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Scientific collections and nomadism

ABSTRACT

Do objects of science need a permanent theatre in the University? In a multidisciplinary and multicampus university, is it a good solution to think about the development of collections through the creation of a museum? An alternative would be access to the collections in a successive, partial and temporary manner, in other words through choosing Nomadism – the concept of Nomadism involving small movements that renew the interest of the place. We will study the conditions necessary for attracting diverse audiences, as well as keeping the character of events for these temporary exhibitions in various premises. Thus, we will try to define the concept of academic, as neither virtual nor permanent, but a Nomadic museum.

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As a preliminary comment, I must say that I work in a multidisciplinary and multi-campus university. Limoges is the home of porcelain in the centre of France, with a population of 170,000, including 14,000 students.

How convenient and opportune can it be to conceive a scientific museum today in this kind of university environment? A museum offers many assets. According to IRCOM, museums are defined as permanent institutions open to the public. Thus, the main asset would be to preserve the recent collections of instruments and machines collected in laboratories, to give open access to them, and most of all, to clearly locate scientific heritage for the academic community.

However, with regard to the mission of spreading scientific culture amongst students who do not investigate beyond their own domain of specialisation, a museum is not the best method. For them, a museum is an outmoded institution lacking appeal.

We imagine a nomadic museum to be a good solution for moving temporary exhibitions into each faculty or department of the university. The concept of “nomadic” actually means mobility, lightness, adaptability and opportunity.

The question is how to maintain continuity through moving and temporary exhibitions, and what the conditions are to succeed in that purpose.

First, to manage frequently renewed exhibitions from one campus to another requires the preparation of hosting areas, or “oases”, in lobbies, halls and waiting areas in different parts of universities. In each place, the nomadic museum must find several well-informed partners to organise a welcome. While we are investigating inside laboratories, we should also build a dynamic network of partners for the protection of scientific heritage; partners who are also determined to settle and animate exhibition projects. To facilitate the development of this nomadic museum, it would seem very important that the executive staff of university should be ready to support the team and promote the scientific shows.

Then, we should select “oases” in premises which provide such facilities as light, water, ventilation, as well as the obvious qualities of security for the displayed objects and devices.

A characteristic of the nomadic museum is its caravan carrying specific means to assure easy functioning: mobile resources as flexible and transportable equipment, show cases, mobile partitions and portable spotlights which can be quickly dismantled or installed.

An asset of this temporary exhibition equipment is to be modular and easy to set up, as themes and displays might be adjusted with regard to the interests of the aimed public, as well as the available space. The main asset of this “nomadic solution” is to be able to adapt its relevance and stimulate curiosity and strangeness. It is true that the metamorphosis of usual places and passageways enhance the attraction of the event.



(Views of a naturalist exhibition in three premises, ©université de Limoges, a-mdelaune)

The nomadic museum is a kind of network of architecture, scattering exhibition scenes in lobbies, halls and waiting areas and, at the same time, a network organisation which includes active participation and help from academics.

Finally, to develop the safeguarding of contemporary instruments, disseminate research history linked with present research, the nomadic museum needs besides a storehouse to stock materials, a database for the virtual protection of the inventory, and sustainable archives; and last but not least, an essential website with a virtual museum to promote events. But that is another question.

Dispersed scientific collections or how to overcome the absence of a permanent space of exhibition?

In collaboration with Anne-Marie Delaune within the PATSTEC national network in France, we wanted to challenge and illustrate the concept of nomadism relating to five years of experience at the Université de Bourgogne. A museum is run in a strict and clear frame, and offers many facilities for conservation and valorisation. In Dijon, however, we don't have a museum at our university. Very few universities in France own scientific museums (e.g. Strasbourg).

After five years of coping with the situation, we have observed that this is not a disaster and, on the contrary, offers real freedom of action, within certain limits.

Not having a museum, how can we overcome the absence of a permanent exhibition space? How does this issue oblige us to think of displaying in a different way? And to a certain extent, how do fieldwork, artefact collection and inventory influence our outreach strategies?

Nomadism allows the expectation of display and exhibitions to be met by following the parameters listed and proposed by Anne-Marie Delaune, and can also help to free us from the constraint of a fixed – but potentially fossilised – location.

Specificities of dispersed collections

Dijon, like Limoges, is a regional capital with a population of 160,000. The university, with nearly 30,000 students, was founded in 1723, and 300 years of history explains why the university owns scientific collections. The growth of the university from a small location in the centre of the city to a modern campus on the outskirts of the city has led to scientific instruments being scattered throughout various locations. Moreover, an important part of the collections are still being used in classes or laboratories, and can not be entirely mobilised for conservation and contemplation. Furthermore, these instruments cannot be displayed without real effort of contextualisation, particularly concerning recent scientific heritage, which is quite complex using a lot of electronics and often enclosed in boxes to hide the process.

