunities for the technical exchange of information, when it comes to reaching an agreement on content and aesthetic issues, human contact is indispensable. In the case of the “Explore Poverty” project, for instance, several “real” meetings were held at the Cologne International Design School. First the students presented four different websites, which were discussed. The team then agreed on one project, which the entire student group went on to develop.

Trust and open communication allow cultural differences to be overcome to a certain extent. The curators had to clarify at the outset how far the project could go in order to tackle a subject as difficult as “poverty” and therefore it also necessary to come to an agreement regarding the so-called “metadata” of the objects.

Does this cooperation also affect the exhibition contents?

Yes it does: not all city museums, in fact, share the same self-understanding of their social role. Many curators do not have the courage to tackle “difficult” subjects of recent history. Cooperation projects result in one’s own cultural heritage being viewed with a more discerning critical eye.

Interview by Francesca Lanz