

A VISIBLE BACKSTAGE

A VISIBLE BACKSTAGE ALLOWS THE PUBLIC TO VIEW THE WORKINGS AND THE MAKINGS OF THE MUSEUM -- THE EXHIBITS, THE CONSERVATION WORK, STORAGE, THE STAFF OFFICES AND ANYTHING THAT SHOWS HOW THE MUSEUM TICKS.

THE ISSUES:

Traditionally, museums have been introspective. Most of the support services and basic museum processes such as conservation and display design were performed behind closed doors.

Museums need to communicate a more dynamic image. The museums of today are responsive to the public and contain a host of fascinating activities. Much of this vitality radiates from those hidden work and process chambers, and can be shared with the public.

There is also a need to communicate to the public some basic information about the processes of the museum. Display design and development can be as interesting, educational and as important as the final product; so why not let the process become a display in its own right?

Finally, there is a need to demystify technology, science, and art, to make it look accessible and not just the domain of the specialist. For example, The Exploratorium in San Francisco has a policy to construct displays in the public view. The use of simple materials and the level of finish give the impression that you and I could do it, if we wanted to.

Exposure of the "backstage" functions to the public can create several positive byproducts. The close encounter can:

- * Increase the public's accessibility to the staff;
- * Increase the utility of materials otherwise lying unused in storage;
- * Create or enhance an informal and friendly image.

While these relationships promote an image of an accessible museum, experience has proven that the ultimate benefits include also an increase in the amount of positive publicity, the number of volunteer workers, and the income from fund raising (Berrin, 1981).

However, in designing a visible backstage, one must consider the related issues of security and safety and staff fatigue, generated by overexposure of the staff to the public.

QUALITIES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF A VISIBLE BACKSTAGE:

The backstage area includes those museum-parts not traditionally in the public domain. In children's museums, this quality should not be confused with displays which employ the concept of "visible backstage" e.g. "City Slice" at Boston's Children's Museum, where a section through a Victorian house exposes the guts of the structure to the viewer.

The type of access to and the image of each part of a visible backstage can be free or controlled, informal or formal, etc., depending upon the context and the larger objectives of the museum.

Part of the magic of being allowed behind the scenes is the contrast to the normal ambience of the museum setting. Peeking through, partially visible views, very serious, outrageous, or even ordinary settings are all valid experiences.

APPROACHES FOR DESIGN:

1. TRANSPARENCY:

Separating the backstage activity from the public by a glass wall provides a fishbowl or peephole arrangement that is easy and relatively inexpensive to arrange. This approach allows for complete thermal and acoustical control.

At the Ontario Science Center in Toronto, the boiler room and heating plant are glass enclosed, mechanized, and broadly displayed as part of the general exhibition.

2. GOING ON FRONT STAGE:

Treating a service function as a display in its own right is a bold strategy that brings the backstage into full view. It has the added benefit of increasing the actual square footage that is public space without increasing the total size of the museum.

The Exploratorium in San Francisco places the exhibit workshops near the front door, in the midst of it all; thus a service function becomes a full partner in the display area.

The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco placed a substantial conservation project in two prominent galleries of the De Young Building. The conservators work on the fourteen foot long murals behind large plexiglass windows. This project lasted many months, and was an integral part of the floor's exhibit.

3. CONTROLLED ACCESS INTO "FORBIDDEN ZONES"

Spaces dedicated to a singular service function such as storage can be utilized by the public by changing the accessibility, providing light, and keeping sensible order in the placement and organization of objects.

The Louvre in Paris has opened a storage floor for the study and public viewing of paintings which otherwise would be stored away in a remote basement.

What do you do with all that stuff? The catalogued discovery boxes in children's museums are a miniature version that circumscribes the need for opening up an area of the museum; however, viewing large scale storage can be experiential and informative, giving visitors a clue to the many roles of the museum and its building.

