

The House of European History: Shaping contradiction¹

Miguel Fernández Belmonte

ARISTOTLE UNIVERSITY OF THESSALONIKI

mfbelmonte.uth.gr

Abstract

The House of European History, inaugurated in Brussels in 2017, has many challenges to face. On the one hand its mission is to individuate and evidence the common transnational elements that have shaped European history. On the other, it has to serve the compromise to be rigorous and reflect the complex, contradictory and full of tensions European history, and memory, which is also defined by the coexistence of its different national identities. The present article analyzes these aspects from a semiotic perspective, considering the specific museological and museographical characteristics of the permanent exhibition of the House of European History, as displayed in 2019.

Keywords

European History

museum semiotics

permanent exhibition

Brussels

Introduction

The increasing importance of communication, education, inclusivity, and plurality in contemporary museums is still redefining their very nature, as well as the characteristics of their permanent and temporary exhibitions. The museum is not a static and enclosed institution where objectivity is achieved. The act of communication is essential to its definition (ICOM 2007) and to its social and political implications (Lord and Lord, 2009). The museum is a place where mediation and interpretation are constantly carried out at all levels (Desvallées and Mairesse, 2010) and, therefore, the semiotic processes are fundamental to its function as a communication media (Hernández Hernández, 1998).

Considering the specific topic of museum exhibitions, the museographical aspects of an exhibition are inextricably intertwined with its museological planning. Every element of an exhibition design delivers specific messages and concepts to the receivers, more or less open to dialogue and interpretation, and at the same time these elements contribute to the transmission of the narrative the museum aims to communicate. In the exhibition space, museum objects bear a sign-function, manifest discourses and construct messages (Parreiras Horta, 1992).

In view of these elements, when considering the case of the House of European History, crucial questions arise: does its permanent exhibition articulate a specific discourse, and does it communicate it in a satisfactory manner, or does it lead to different readings and interpretations? Does it encourage visitors to construct their own meanings?

The House of European History

The House of European History is an initiative of the European Parliament. In February 2007 the European Parliament proposed its creation, and the official decision was taken in December 2008. The House was finally inaugurated on May 6, 2017. The permanent exhibition is intended to provide visitors with an overview of European History in the light of the main processes and phenomena that have divided and united Europeans over time. It aims to stimulate learning about transnational perspectives across Europe. Therefore, its primary task is to enhance understanding of European history across its complexity, while encouraging the exchange of ideas or even challenging common assumptions.

The contents of the permanent exhibition are intended to change periodically. Educational programs and temporary exhibitions focus on specific topics related to the permanent exhibition, and enrich the overall experience of the visitors:

The House presents Europe's history in a way that raises awareness about the multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations. It preserves shared and dividing memories. It exhibits and collects the history of European integration and

its foundations. A project of the European Parliament and part of its visitor offer, the House of European History is academically independent. (House of European History, 2019)

Through its exhibitions, the House of European History shows,

[...] the common values of European unification – human dignity, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, peace and the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity – as representing the progress of peaceful coexistence, particularly since the end of the Second World War and the overcoming of divisions within our continent. Furthermore, the House aims to promote greater involvement from citizens in political decision-making in a united Europe. (Hans-Gert Pöttering, 2018)

The conceptual basis for the House of European History was designed by a committee of experts consisting of recognized scholars of European prestige and was adopted on 15 December 2008 by the Bureau of the European Parliament.² It was decided that the permanent exhibition would focus on the period from the First World War to the present, and that earlier periods would be presented as snapshots highlighting the roots and essential features of European history. It was also decided to use the term ‘European cultural memory’ instead of ‘European identity’. The main focus of the permanent exhibition is to create links to current challenges in Europe, while temporary and itinerant exhibitions will supplement its contents.

The House of European History is located in the Eastman building in Leopold Park, Brussels, next to the European Parliament. The building originally functioned as a dental clinic designed by the Swiss architect Michel Polak in 1935, and its owner was George Eastman, a businessman, founder of Eastman Kodak, and a philanthropist (Eastman Museum, 2019). Regarding the use of the term ‘House’ instead of ‘Museum’, Director Constanze Itzel explained in an interview:

For us, a home has a positive feel, and we like to see the House of European History as a home for European memories in all its diversity. Instead of a monument to a fixed and well-defined historical event or period, it is an open concept that can be understood as the recipient of evolving content. (Itzel, 2017)

The permanent exhibition

The permanent exhibition is structured around the following six sections: ‘Shaping Europe’, ‘Europe: a global power (1789-1914)’, ‘Europe in ruins (1914-1945)’, ‘Rebuilding a divided continent (1945-1970s)’, ‘Shattering certainties (1970s-today)’, ‘Accolades and criticism’ (House of European History, 2018).