If collections are dispersed, they are also disparate, reflecting all the various fields of research and study to be found in Dijon. However, this heterogeneous character is balanced by a certain coherence, given by the fact that all these instruments have met the needs of research and teaching at certain times. At French universities, very few people are involved in the field of scientific heritage. Specific scientific and technical staff are almost non-existent. Teachers or engineers in various departments are often in charge of the collections. They are often not clearly identified nor recognised by the institution. In Dijon, actions regarding scientific heritage are centralised in a “Mission Culture Scientifique” of two persons (a curator and a person in charge of collecting and listing). They have to coordinate, protect and enhance the collections. As a consequence, it is often difficult to manage both the conservation and the outreach strategies at the same time. Nevertheless, we notice that fieldwork and the methodology used while collecting and listing the objects oblige us to think about valorisation at the same time.

Anne-Marie Delaune underlines the importance of, “a dynamic network of partners for the protection of scientific heritage, partners who are also determined to set up and animate exhibition projects”. A small team without a permanent theatre for scientific collections really needs to find partnerships to exist and to tighten the network. A lot of possibilities exist and reinforce the methodological aspects as well as events.

Strategies of dissemination: the importance of partnerships

The concept of nomadism is extremely large, and some key factors to success in outreach strategies need to be identified. Amongst them partnerships, good locations and strategic monitoring of relevant activities within the institution will be discussed.

National partnership:

To give legitimacy and visibility to our actions, we needed to be involved in a bigger institution. In signing an agreement with the Musée des Arts et Métiers for the PATSTEC programme, we agreed to apply the methodology defined by the national mission. This

methodology implies the collection of information on the technical properties and principles of functioning of the scientific instruments, as well as making enquiries about the context of their use, and research in which these instruments were involved.

Going into laboratories in order to sensitise people to the importance of recent scientific heritage, to be in contact with users and to study the objects *in situ*, in their original context, oblige us to work in a very different manner from that we would adopt if we had all the objects centralised in storage areas. By encouraging the recording of a certain memory of researchers regarding their scientific heritage, this method allows us to replace these objects in a larger context and gives us ideas at this first step for future valorisation. Indeed, the stories they tell us give depth to the objects, and are a rich source of context to attracting the public.

This approach, based on working experience, offers a rich source of issues to explore, as well as more means of mediation (with a lot of entries: contextualisation, the methods and the instruments of the researchers, ethnographic and sociological approach, testimony, emotional relation with the instruments, etc.). They bear witness to the history of the institution and are milestones for the history of research.

Inside the institution: how to create partnerships in order to create events? As we have no museum and no exhibition space, but yet a real potential and desire to show this heritage, we had to and still must create partnerships, in order to create events: finding “oases”.

Anne-Marie Delaune underlines the fact that , “an asset of temporary exhibition equipment is to be modular and easy to set up in premises since themes and displays could be adjusted to the interests of the targeted public and available space. The main asset of this ‘nomadic solution’ is to be able to adapt its relevance and stimulate curiosity and create a sense of strangeness. It is true that the metamorphosis of usual places and passageways would enhance the attraction of the event.” However, places to invest in and partnerships need to be carefully chosen. University libraries attract a lot of various people: professors, teachers, PhD students, undergraduate students, and even people from outside the university ... and appear to be *the* places to be!

Libraries and halls:

“Où sont passées les collections? Du réel au virtuel”. What’s happened to the collections?

This is the event that has set the pattern for several years. This exhibition was created and presented in the library hall. We wanted to make the collections visible to people in the institution who often ignore the fact that they exist. As it is not possible to go to the collections, the collections come to the people. With a important kit of communication comprising flyers and four different posters describing different aspects of the collections, we tried to announce the exhibition so as to attract the public.



This event also needed us to mobilise all resources persons so as to find and show the treasures of the university. We chose five objects representing the collections (zoology, medicine, palaeontology, old and rare books and botany), and presented each of them with a dispositive comprising one object and a film (see photo). In each of the five films, an unbiased observer, chosen amongst the university staff, was in conversation with the person in charge of the collection.