4. SERVICE CONNECTED TO EXHIBITS

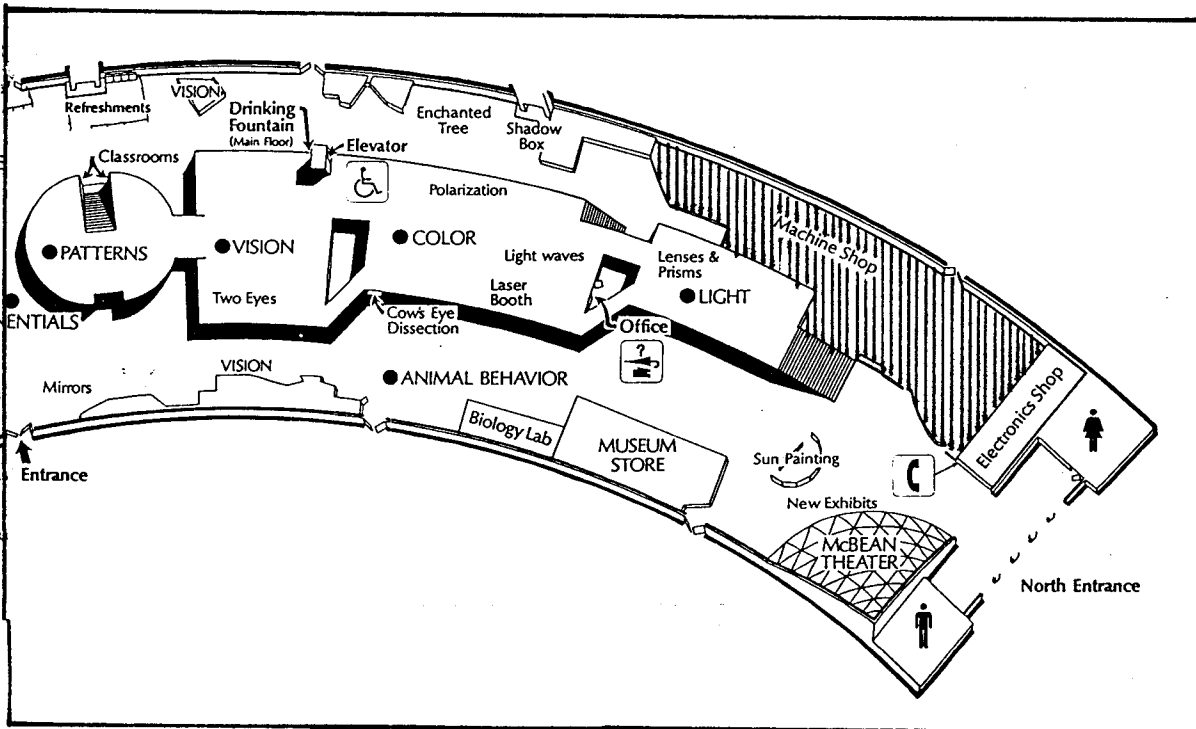
If a curator's office and work space is near the exhibit area, the possibility of interaction with visitors is increased and, at least, exposure to the public view is greater.

Boston's Children's Museum has several offices distributed throughout the building, rather than conventionally centralized in an "administration" zone. This arrangement allows the public a partial view into the office, and lets people ask questions and consult the curators right where they are needed.

EXAMPLES:

