

Exhibit Review

Compte rendu d'exposition

Edu-tainment and the Museum: A Cautionary Tale

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Nauticus is a huge battleship-coloured building, constructed as a metaphor for a ship, on the waterfront in Norfolk, Virginia. Opened in 1994 as an "urban theme park" — its theme being the sea and human maritime endeavour — it gained the title *National Maritime Center*, cost \$50 million and projected attendance in the range of 800 000 visitors a year. There was much that was appealing: temporary exhibits featuring such things as *Titanic* artifacts, an award winning film "The Living Sea," virtual adventure games, a simulated battleship command post at the height of a battle, a number of interactive exhibits and the presence on site, on film and in publications of comic book hero "Captain Nauticus" and his "Ocean Force" who "explored and protected the Ocean." This was, seemingly, edu-tainment at its most sophisticated. But with success measured, almost exclusively for financial reasons, by attendance, *Nauticus* was soon in trouble. A high admission price, combined with a preference for tourist dollars over community involvement and support in an area full of other well established visitor attractions, soon meant that the economics were not working out. *Nauticus* essentially collapsed; "Captain Nauticus" went the way of his Director, whose theme park experience had not delivered the goods, that is, enough people through the gate, and the City of Norfolk was obliged to take over from the Board of Directors to make the institution an agency of the municipality.

Nauticus, nevertheless, remains a multi-faceted experience and the eclectic nature of its various presentations is certainly not without interest. The virtual adventure, however, in which the visitor rides a submersible in search of the eggs of the Loch Ness monster has now definitely taken a back seat to the concept of big, and if possible blockbuster, exhibits and permanent displays upon which educational

programming can be based. The varied nature of the permanent exhibit subject matter — from didactic exhibitions on ship design, mining the sea, oil spills, port loading, weather and naval warfare to an aquarium section that includes a "shark petting" pool and a "touch tank" — can now be considered as important complements to the temporary exhibits, the visiting ships and the AEGIS theatre where actors play out a battle situation and lead one to appreciate the incredible sophistication of the U.S. Navy's integrated surveillance and weapons systems. A visitor's understanding of the latter experience might be superficial but, despite the jingoism, it is entertaining and full of action.

Today, having large temporary exhibitions for repeat visitors is clearly recognized as an important component of the visit to *Nauticus*. Whether or not artifacts are involved (they were absent from the recent Antarctica exhibition) is not seemingly important and certainly, as demonstrated by the willingness to show items from the *Titanic* or the booty of treasure hunters, there is little obvious concern for the principles surrounding underwater archaeology that maritime museums are obliged to acknowledge and honour.

Although outwardly much remains the same from a few years ago (obviously one cannot replace a multi-million dollar infrastructure *that* easily) there has been a subtle shift in emphasis. The concept of the "urban theme park" has given way to that of "science centre" and one senses that *Nauticus* will increasingly commit itself to the presentation of science and technology in the context of man's relationship with the ocean. Against a backdrop of the natural wonder and power of the sea, *Nauticus* will subscribe to the idea of fun and learning. Certainly, once the two university-sponsored science laboratories are fully part of the visitor

galleries, there will be the potential for some real learning about the ecology of the sea.

Nauticus is not a museum and does not aspire to be one. A direct comparison with maritime museums therefore is necessarily subject to some important limitations. However it does use a wide variety of museological conventions in its display and interpretation techniques, is in direct partnership onsite with a naval museum (The Hampton Roads Naval Museum) and a Tugboat Museum, presents visiting exhibitions and offers educational programming. Like all museums it is also concerned with the details of effective visitor service and naturally offers a restaurant and a well stocked gift store.

While seemingly simplistic therefore, the question is a little more complicated: Does the Nauticus experience offer any useful insights for maritime museums in their quest to encourage learning and an appreciation of maritime history and material culture?

First, it must be re-emphasized, there can be no substitute for the power of collections backed by curatorial research. Intrinsically, museums have an advantage over display/interpretation centres. Within a few miles of Nauticus is *The Mariners' Museum* in Newport News, widely considered to be one of the most important institutions of its kind in the United States. The issue is not so much the richness of its collections and the research potential of a great library and archives; rather it is the ability to use the power of artifacts in exhibitions based on that research, and as the central elements in an exhibit not as mere illustrations for a story being told in words, photographs, or film. While a number of the galleries at the museum are in need of renovation, the objects themselves remain magnificent and come into their own in the Chesapeake Gallery where not just the objects themselves make for a fascinating experience, but the all-important human presence is strong throughout the complementary interpretation. At Nauticus there is a wealth of information, much of it basically interesting and colourfully presented, but there is a textbook dryness about the "Principles of Ship Design" and "The Modern Navy" that cry out for the presence of objects to give the displays an extra meaning and another dimension to both the technology and the human stories involved.

