

# Skillbridge report

## **The opportunity to look over our colleagues' shoulders**

*A museum pedagogue on a working visit at the London Transport Museum, 3rd to 9th March 2012*

In 2009, The Dresden Transport Museum (Verkehrsmuseum) hosted a guest exhibition – “The art of the poster” – developed in partnership with the London Transport Museum. The two transport museums differ in their profiles, with the London Transport Museum focusing exclusively on the history-charged local public transport in London. The Dresden Verkehrsmuseum, on the other hand, covers five modes of transport. In addition to exhibits of local public transport, the museum collects, studies, shows and explains watercrafts, road and rail vehicles, as well as aircrafts. As the exhibitions are going to be profoundly redesigned in the years to come (with focus on humans – technology – environment – future), a visit to a museum that has already taken this “quantum leap” might be particularly interesting.

The regularly changing exhibition contents have helped to convey new and up-to-date information to visitors. Therefore, the exhibition philosophy, our becoming acquainted with the teaching programs for pupils and students, as well as new aspects of the comprehensive customer care were at the top of our work list.

## **Exhibitions**

Since 2007, the new design has proven to be an interesting and successful version of a modern exhibition housed in a historical building. The gutting added considerable transparency to the historical market hall, offering visitors various different views from the ground floor and the two galleries.

For me, the inclusion of current topics such as the recollection of experiences, sustainability and the future development of mobility all seemed valuable for the redesign of the Dresden Transport Museum in the future.

The long-standing British tradition of integrating figurines representing people in a certain situation into the exhibition was realised with much love for detail. Although it is certainly a matter of budget, this extra feature seems to be an effective way of conveying historical information. The following is an example of it:

Both the Local public transport exhibition at the Verkehrsmuseum and the London Transport Museum have a sedan chair on display; however, the latter shows it with two sedan bearers in their efforts to lift it up. Here, a guide does not have to say much.

What I also found very interesting was how self-evident it was for visitors to get on buses (also double deck coaches), railway coaches and tramcars. To protect the original fittings, the rear parts were closed off merely by a small perspex sign. In Dresden such a measure would be meaningless as visitors would simply overlook the discreet advice. Instead, big barriers, which always disturb the overall picture, are necessary for safety reasons.

## **How visible are museum pedagogues in exhibitions?**

At the first gallery level of the museum in London is an open counter visible to all visitors. It is not a coat check but an info desk designed for education purposes of a kind I had never seen before. When the counter is unoccupied, there is a sign.

Right next to it is a hands-on area for preschoolers. In a matching game, children can learn

about different vehicle parts, put on work clothes or start computer inquiries. Some of the computers can be tilted, allowing the right adjustment for different body sizes.

I was especially astonished at the constant noise level, resulting mainly from the audio stations, speaking figurines and hands-on stations. Yet, the children taking part in events were so concentrated that they remained completely undisturbed by the noise.

### **Guides**

With a lot of commitment, directly employed and external guides maintain conveying programs at museums, schools and leisure centres. Among the external guides are also amateur teachers who bring everything they need for their events. They themselves come dressed in fantasy or historical costumes and have caps, tickets etc. for the kids.

The guides I met had lively facial expressions, which alone fascinated the children.

### **Social programs: Learning for life**

- Traffic education

By way of the "Security and citizens' rights" project, the London Transport Museum has the task of preparing primary-school pupils for bus and underground travel. Besides explaining the transport system and purchase of tickets, the Tube's escalators, safe waiting at bus stops and other important things, teachers also encouraged correct and respectful behavior in children. Other topics included first aid boxes kept at Tube stations, theft prevention, fire and electrical accidents. The fact that traffic education topics were combined with tips for healthy eating was also interesting to me.

The didactics (circle training/10 stations of 10 minutes each, role play and films) was very appealing to the pupils in Islington, where committed instructors knew how to whip up enthusiasm in their pupils using play and humor.

The presentations at schools in Harrow and Brent gave me remarkable insights into schools with pupils with a migration background. Class sizes of 12 pupils are paradisaical conditions for Germany.

The overall classroom discipline and attentiveness was amazing.

- "Happy Museum"

In conjunction with communal groups that work with adults in need of help, the London Transport Museum and five other museums have developed a social pilot program. The aim of several volunteer and service-learning projects is to take away from homeless people the fear of entering cultural facilities. The museums themselves see their role as hubs and communication centres.

- "Route into Work"

Since 2010, free vocational preparation courses (without degree) for a later placement at Transport for London (TfL) have been offered to young people. So, 16- to 24-year-olds are trained in skills such as the ability to concentrate, punctuality, determination and teamwork. With the support of the project head, the students also create an application video, which, so far, has helped 16.9 % of the course participants to find an apprenticeship. In addition, a promo was put together of previous courses, which can be downloaded from the museum's website.

### **Service**

Over the next years, the Verkehrsmuseum in Dresden is going to make space for a spacious

coat check, café, shop and communication terminals.

It was obvious during my visit in London that the Transport Museum has been extremely service-oriented since its renovation in 2007.

Friendly staff works at the coat check. On the ground floor of the exhibition, pupils can use movable storage containers for their school bags and jackets and eat their breaktime snacks in the room next door. There are also small seats for mothers and baby-chairs for small children.

The counter for education purposes is certainly a result of this all-inclusive service orientation as well.

### **Visit of the depot**

The Verkehrsmuseum has a demonstration depot comprising railway and utility vehicles outside of the exhibition building. Therefore, I was very curious to see the depot in Acton. There is no need to say that it can easily be reached by taking the Tube. This depot has the great advantage that staff from the photo and poster archives as well as from the restoration group are present at all times. At the poster archive, I could admire again some of the artworks we had on display in a special exhibition in Dresden in 2009.

And, of course, the parade of approx. 100 historical local public transport vehicles such as double decker trams, buses and Underground trains was impressive. Typical of the British people, the whole range of memorabilia, uniforms, work gear, furnishings of wagons, cups of employees and many other things were collected. I should not forget to mention the impressive engineering models (for example, Underground engines, signals, staircases and elevators).

The second level is perfect for family events, offering opportunities for doing handicrafts and playing.

### **Conclusion**

Once more it became very clear to me that the effect of exhibitions depends not only on their expert information and special contents but also on the passion for detail. This relates, among others, to interior fittings of vehicles, the lively decoration and well-chosen clothes, witty texts, and also the way reports of contemporary witnesses are written.

A new approach for me was that the role of museums – a memory and mirror of society – could also include social tasks as shown by the success of the projects in London.

The London Transport Museum is interconnected with other museums, schools and social facilities through project heads/Liaison Officers. The wide range of projects requires intensive cooperation.

I surely spent an inspiring week with a lot of new ideas and suggestions for our own work back in Dresden.

I became acquainted with a well-organized and very lively team.

Thus I would like to thank very much Director Sam Mullins as well as Chris Nix, Director of museum pedagogy for having composed such a wide-ranging consulting program for me.

This was the perfect way to look over our colleagues' shoulders in London.

/ Renate Oertel