Virtual museums and the Web: a dilemma of compatibility?

Introduction

What happens when a museum is presented online? The Internet is a very ductile space, where content is transmitted not only by means of text, but also, and more effectively, by means of images and, recently, other multimedia tools, which support, substitute and make immediate the reception of meanings. Everything is instrumental to the achievement of a purpose. It would be logical to think that the institutions, by means of the characteristics proper of the medium, would be able to re-propose or translate, through an act of translation, the same concepts, ideologies, scopes originally included in their physical spaces. However, such a direct translation cannot take place without producing problems and major tensions. In fact, some characteristics proper of the Internet constitute a challenge for the institution, which seems to be forced to either find a balance between its traditional configuration and an acquired new image on the Web, or to discard some of its original premises in favour of new ones. Although it is possible to see an effort to find new strategies of engagement with the medium used, I believe that the museum still hasn’t completely managed to either one or the other solution: it is still not clear whether the virtual museum will produce a new interpretation of the medium, as we know it, or on the contrary, it will use Internet tools in a way that results in a traditional goals.

2. A Definition of Virtual Museum

The word “virtual” originally indicates a computer generated space, which only exists within the computer or in the imaginary space of the network and doesn’t have any apparent relation with reality. However, when it is associated with the museum, the term virtual is commonly used to indicate the Internet version of a real museum space. This means that a real building, containing concrete objects, exists beside the space dedicated on line. The majority of museums’ websites contains a choice of collection or images which can be admired during a normal museum’s visit, and they are always accompanied by an indication of the museum’s real coordinates, a complete schedule of activities. This means that the virtual space is only an online complement of the real one, which only exists within the computer.

A definition of virtual museum

In this paper, it will be demonstrated that this contrast cannot be limited only to the operation of translation from the real into the virtual space, but it is implicit in the concept of the museum itself. The virtual museum, as a new space, cannot be independent from the traditional one, and it will always be linked to it, even if its development is independent from the configuration of the real space. In fact, the Internet is unable to take place without producing problems and major tensions. In fact, some characteristics proper of the Internet, such as the nature of the medium, make it impossible to see an effort to find new strategies of engagement with the medium used, as we know it, or on the contrary, it will use Internet tools in a way that results in a traditional goals.

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In this case is interpreted as a promotional tool. A second interpretation sees the Internet as an indispensable communication tool, which enables museums to transmit information and to communicate with a prospective or established audience. This goal was particularly promoted when museums aimed at providing the public with a new level of access to information. A second interpretation sees the Internet as an indispensable communication tool, which enables museums to transmit information and to communicate with a prospective or established audience.

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Building a virtual museum was a way to avoid these prohibitive costs with the advantage of having Uruguayan art diffused worldwide.

The above mentioned museums share a characteristic in common: their web site cannot be interpreted either as a promotional tool, which attracts audience to a real space, nor an addition to the original museum entity. Their web site is "The Museum," and for this reason it has to be entirely and totally present in the virtual space only.

The three categories of virtual museums I have identified, underline some major distinctions: in the first category the virtual space is functional but not essential for the life of the museum, it is, rather, an addition, or an enhancement of the physical site. The web site, alone, only works in conjunction with the physical site. In the last two categories the virtual domain represents the core, without which the museum itself would not exist. These virtual museums completely rely upon the Internet as the primary mode of delivery of the museum's content, in conjunction with the physical site. The web site, alone, may work in lieu of the physical site. In the first category the virtual space is functional, but not essential for the life of the museum. In the last two categories the virtual domain represents the core, without which the museum itself would not exist.

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A third category of virtual museums exists, although it is currently represented by a single

### 3. The Creation of a Context in the Virtual Museum

Every virtual museum usually contains a huge amount of data, ordered and classified according to

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over 100 million dollars, a prohibitive sum for the Uruguayan reality.
The creation of a context makes virtual museums distinguishable and recognisable: the process involves both the transmission of information, representational strategies, and the integration of the two. The way virtual museums have been constructed and developed demonstrate this interdependency: the location and the amount of information as a technique of display (and not as pure data) contribute to define the context, while the content (in the form of data) is inserted in a more or less complex visual structure, which stands out as a recognizable entity.