The permanent exhibition uses different levels of information: the texts from the 'vortex of history',³ an introductory text in each section, followed by texts for each exhibition object. These texts – except those of the vortex – are not displayed in the exhibition space but are available through a digital application.⁴

The exhibition is characterized by the variety of exhibits, the absence of texts in the physical space, the use of different media (videos, projections, touch screens), the use of large showcases and of low lighting (in most of the sections).

The objects come from many collections and museums from different countries. They were selected on the basis of their European origin, and represent phenomena that are European, have influenced large European areas, are important to this day, and are considered significant for the evolution of European culture. Many of these items are on loan, which makes the constant change of the contents of the permanent exhibition a necessity.

Permanent exhibition / *Itinerary*

Are the aims and vision of the House of European History, as mentioned above, effectively displayed and transmitted in its permanent exhibition? The overall exhibition design, its structure and display, expresses and communicates the meaning and the theoretical and research background from which it is formed. It states both the choices and the rejections made. The elements that we can observe at a design level reflect the choices made at the theoretical one.

Considering the permanent exhibition itinerary, given the complexity of European history and culture, it could be expected that the exhibition area would be full of intersections, alleys and mirrors, that it would be a place shaped on the concepts of the web or the labyrinth, where history illuminates various paths and dead ends. Instead, the exhibition display is linear, it does not give the visitors any choice. It starts from the second floor and extends to the sixth, which is characterized by more intense lighting. Alternative routes or free movement within the exhibition area are prevented by means of the predetermined linear route.

The experience of the visitors-users involves a time span that follows the chronological order of the exhibition. The narrative displayed in the exhibition presents a linear timeline with a beginning, middle, and end, an element which, in the specific context of the House of European History, could bring to mind a vague idea of evolution, of continuous improvement, rather than other alternatives.

This feature, which could be further discussed considering the evolution of anthropological and history museums in the Western World during the 19th and 20th centuries and their theoretical background,⁵ defines much of the experience of the visit, as it does in historical examples of museum exhibitions with linear itineraries, such as the Glyptothek in Munich or the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

The aims of presenting multiple perspectives and interpretations at a theoretical level are not visible in the chosen exhibition itinerary neither are they in any other design elements (lighting, display of exhibits, public interaction, etc.).

Permanent exhibitions / Contents

Although not translated into space design, are the different interpretations and approaches to the selected topics that present European phenomena reflected in the contents displayed in the permanent exhibition?

Due to the impossibility to analyze each section and sub-section thoroughly, specific sections will be briefly discussed. These may be regarded as presenting contradictions, considering these not as exceptions, but as indicative of the general features of the permanent exhibition.

First, in the sub-section entitled 'Notions of progress and superiority', which is part of the 'Europe: a global power (1789-1914)' section, there is reference to the theories of European cultural superiority in the context of colonialism, as well as a remark on the influence of African art on the work of cubists and expressionists artists. In this section, the radicality and new perspectives that Modernism brought to European thought are not mentioned. There is also no reference to any efforts to create an alternative to industrialized society, such as the Arts & Crafts movement, a European phenomenon of global significance, which is influential even today. In this part of the museum, visitors could have been given the opportunity to choose a different, alternative course, where they could see evidence of different perceptions of progress existing at the time.

Another example could be found in the sub-section entitled 'Cultural and moral reconstruction' (in 'Rebuilding a divided continent' section) where there is a reference to the importance of the Nuremberg trials, which are a milestone in international law. This aspect could be enriched by some reference to the lack of any measures against many Nazis and their associates in multiple parts of post-war Europe, this being something that the European society is still concerned about. The exhibition does not show that the Nuremberg trials were a milestone, but also an exception.