Photo: Mission Culture Scientifique, uB



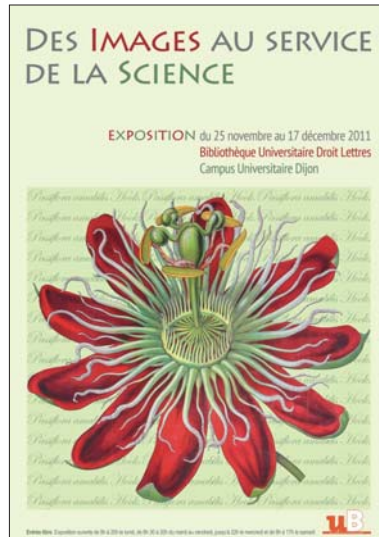
Photo: Mission Culture Scientifique, uB

As a library is a place dedicated to study, it has to be quiet, and what could be a constraint for the exhibition helps us to create an intimate, individual encounter with the objects. One person can discover a whole collection through a representative object while watching the film on a small screen with headphones.

A small team also has to deal with financial issues related to organising events. The structure built for the exhibition “What’s happened to the collections” – a 10 m² cube – has been recycled in the hall of the faculty of science and enables us to do small temporary exhibitions in line with current events, as well as announcing events (e.g. for the Researchers’ night). This is a permanent oasis where we propose a fragmented view of the collections.

L’illustration scientifique: Des images au service de la science – Scientific illustration: Pictures serving science.

We wanted to valorise a pack of beautifully illustrated boards used for teaching. We had already collaborated with the library of the university, but couldn’t come up with the opportunity to create the event. By monitoring relevant activities, we finally discovered that a congress on scientific illustration was to be held in Dijon, followed by a yearly seminar. We seized this opportunity and organised an exhibition in the library hall with the help of an exhibition designer and a technician hired for the occasion. The multimedia service of the university also produced a film on the exhibition. All the participants of the congress were invited to the opening exhibition. This exhibition is still “turning” in various locations through Burgundy.



http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xmtd08_des-images-au-service-de-la-science_school

Culture and City: partnership outside the university, or how to reach a bigger public with fewer instruments...?

The university signed a convention with Le Musée de la Vie Bourguignonne, a museum in Dijon. For various reasons, mostly to offer good conditions of conservation for old instruments, a group of 240 instruments were deposited in the museum. Even if only one-fifth of these objects are able to be shown, this oasis outside the university enables us to reach a rather larger public; and not only students and scholars, but also families, classes, tourists ... and the whole group was inventoried and conserved under good conditions.

The only disadvantage is that we do not have free-use of these objects, because they have now a different status.

What can we do after an exhibition?

It is crucial to think about a large panel of multimedia devices. The exhibition “What’s happened to the collections? From reality to virtuality” was also an opportunity to launch and distribute a catalogue of the collections.

Two new brochures have been proposed for each year on other items of the collections (botanical, lasers, microwaves and nanomaterial).



Organising a virtual approach

Brochures and films, as well as our monthly scientific campus radio programme, are relays for our actions on heritage.

The campus radio is happy to broadcast our monthly scientific programme – le microscope et la blouse – proposing highlights on scientific heritage. This programme is one of the most popular on *Radio Dijon Campus* and has been recently listed by France culture. All “Microscope & la Blouse” items are available as podcasts on the *Experimentarium* website:

<http://experimentarium.u-bourgogne.fr/spip.php?rubrique31>

In this age of communication in our society, it is capital to create a virtual oasis. Modern technologies help us to touch a potentially infinite public. As a consequence, a functional website is a key aspect of our strategy. Hosted on the university’s institutional website, it centralises all productions regarding scientific heritage, gives information on current events, actions to come, links to other heritage institutions, and hosts photo galleries:

<http://culture-scientifique.u-bourgogne.fr/que-fait-on/les-collections.html>

And what about a virtual museum? Dematerialisation also helps to “create” a museum, or at least attempts to centralise collections in a virtual museum. To improve the visibility of this dematerialised approach, all our actions are presented and selected items of the collections are “displayed” in the national database of the PATSTEC network, as well as on the PATSTEC website, offering important documentation and lots of resources concerning contemporary scientific heritage:

<http://www.patstec.fr/PSETT>

As a conclusion, we can say that it is possible to overcome the fact of not having a museum. Paradoxically, It gives us a lot of possibilities and places to invest in. It is absolutely inevitable to question the need for a clear policy: beyond the simple centralisation of collections, it is more a question of finding a good and invariant angle of attack, from which would come out a coherent offer of actions of dissemination to touch composite publics. More than a simple confrontation between dispersed and centralised collections, the real confrontation concerns conservation regarding scientific mediation; and it is a real challenge to manage both at the same time. It is also difficult to only show parcels of the collections. However, a museum is not always the best solution and also endures a lot of turpitudes. The recent move in museums to organise “extra-mural” exhibitions or to take the public behind the scenes, shows the validity of the nomadic actions developed in several French universities.