It is important to observe how the location of the information displayed contributes to determine the character of a virtual museum: In the case of the first category of virtual museums, a particular emphasis is given to their virtual space, their hours of operation and their entrance fee. This reinforces the dependency of these sites upon their real space. Several American museums, such as the Guggenheim, the MoMA in New York and the SFMoMA, chose a similar model to locate and classify their information on line.

The second category of virtual museums presents a similar approach to the transmission of information: extended use of menus and lists, where the most relevant information is classified under the guide of submenus. The virtual space is conceived as a sort of curated archive (in the case of Gallery 9) or a space, which can be explored through guided tours (the MUVA). In the case of the VMC, the inclusion of ‘Canadian content’ implies the consideration of a series of components to be emphasised in the web site. Information is displayed in order to convey the idea of diversity: ‘A list of the institutions from all over Canada is gathered by province and in a alphabetical order. There is no division by type of museum, or importance. All the institutions are treated equally: a list is drawn up as far as the name of the museum, the province where the museum is located, and its URL (site address). In the case of Gallery 9, the virtual space is conceived as a sort of curated archive (in the case of Gallery 9), while the virtual space is considered as a space where the most relevant information is classified.

The second category of virtual museums presents a similar approach to the transmission of information: a more or less complex visual structure, By means of these techniques, the web site as a whole and video and hyperlinked names gives its developers the possibility of building an environment where visual architecture, different strategies of information display and metaphoric and video and hyperlinked names gives its developers the possibility of building an
A number of online museums adopted visual elements that evoke their real buildings or create the perception that the viewer is entering a real place. Several museums and institutions have reproduced part of their physical buildings' appearance as a background image for their website. One would assume that this use is adopted only by the first category of virtual museums and when the museum represented is well recognizable. However, even if in the second category of virtual museums the building is absent, a similar tendency can be observed: their interfaces either reproduce imaginary or potential buildings, or strive to evoke in the viewer the sensation of being in a real space. In the new website of the National Gallery of Canada, powerful images of the interiors of the building are displayed in the frames located around the content. The image of the National Gallery, with its imposing architecture, is used both as a landmark to remind its public and as an aesthetic element to enrich the website. The MUVA, which has no building, has invented its own imaginary space: its architecture has been designed online by several architects who shaped it according to an hypothetical idea of how a real museum could look, and they have ideally located the building in the very core of Uruguay's capital city, so that the viewer can understand the importance and significance of the museum. The use of photographic samples of the building to identify the museum or the display of facades and doors to indicate the entrance are defined by Claire Simard as "Theatrality" (thértalit) conceived to involve the viewer and convey an atmosphere for the site. They seem to be dictated on the one hand, by the necessity to delimit the web space in the same way as a real place, and, on the other hand, by the need to confirm the symbolism and the value of the traditional museum building. Although operating in the virtual space, the museum needs to communicate with the viewer and the public in the same way as a real institution. The MUVA presents a stylized entrance, where two minimally designed arched doors welcome its audience. Though the idea of a door is only suggested, the arch, thanks to its historical triumphal and ceremonial connotation, creates the impression of a real entrance. The use of entrances, doors and gates to communicate with the viewer is a characteristic feature of Claire Simard's "Theatrality." The exception that the viewer is entering a real place.
The majority of virtual museums contain a section from their entire collection, ordered and classified to give the audience an orientation through the works offered by the institution.

The navigation of virtual museums contrasts with the traditional museum.

To create a certain fiction, a well-structured iconography with the traditional museum's characteristics, user-friendly approach and its expediency is necessary. However, explaining these characteristics means considering the actor's and audience's distance from the institution's identity and its functional development as a political tool.