Historian Matti Klinge has emphasized that in this permanent exhibition there is a lack of understanding with respect to the ones that lost in World War II and their mentality, which is a necessary component if we do really wish not to repeat the same mistakes (Matti Klinge, 2018).

Historian Timothy Garthon posed the following questions in a lecture at the House of European History (Timothy Garthon, 2018): What about the Europeans of other countries? What happens with those countries that were formed by Europe and became colonies? These countries have their own ideas about Europe as well, but their voice is missing from the permanent exhibition.

Finally, the only sub-section in which there is clear reference to the vision of Europe

from non-Europeans – in addition to a reference in the ‘mapping Europe’ sub-section (part of the ‘Shaping Europe’ section) – is entitled ‘Europe as seen from abroad’ (‘Accolades and criticism’ section). Various objects from Africa and Asia, where Europeans were present, are displayed in this sub-section. These objects have been selected by European curators to represent the fact that there exists another point of view, another perception of Europe that has not been voiced. In this, the contradiction of choosing ourselves what will represent the other’s view of us is clear.⁶ There is an antithesis between ‘us’ and the ‘others’, one which in order to be challenged presupposes that “[...] contemporary ideas of Europe must be based on the recognition that European culture and society is heterogeneous and includes a variety of traditions. In other words, European heritage must be reconceptualized to include the relationship between Europe and its neighbours” (Roberta Guerrina, 2002).

The three specific cases mentioned above are illustrative of the fact that, at various points of the permanent exhibition, other interpretations and versions of historical events or cultural phenomena are not considered thoroughly or are simply missing.

Permanent exhibition / Contents & Design

One feature of the exhibition design is the use, in many sections, of large showcases where the objects are illuminated by a target light to distinguish them from the surrounding, in most cases, low-key lighting. In this way the perception created is that of valuable exhibits, of material and aesthetic value.

These features may not be so obvious as visitors are usually familiar with this way of presentation. However, in some cases the characteristics of the display add an extra level of interpretation that may be in stark contradiction with the intended meaning.

For example, in the ‘Democratisation in Western Europe’ sub-section, part of the ‘Shattering certainties (1970s-today)’ section, social movements are represented by banners with slogans on gender equality, environmental protection, and pacifist causes. All these banners are placed within a showcase, well enclosed and controlled in the context of a museum exhibition (the red colour chosen for the showcase does not change this perception). There is a contradiction, in this case, between the content that these objects express and represent, and the way in which they are being displayed. Perhaps these banners could have been displayed in an open place where the sound of a real demonstration could be heard. The way in which the exhibition design mediates and influences the interaction of the visitors with the exhibits is itself a way of interpretation.

Another example would be the tragedy of migrant victims dying in the Mediterranean Sea while trying to reach Europe. This is presented in the ‘Dealing with diversity’ sub-subsection, which is part of ‘Milestones of European integration III’ sub-section, and of the ‘Shattering certainties (1970s-today)’ section. This issue is highlighted through a work of art that an artist has produced after collecting personal items of immigrants

which were washed up in the Tunisian coast. The voice of the immigrants is nowhere, neither is there any crude image of the tragedy, but rather a safe distance is kept, mediated and controlled by art in the confined frame of a showcase. At this section of the exhibition, perhaps there could have been real images of these tragic events, and testimonies from survivors willing to share their experiences.

Therefore, as seen in the cases mentioned above, at certain points, the chosen exhibition display and design affect the visitor's ability to understand the multiple approaches to and interpretations of a phenomenon, a characteristic that clearly contradicts the objective of the House of European History to challenge common beliefs. In the 'Memory of the Shoa' sub-section, part of the 'Rebuilding a divided continent (1945-1970s)' section, this intention to challenge common assumptions is more evident than in the rest of the permanent exhibition, as the sub-section shows different ways in which different states have dealt with the Holocaust in post-war times, often avoiding the recognition of their own complicity.

Permanent exhibition / *Stalinism and National Socialism*

Within a general positive assessment of the effort made, historian Norman Davies has underlined two points as the most problematic ones, with respect to the House of European History: first, the lack of reference to national histories as an indication of a perception necessary to understand Twentieth-Century European history – such lack is still dominant in the education systems of the member-states of the European Union–, and, secondly, the presentation of Stalinism and National Socialism in the exhibition as almost equal phenomena (Norman Davies, 2018).

