

The Role of Exhibitions in the Future of Transport Museums

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Museums are about communication. They collect, preserve, interpret and study objects and collections for this purpose and there is no more effective way to communicate than through exhibitions. Exhibitions and the communication space they constitute can be an invaluable tool when it comes to changing the way museums operate and communicate with their public. This article investigates the role of exhibitions in shaping the future of transport museums by examining the case of the Oporto Tramway Museum in Portugal. We argue that communicating through the medium of exhibitions can prove fundamental in shaping a new role for transport museums and show how the dynamics of the medium can induce changes in the way transport museums perceive and organize themselves.

Introduction

Throughout the West, exhibitions have become one of the most important media by which museums communicate and assert themselves as educational institutions. 'Transport museums,' meaning museums dedicated to the history of transportation and travel, are no exception. However, although development of the exhibition as a privileged mode of communicating with the public has been widely discussed and is the focus of much debate and controversy in the museum community, questions pertaining to the importance and role of exhibitions have yet to be asked by the world of transport museums. This omission is partly explained by the very nature of the transport museum. Indeed, as Jack Simmons has so eloquently explained, transport museums are still, 'a contradiction in terms,' placed halfway between the museum culture and practices of interpretation, and the heritage culture of spectacle and

practices of recreation. The idea that 'transport moves or it is not transport' is still ingrained into the culture of transport museums and although widely recognized, the tension between the museum's role as an educational site and its potential as a heritage transport attraction more-or-less dedicated to simulating historical 'experiences' and 'recreating' the past has yet to be solved. The solution is not easy but must be

addressed if the future potential of the transport museum is to be fully accomplished. As an example, we will explain the case of the Oporto Tramway Museum.

Transport museums can (and should) play a unique role in educating the public towards a better and wider understanding of the socio-economic history of transportation by developing their display and exhibition techniques. In this



Tramcar No. 22 leaving Oporto Tramway Museum, 1995

(Oporto Tramway Museum)

process of exploring new themes for displays and exhibitions, transport museums would open themselves up to other fields of enquiry, ultimately contributing to a wider understanding of their role as educational sites and diluting the tension arising from their enormous potential as heritage attractions deeply committed to operating transport vehicles and recreating the past.

Oporto Tramway Museum— from Heritage Spectacle to Exhibition Communication

Although an enormous accomplishment, the Oporto Tramway Museum has a relatively short history; in less than a decade, it has transformed itself from a transport heritage attraction dedicated almost exclusively to preserving, safeguarding and demonstrating a unique collection of tramcars into a lively and dynamic museum deeply committed to educating its public about the history of

Oporto in general and the history of its tramcars in particular.

The Oporto Tramway Museum was founded in 1992 as the result of the commitment of a group of tramcar enthusiasts whose main aim was to preserve and safeguard a valuable collection of unique vehicles belonging to the Oporto Public Transport Service (STCP), a transport operator with a long history of more than 100 years that is connected to the birth and development of the city's public transport system.

As it happens with many transport museums, the Oporto Tramway Museum was dedicated almost exclusively to preserving, safeguarding and operating a unique collection of tramcars, wagons and other related rolling stock whose history could be traced back to 1872. The museum's governing body was formed principally by tramcar and operations specialists from STCP, and the museum was imbued with STCP's mission of managing and operating

Oporto's public transport.

Like in most European cities, Oporto also saw the tramcar decline as public transport from the 1960s, but the trams never disappeared completely from the city and a reduced number of lines remained an integral part of the transport system.

The rolling stock on these lines dated mainly from the 1920s and 1930s, making for the museum to be primarily concerned with the preservation and operation principles of a heritage transport attraction.

Although the heritage role of Oporto Tramway Museum and the strong emphasis on heritage spectacles helped increase empathy between the city, its citizens and the trams, the museum lacked the structural and organizational tools needed to ensure its survival. The museum's *raison d'être* became particularly vulnerable as STCP began moving forward with new services using new tramcar designs, creating a conflict between the museum's mission and the company's aims.

Clearly, in order to survive, the museum had to change and separate itself from STCP's business mission in such a way that it would not jeopardize its future as a transport museum structure.

Managing Change— Development of Travellers and Passengers Exhibition

The first step towards creating a museum organization prepared for the future occurred in 1998 with the inception of the museum's educational services, which contributed decisively to attracting a different public and to initiating new methods of communicating with visitors. The activities of the museum's Educational Department coupled with the fact that the collection has a potentially deep relationship to the school curriculum generated a greatly increased number of school visits to the



General view of Travellers and Passengers exhibition in 2001 with various tramcars
(Salóme Jorge, Oporto Tramway Museum)

museum. Moreover, many children visiting the museum on a school trip would then bring along their parents at weekends, creating a different public with very different expectations. With this refocused mission, it became clear that the museum would have to change if a sustainable structure was to be developed. With more visitors and a mission more related to education, the necessity to renew the permanent exhibition and to rethink the communication models became extremely acute and a major renovation project was started.

Consultants from different backgrounds were brought in to discuss the layout of new exhibits and display techniques. In the process of paying more attention to new elements in the collection, it became clear that a successful exhibition would require more space for human and social elements. This in turn would give visitors a more direct relationship with the collections and wider themes pertaining to the history of transport and travel.

As ideas began to take shape, a great deal of thought went into the exhibition name and theme. Although the focus was on the chronological history of Oporto's tram system, the tramcar was not to be emphasized. Instead, the exhibition was to accommodate insight into the lives, stories and memories of the tram passengers, who were the basis of the development of Oporto's public transport. In addition to exploring the technical, aesthetic and historical facts of tramcars, a great deal attention was given to the



Another view of Travellers and Passengers exhibition in 2001

(Oporto Tramway Museum)

now anonymous men and women who contributed to Oporto's public transport. Social history was drawn into the process and the importance and status of many vehicles in the collection were questioned in a more detailed and scientific context. Photographs, documents and other objects relating to the history of Oporto and its tramcars were also incorporated to develop new exhibition techniques.

The result is an exhibition that draws as much on social history as on transport history and that has proved fundamental to both how the museum communicates with its public and with itself.

The Travellers and Passengers—from the Omnibus to the Tramcar exhibition finally opened to the public on 18 May 2001.

The sometimes long and painstaking process has become a *leitmotiv* for almost all the museum's other educational and communication programmes, providing visitors with a better understanding of the history and role of transport in society, while providing the museum with a more sustainable structure that is undoubtedly more prepared to deal with what the future might bring. ■

This article was first presented at the international conference 'Slow Train Coming: Heritage Railways in the 21st Century,' held in York in September 2001.

Further Reading

J. Simmons, *Transport Museums*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1970.



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