In their virtual museums, the institution seems to appreciate and truthfully use Internet

Theorists who, from their point of view, defend the concept of the virtual museum, these characteristics seem to be the main arguments to distinguish them from other virtual spaces. However, some characteristics of the real space and the virtual space are basically comparable.

Mitchell's discourse assimilates the real space and the virtual space as being essentially and functionally similar. The museum, the goals and methods of the real museum and the virtual museum are seen as being similar. He also sees in computer generated graphics and the virtual space represented by the Internet the possibility to faithfully render, by means of metaphors, what we can observe in the physical space. According to him, using the tools proper to the medium, museums shape the virtual space to achieve similar goals, so that the visual interface is able to recognize, in the virtual space, the real space and vice versa.

4. The Relation Internet/Museum: is there Conflict?

In 'City of Bits' William J. Mitchell affirms: "If before the electronic revolution Architecture played an indispensable representational role by providing occupations, organisations, and social groups with public faces, now computer-generated graphic displays are replacing built facades and the public faces of institutions." The exhibition is an indispensable representational role by providing organisations, organisations, and social groups with public faces. But before the electronic revolution Architecture played a more significant representational role by providing occupations, organisations, and social groups with public faces.
Showing the painting or the artwork in a photographic format accompanied by a short description, the size and the author’s name is a commonly followed strategy. While, in the main page, the museum tends to recreate its original atmosphere by means of graphical and visual devices, in the page dedicated to its collections the environment disappears. It is as if a sort of neutral space were established, where any kind of work could be displayed, without having to worry about the strategies that would be used in a real museum environment (the lighting aspects and so on).

The virtual museum tends to work between the acceptance and the use of the museum and the use of the whole space, where the virtual nature of the whole is clearly visible. The virtual museum is a mixture of data and images, where the elements are not linked to each other, but are presented as separate items. The virtual museum is a place where the viewer can move freely, without any restriction.

Vannevar Bush asserted, as early as 1945, that linearity, as we usually conceive it in our systems, is artificially constructed: “The human mind doesn’t work that way. In its grasp, the mind snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain.” His idea of non-linearity is realised on the Internet, where a myriad of hyperlinks takes the viewer to as many different places. The virtual museum is a place where the viewer can move freely, without any restriction.

The collection space becomes the central element of the museum, and the visitor can move freely between different sections. The virtual museum is a place where the viewer can move freely, without any restriction.

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create an overall order and could lead the viewer to a better understanding of the entire content, avoiding confusion and disorientation. Additionally it is a way to insert a curatorial view in the virtual museum in the same way as it is shown in the galleries of the real museum. However these choices damage the breadth of navigability and limit the viewer’s choices, contributing to constrain her freedom. On the contrary, if a great number of links between objects and topics were added, the desired curatorial view would probably be negatively affected or rendered unintelligible by the viewer.

The refusal to use links connecting to other sites or to external museums seems to be related to the necessity on the part of the virtual museum to create its own distinct place, separated from the rest of the other sites, on the web in the same way as in the reality. The institution embraces the ephemerality of the Internet because of its ductility and the ease of being reshaped and modified at any time. However, it usually references a physical site or the equivalent thereof, to prevent the traditional image of the museum with its monumental building, and its austere presence from being damaged by the ephemerality and volatility of the Web. Stephen Borysewicz argues that a “World Wide Web site and a cd-rom might seem less fulfilling than a museum visit.Ó Among the reasons he cites are the environment, the imposing facade, the atrium of the museum, all elements suggesting us that “we are about to have a really important experience.Ó Any building then is an independent reality, closed between the walls, and not graspable from outside. The Internet with its multiple links and its open ended nature can preclude the existence of an entity separated from the others. In order to preserve their singularity and their independency, and to recreate a similar atmosphere the viewer could find also in the real museum, the virtual museums are planned in a way so that the viewer is allowed to enter them exclusively from their main entrance but she is not allowed to exit them unless she types a different domain name on the browser address string. In some cases, like in the AGO new virtual space, the museum has found a way to create a delimited and controlling space inside the virtual space through the use of gates and icons, as observed above, seen to be used to re-establish the traditional idea of controlling a space and creating a new order.