More specifically, the 'Russian Revolution', 'Stalinism and National Socialism', and the 'Spanish Civil War' are presented as sub-units of the broader sub-subsection entitled 'Rise and Fall of Democracy', part of the 'Totalitarianism versus democracy' sub-section, and the 'Europe in ruins (1914-1945)' section. The written content regarding 'Stalinism and National Socialism' refers to their ideological differences, while the mass terrorism they have caused, their oppression and cruelty are highlighted as similar. The leadership and representations of Hitler and Stalin are treated as another common element.

These aspects are showcased in the permanent exhibition as a symmetrical presentation of the same visual weight and museum design features. In this way, the exhibition design of this particular topic, namely 'Stalinism and National Socialism', highlights the similarities rather than the differences.

This feature may be considered in connection with the recent European Parliament resolution on 19 September 2019, on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe, which recalls that,

[...] the Nazi and communist regimes carried out mass murders, genocide and deportations and caused a loss of life and freedom in the 20th century on a

scale unseen in human history and recalls the horrific crime of the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazi regime; condemns in the strongest terms the acts of aggression, crimes against humanity and mass human rights violations perpetrated by the Nazi, communist and other totalitarian regimes. (European Parliament, 2019)

Conclusions

The permanent exhibition at the House of European History has a clear conceptual structure that proposes a linear narration (also reflected spatially in the linear itinerary). After some brief references to the shaping of Europe and its rise as a sovereign world power, and the darkness of war and violence caused by anti-democratic regimes, this narration finally reaches the light (conceptually and physically) of the upper floor where, though Europe has been a divided continent, important milestones of European integration have been achieved.

The last section of the exhibition, entitled 'Accolades and criticism', which could seemingly imply a more open ending, at a conceptual level, serves, in fact, as a 'foot-note', if compared to the content displayed at the rest of the exhibition. In addition, the exhibits that represent 'criticism' in this section are selected by the museum curators, and do not express those parts of society that discuss, criticize or are opposed to the European Union's vision of Europe.

Consequently, the proposed narrative, as articulated in the permanent exhibition display, delineates a clear meaning, and does not encourage or facilitate the possibility for the visitors to play an active role in the construction or decoding of this or other meanings, an active role that is one of the most important features of an exhibition as evidenced in recent museology and museum semiotics (Davallon, 1986, Parreiras Horta 1992).

The conceptual structure of the permanent exhibition, at a museological and at a museographical level, does not thoroughly encourage multiple points of views, understanding the complexity of European history or challenging common assumptions, although these are regarded, by the institution, as central aspects that the exhibition should address.

In addition, many complex and open issues that could be considered important for understanding European history and the present challenges Europeans face have been avoided, such as the emergence of terrorism, the right to national self-determination, the relations with the Arab world, and the role and future of minorities in Europe; this comes in contrast with the intended main focus of the permanent exhibition to create links to current challenges in Europe.

All the above remarks may lead to the conclusion that the institutional mission and vision of the House of European History are not communicated in its permanent exhibition in an entirely satisfactory manner. The difficulty of aligning the theoretical content with

exhibition design under specific economic, temporal, and architectural conditions (budget, timeline, space characteristics, technical requirements for display, security, conservation, etc.) is a given in any such endeavor. Nevertheless, leaving aside the complexity of this process and considering the developments in museology in the last decades, a clear space of communication, open, participative, related to society and to its necessities, should be a priority sought after in any contemporary museum (Alonso Fernández, 2003).

Endnotes

1. I would like to express my gratitude to Perikles Christodoulou, curator at the House of European History, and Penelope Tsatsouli, archaeologist-museologist, for their collaboration.
2. As indicated by museum conservators, this conceptual basis has changed, over the years, although maintaining its main features.
3. The 'Vortex of History' is a sculpture that extends through and is displayed at all the exhibition floors. It is made of excerpts and quotations from intellectuals, philosophers, etc.
4. Before entering the exhibition area, visitors can get a tablet which presents a digital guide to the exhibition, with all its written texts available in the 24 official languages of the European Union. Alternatively, there is a brief guide in printed form.
5. For more information on this topic see Mac Donald (2004) and Pearce (2004 [1992]).
6. An utterly different museological approach can be seen at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, inaugurated in 2004.

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