Steven Baum

Accent London, Fall 2015, London Museums

Architecture & User Experience in The National Portrait Gallery

The National Portrait Gallery is Britain's monument to its most prominent citizens, and it traces a line from the monarchies of the 16th century to the famous faces of 2015. Situated behind its more famous sibling, the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery mimics its prominent counterpart in directing attendees through a chronological series of art pieces that are intended to be representative of their eras of creation.

The primary difference, however, lies not in each building's paintings but rather their range of dates. The National Gallery has a hard and fast rule for where to house a painting according to its date of creation: anything before the Italian Renaissance is a historical artifact and suited for the British Museum, and anything after 1899 need be shipped to Tate Modern across the Thames. The National Portrait Gallery, conversely, deems that "British" starts with the portraiture explosion of the 16th century and continues into the recentness of figures like Kate Middleton.

Because it is tasked with representing so many individuals from such radically different periods of time, the National Portrait Gallery must construct a space that appropriately allows its visitors to engage with the various portraits in ways that are sensible to the times in which they existed. Two essays – Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube: Notes on Gallery Space* and Nicholas Serota's *Experience or Interpretation* – deal in precisely this; they examine the effects generated by particular designs of museum spaces, and how this can shape a user's experience of a particular museum venue. Both papers also detail the self-aware nature of contemporary museum spaces; to quote Brian O'Doherty, "We have now reached a point where we see not the art but the space first." (O'Doherty, 1).

Museumgoers and curators alike are now hyperaware of how their surroundings play into the interpretation of the objects on display, and consequently the architecture now receives as much attention as its actual contents.

Inside the White Cube has a primary focus on the presentation of modern art in the eponymous "White Cube" space, which is the canonical aesthetic of a modern art gallery. Sterile, blank walls and gratuitous lighting in architecturally simple spaces are what define the white cube. Like most other components of modern art, it was conceived largely as a reaction against the art and museum norms that predated it, and this type of gallery space embodied a very conscious rejection of the ornate and intricate displays seen at the likes of the National Gallery. It is important to remember that although this aesthetic has since solidified itself as the de facto way of presenting modern art ,it was considered quite revolutionary at the time to opt for such a minimalistic and stripped-down approach.

The intent of this space is to divert all attention onto the art itself and away from anything that is, conversely, not said art. To use O'Doherty's explicit statement, "The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is 'art'." (O'Doherty, 1). The art is then allowed to "breathe" as O'Doherty explains, as it need not contend with its surrounding environment but can rather exist as an independent entity. The essay writes about things like perceptual fields, and the value of the White Cube comes from the fact that viewing a particular work of art is an isolated experience, i.e. the museumgoer is incapable of seeing anything other than one work at a time due to particular uses of spacing.

Nicholas Serota's *Experience or Interpretation* discusses a wide variety of topics, one of which being how the focus on dedicating spaces to singular, prolific artists can be detrimental to the overall experience and learning of someone engaging in said museum. With New York's Museum of Modern Art as the primary example in this essay, the author details how the glamour and fame of particular artists

can yield them entire rooms dedicated to their work in particular museums. This is not necessarily beneficial, Serota claims, as this singular experience of only on artist leaves visitors without any context or juxtaposition against other works that would be pertinent to contemplation or discussion (Serota, 10).

Furthermore, Serota chronicles the progression of the museum experience from its days in the nineteenth century into today, and this 150 year history deals largely in the shift in curatorial attitudes towards display. In the early days of museums like the National Gallery, paintings were amassed and stacked end-to-end on walls based on their date and location of creation; "The museum was becoming a history book rather than a cabinet of treasures," (Serota, 7). While this statement still holds validity in 2015, a shift has taken place to encourage more thought-provoking intake of art, rather than the simple experience of viewing masses of paintings splayed across a wall. "As a visitor, one is conscious that grouping in this way places a curatorial *interpretation* on the works, establishing relationships that could not have existed in the minds of the makers of these objects," (Serota, 8).

Where does the National Portrait Gallery fit into this discussion of the design of space and curation of content, then? This museum is particularly interesting because it is an architectural chimaera of sorts, and the experience of traversing the museum reflects that dichotomy. Because the contents of the museum span from the beginnings of portraiture to contemporary submissions the museum must effectively display the past and present, and doing so involves different curatorial approaches for each. Furthermore, the National Portrait Gallery is a forced experience, which is to say that there is a heavily-imposed method of moving through and viewing the centuries' worth of portraits. Consider the building's lobby, shown below:

(Lobby of the National Portrait Gallery, courtesy of equivocality.com)

There are three ways of continuing into the rest of the museum from this point, the most prominent and expected of which is the escalator on the left-hand side. This overt suggestion to take the escalator to the top of the museum coincides with the physical orientation of the timeline that traces its way from the Henry VIII paintings on the 3rd floor down to the Elizabeth II portrait on the ground level. In this way the curatorial presence is evident to provide a directed experience as patrons travel through time from start to finish.