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The colloquial and friendly, which can be felt as an effort from the part of the institution to include and establish a dialogue with the viewer (a reconciliation public/museum); additionally the viewer is often addressed with several friendly messages such as “No more visiting hours. At any time of the day or night, one can read on the National Gallery home page. However, the colloquial and friendly, which can be felt as an effort from the part of the institution to include...
notice a special care to use the Internet in a way that doesn't disrupt the authority and the prominence of its real site. The need to establish linear patterns and the correspondence of its visual interface with the appearance and the structure of its real site could be in part justified by its derivation and its dependency from the physical site: in fact, as observed before, the first category of virtual museums constitute an addition or an integration of the original institution.

However, this isn't always the case. The museums' recognition of the web as a virtual museum would have to be justified on real-world experiences. If the difference is real, then the recognition of the web as a virtual museum would be very difficult. The museum would have to solve the issue of the web site as a virtual museum, even in the other cases. These differences have underlined some significant changes, its core still tell us the visions that although the contents may have undergone some significant changes, its core still

create a ceremonial resemblance (either real or virtual) to the appearance and the structure of its real site. These changes, by replicating these elements in some way, have created a symbol of symbolicness, whose meaning is visual as much as symbolic. This resemblance isn't just a single space, it is the presentation of itself to other similar museums, it is the construction of the virtual museum as a temple-like site in the virtual space like in the real space, the autonomous entity hidden behind its thick walls in the virtual space. The virtual museum resembles a temple. When the virtual museum resembles a temple...

The ceremonial aspect of the museum resembles a temple. When the virtual museum resembles a temple...

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by a sort of schizophrenic tendency between being a temple or becoming a forum: “The idea of bringing the forum, a place for confrontation and experimentation, inside the temple is to inhibit and in effect to castrate the performance in the forum.”

He ascribed the unsuccessful attempt to insert the forum component into the museum to the fact that any possible introduction of controversial, radical or experimental activities was welcomed with a paternalistic attitude, sign of a lack of acceptance and indecision on the part of the institution to start any effective transformation. In the case of the Internet a recurrent and not yet overcome scepticism on the part of many museum curators and operators work together to impede the development of a virtual museum, which may present the institution with an appearance too dissimilar from the way the physical museum is traditionally conceived and consequently may be able to modify the actual configuration of the institution. The scenario described by Cameron is very similar to the situation presented by the virtual museum. In both cases the concept of the museum as a temple and its traditional configuration constitute elements of incompatibility with any new approach the museum would undertake. With the traditional museum maintaining the old instances, the virtual museum is prevented from representing an image which would differ from and even contradict the physical counterpart. An operation of radical transformation enacted on line by the virtual museum would invalidate its privilege of being considered a museum: as Stephen E. Weil argues, “the metaphors we elect to use in speaking about our museums can directly influence what our visitors expect. Call a museum a treasure house, and their expectation may be of carefully chosen objects of great rarity and value.”

Although old rules constrain the virtual museum and force it to maintain a fairly conventional facade, its appearance is forced to change fairly quickly to conform with the development of new technologies, to satisfy an audience who increasingly approaches its on line space, or to try and experiment new modes of display and exhibition techniques.

In order to fully exploit the Internet, the museum should renounce to most of its basic principles (authority, ceremonial aspects, its resemblance to a temple, its isolation from the rest of the world) in order to fully exploit the Internet, the museum should renounce to most of its basic principles and experiment with new modes of display and exhibition techniques. To satisfy an audience who increasingly approaches its on line space, or to try and experiment new modes of display and exhibition techniques.

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