The Exploratorium San Francisco
 Original Structure:
 Bernard Maybeck 1915

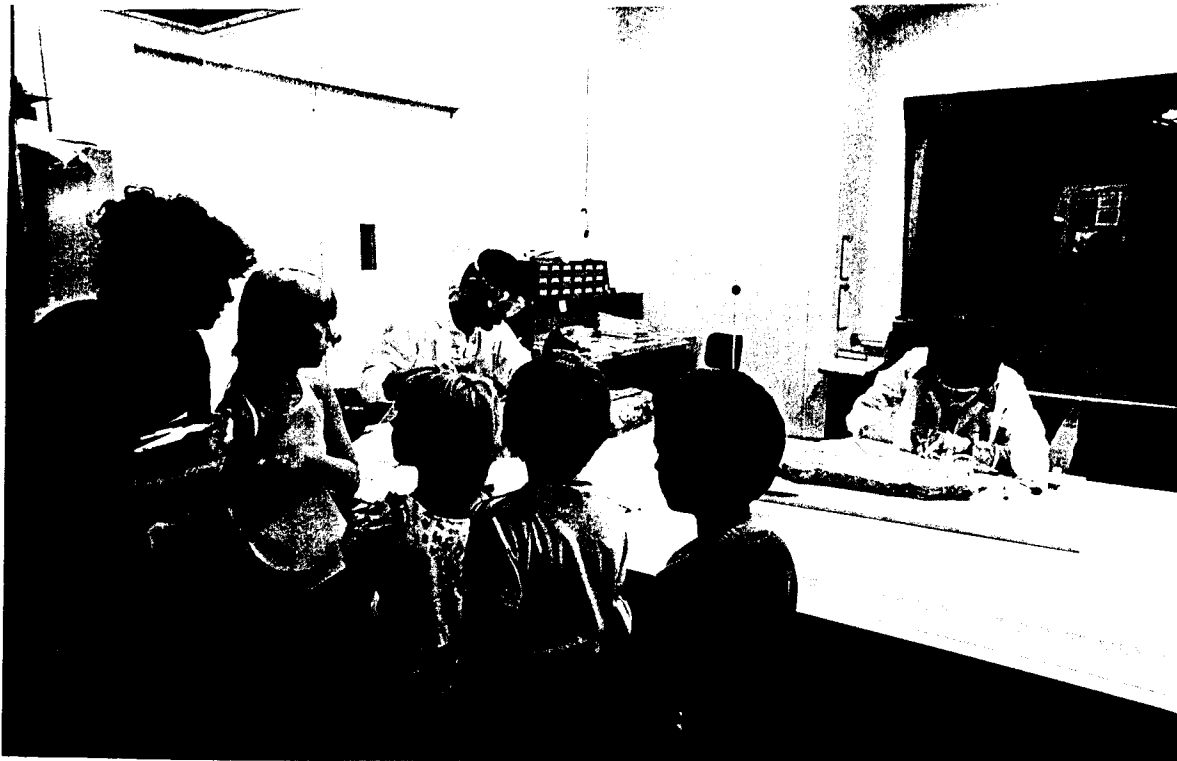
Located at the center, next to the entry, the exhibit workshop is an island made up of machines and materials and intense activity. Its presence sets a mood that affects the overall ambience of the museum.



The Louvre Paris

What is typically a "no man's land" was transformed into an activity zone. The naturally lit storage rooms on the top floor are used to display study collections of paintings that would otherwise collect dust in the lonely basement.



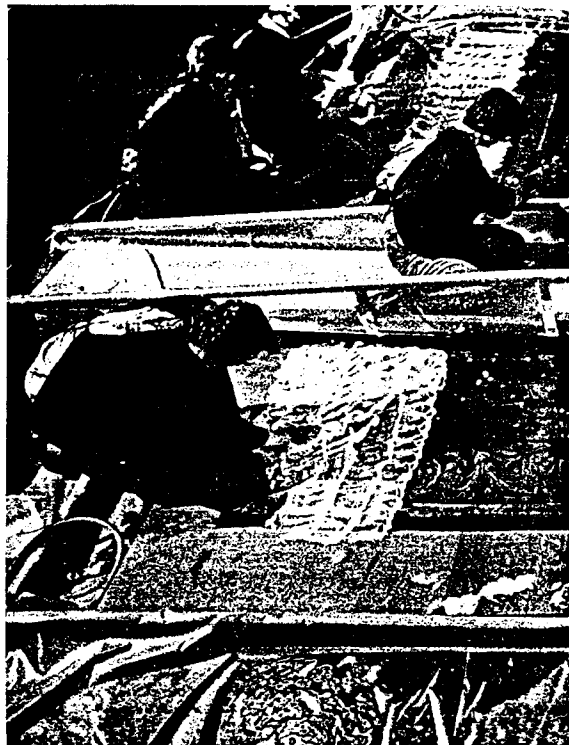


Fine Arts Museum San Francisco

The public can watch the conservators in action in the lab through a glass wall. Explanations and video tapes provide supporting information about the process.

Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Conservators are down on their knees, working on a huge tapestry in a main gallery. Their work is open to close scrutiny by the museum visitors.



RELATED PRINCIPLES:

- * FOCAL POINT
- * DISTRIBUTION OF SERVICES