The divide in user experience between the two halves of the National Portrait Gallery is evident through the aesthetic elements present in the top and bottom galleries. Consider the arrangement of art, use of lighting, and use of color in the third floor gallery – seen below - which deals largely with the Tudor family and associated monarchial figures:

(The third floor of the National Portrait Gallery, courtesy of londonandpartners.com)

The setup is very reminiscent of the early days of the National Gallery as described by Serota, the cluttered "history book" of images. Each portrait has a relatively small margin on all sides and thus sits in very close proximity to the rest of the works in the hallway. The lighting is dimmed and invokes a hushed tone, while the deep purple wall coloring cements the theme of royalty and aristocracy that defined Britain in the 16th and 17th centuries.

In some instances, the subject of the portrait is of less importance than the artist responsible for its creation. Although the primary focus of the National Portrait Gallery is a place for housing "historically important and famous British people", some of the people featured in this room are unnamed and obscure figures of Tudor England, and the focus is instead on the technical skill in the painting, or the historical inferences one can draw from it, or the prominence of its painter. This signals a shift away from the patrons engaging in an experience with art, but rather one with art history.

The organization of all works within the National Portrait Gallery that predate 1950 follow design patterns seen in the Tudor room; ornate décor, soft lighting and closely-stacked pictures create an elaborately-staged scene that provides all of the context and interpretation for the viewers. The curator has near-total control in these spaces, and the museumgoer need not do as many mental gymnastics to draw out meaning or value from observing the portraits. The end result is the exact effect that Nicholas Serota hopes to avoid, as people "find themselves standing on the conveyor belt of history," (Serota, 55). There is no engagement with the art on display and the experience is ultimately a passive role of reading placards to glean semantic historical information, and little more.

(Victorian-era portrait hall in the National Portrait Gallery)

The transition is abrupt and noticeable as one continues to descend down to through the building and, consequently, through time until they reach the rooms of contemporary works, i.e. notable Britons that one would likely know without the assistance of a plaque. It is here that the space changes into something definitively modern, which is to say it is the canonical “White Cube” space that Brian O’Doherty expounds upon in his essay.

(Portrait series of Her Majesty the Queen, ground floor of the National Portrait Gallery)

Here the portraits sit as indisputable pieces of art, rather than relics of art history. They are allowed the neutrality of Brian O’Doherty’s “ideal gallery” which “subtracts from the artworks all cues that interfere the fact that it is ‘art’,” (O’Doherty, 1). There is ample room between pieces such that there is a sense of independence to them, they need not compete for attention, and can instead gently juxtapose against each other from a respectable distance. The blankness of white walls and flush lighting serves to strip away all context and shine a distinct spotlight on the figures within the paintings; the artist and time period are secondary thoughts to the actual person residing within the frame. As

O'Doherty writes, "the wall itself has no intrinsic aesthetic; it is simply a necessity for an upright animal," (O'Doherty, 1).

The curatorial power of creating interpretation is far weaker here than in the upper levels of the National Portrait Gallery, and this lesser place of authority instead is used to prompt viewers into drawing their own inferences between portraits. The Camden exhibit is an apt example of this process; the museum dedicated two rooms to famous residents of the London borough, the likes of Zadie Smith, Benedict Cumberbatch and Bertrand Russell, and created a space with a common thread of a locational heritage. From there patrons could construct their own interpretations of each portrait subject, their relationship to the history of a well-known area and, consequently, their impact on British society as a whole. This strikes a compromise with O'Doherty's thesis on the White Space, as the portrait subjects are still individual, distantly-spaced entities and thus subject to "the authority of the frame," as he writes, but the overarching theme of the room serves to still bind them together in relevance (O'Doherty, 1).

Furthermore, because the contemporary subjects are more known (and generally more beloved) than historical figures, visitors are able to engage on a more intimate and emotional level with the portraits, and the White Cube space serves to heighten the relationship between viewer and painting. The isolated presentation of modern Britons directs all visual attention onto them, and consequently all mental attention is likewise directed onto the particular life and narrative of that individual. In the case of more emotionally-charged figures, like the striking depiction of the late Princess Diana shown below, the viewer is prompted to consider the art – and thereby the person – more pensively and thoughtfully, which provides the space for personal reflection and the generation of individual interpretation.

(Portrait of the late Lady Diana, Princess of Wales at the National Portrait Gallery)

In summation, the design and implementation of museum architecture and aesthetics are reflections of curators' power and the degree to which they wield that power in actively shaping users' experiences with museum contents. The National Portrait Gallery is a particularly interesting case study because it effectively demonstrates both ends of the spectrum, from "history book" to "White Cube" spaces. There are appropriate environments for each, and the National Portrait Gallery serves as an effective demonstration of when each has a purpose; there is likely to be more substantial interpretation of dearly-loved Britons or abstract compositions than there is from observing a portrait of an unnamed 17th century duchess.

Word Count: 2069

Bibliography

1. O'Doherty, Brian, 1976. 'Inside the White Cube: Notes on the Gallery Space'. Society of Control [Online]. http://www.societyofcontrol.com/whitecube/insidewc.htm. Accessed 9 November 12, 2015.
2. Serota, Nicholas. Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art. 2000. Thames and Hudson Ltd, New Edition. Accessed 9 November, 2015.