We often fall short of presenting our collections in more than a single dimension. The fishing skiff is more than the reality of an image in a photograph or a film; it represents the tools and genius of its maker, the activities of the

different seasons, a social and commercial dynamic. Likewise our museums are full of wonderful navigational instruments. But the chronometer, for example, is rarely interpreted as more than the instrument that "solved the problem of longitude" rather than as a multi-dimensional object of material culture and metaphor for an age in which the visitor is engaged by questions surrounding inventiveness and design, the materials used, the drama of solving the longitude riddle and the circumstances of how the earliest clocks went to sea. However short we fall in doing justice to our artifacts as objects to be read, appreciated and understood, there is no dispute that the core value of the museum are the things that give it its *raison d'être* and fundamental attractiveness. For this reason what might have been just another *Titanic* exhibit at The Mariners' Museum was unusually special because it featured not artifacts from the deep but a host of simple passenger artifacts — things that had obviously been tucked into a pocket or a bag as their owner scrambled into one of the lifeboats. The context was one of social history made all the more intriguing as each visitor was given a replica ticket; at the end of the exhibit one could check on the fate of one's alter ego.

Secondly, it needs to be understood that "interaction" is not synonymous with engagement. From the moment when buttons were first pushed to start a film clip or to activate a model, museums have taken pride in themselves as "hands-on" and interactive; it was as if we felt the need to apologize for our artifacts being "hands-off." In fact these early "interactives" — and many of their successors today — were nothing of the sort, being actually "reactive"; the visitor having pushed a button is left to watch or listen and is invited to interact or engage no further.

One of the interactives at *Nauticus* clearly demonstrates this failure to move beyond the most simplistic of activities and thus to miss a real opportunity for learning to take place, in this case about the interplay of principles involved in retrieving and displaying marine artifacts. The subject of this particular "interactive video terminal" was locating and bringing up treasure from the wreck of the SS *Central America*. The visitor was invited to activate a number of short video clips about "The Ship," "The Team," "Locating the Wreck," and "Finding the Mother Lode," and these were obviously not without some basic interest. Completely absent, however, was any attempt to engage the visitor, through the posing of questions or

the offer of choices that would have involved him or her in the great debate that engulfed this story when the wreck was found by a treasure-hunting consortium in 1987. There is no inkling of a reference to the fact that through a long series of court cases some vital principles about the "exploitation" of shipwrecks were established, which are crucial to all educational institutions, including Nauticus that, given the chance, will want to display such underwater artifacts. These principles include the fact that original owners still have rights and that salvers cannot ignore their obligations to preservation and education. On this occasion Nauticus played for what could be called the "treasure angle" and missed the opportunity to move beyond that one dimension.

Incorporating high-tech equipment and well thought out programs into exhibits is extremely expensive. If the only result is a simple film clip, if "fun" à la arcade is the chief motivating factor rather than some expectation of learning and intellectual challenge, or if the noise and excitement of the setting reduces any learning opportunities to the level of mere play, then the exercise has to be considered largely a waste of time and money. Pushing a button to activate a train going round a port installation or pointing a cursor to activate a film clip is little progress indeed; Nauticus could learn much from some of the more innovative opportunities being offered in other science centres let alone a number of maritime museums.

These two issues — the use of collections and the use of active and interactive interpretation techniques — are inextricably linked in the central dilemma that faces maritime museums, indeed all history museums. This involves the fundamental contradiction of our institutions. History is a record of experience and events — it is a stream, a continuum. The museum, in contrast, is concerned with things — it is basically static. The ship, the sail and the engine are all products of extensive human ingenuity and endeavour but as objects they tell little of the work itself: similarly they have had a life of use and motion, but this essential characteristic has been lost. Lost, that is, without that information and interpretation that can attempt at least to challenge the imagination. Maritime museums have made enormous strides in bringing this necessary colour to their exhibits, but

it is not always easy as demonstrated by the reaction of a colleague who, having the opportunity to visit a museum ship upon which he had once sailed, stated that to him it was dead. The fact that it had been lovingly restored and preserved and well interpreted was not enough; the essential element of motion had of course been lost.

The danger of overreacting to the activity, colour and sheer energy of a Nauticus is that we risk relegating our artifacts into the role of mere bystander in the visitor experience. Museums must continue to seek out and utilize all the most innovative techniques in design and interpretation and to make our institutions less sepulchral, but we must oppose one dimensional market driven administrators and their acolytes who would compromise the central reason for our being — the display of objects from which our visitors, if we assist and encourage them, can learn infinitely more than from the purely informative display. Artifacts, curatorial insight and educational inventiveness are the essential trinity of any museum's existence and, if we do it right, "they will come" as has been proven time and time again. The warning bell sounding is that the quantity of the experiences cannot be more important than the quality of the experience; this is the sombre and incredibly expensive lesson of Nauticus's first few years. We cannot afford to appeal to the lowest common denominator; rather we must aim to explore the widest variety of denominators.

In the end museums must succeed as learning centres, displaying and interpreting with pride their unique collections, not as entertainment centres, mildly distracting and superficially fun. Learning can be fun too, but it is not entertainment. That is why in the final analysis Nauticus has little to offer maritime museums about either exhibit technique or learning; it is, sadly and expensively, rather superficial and shallow. It is also why an experience like that in a small corner of The Mariners' Museum among real artifacts from the *Monitor*, with an informative video and a costumed interpreter explaining, questioning — and yes! interacting — with a small group of youngsters, offers the hope of a lasting and infinitely more rewarding experience.