

First experiences about our Museum's new exhibition hall

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Abstract – The Hungarian Natural History Museum opened its Exhibition Hall in October 1996. The paper shortly discusses the considerations concerning the first exhibitions, and the events of the first two and half years. The opening was but a milestone in the development process of the museum and its visitor facilities. With 2 figures.

INTRODUCTION

The Hungarian Natural History Museum is in a great development. For the first time in its nearly 200 years of history it has its own building complex, to house all the collections of the five departments, the library, the working rooms and the exhibitions and other public services. The new facility is the one-time military academy and its riding school, with a large city park behind the building and a university botanical garden just across the street. The first step was the reconstruction of a part of the academy's building and the moving of the Department of Mineralogy and Petrology in 1995. It was followed by the reconstruction of the riding school and the opening of the exhibitions at the end of 1996 (BAJZÁTH 1996, VÁSÁRHELYI & SZÓKE 1996) (Fig. 1). The third step was to renew the complete roof-system of the main building and making space for the Department of Anthropology, the Mammal and Bird Collection and the Ecology Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, working in collaboration with the HNHM. This paper summarises the events of the first two years of the exhibition building, together with some good or bad experiences worth of mentioning for those facing similar changes. Another paper (BAJZÁTH *et al.* 1999) briefly introduces the location, the building and the permanent exhibitions.

THE BUILDING

The roof-system of the building perished in a fire in 1992 and prevailed so until late 1995. Practically the whole structure had to be reconstructed, building in huge quantities of concrete. All these resulted in high relative humidity at various spaces of the building and parts of the walls are – in spite of mechanical and electronic dehydration – still wet. Fortunately these problems do not affect the cultural values housed in the building and affect a small part of the cca 2500 square metre visitor area.

EXHIBITIONS

At opening the best part of the spaces was built in showing 8 exhibitions. Except for individual exhibits, the exhibitions are found on the ground floor and on the gallery. On the ground floor we usually stage temporary exhibitions, while the gallery is occupied by our permanent exhibition: *Man and nature in Hungary*. Almost all the staff had either slight or substantial influence on and contribution to the exhibitions. Many items were manufactured by the Museum's craftsmen and much creative energy was invested in planning the items.

The permanent exhibition is an interdisciplinary one, which may be described not just as a natural history but also as a historical ecology, or environmental education exhibition. It covers the natural and environmental history of the entire Carpathian Basin. During the planning of the permanent exhibition and ever since efforts have been made how to involve the visitors. The first and foremost point is the presence of man in title and the content of the natural history exhibition. The exhibition is a travel through time, starting not just with prehistoric but pre-human times, showing – by records found in Hungary – the evolution and appearance of man, pre-Hungarian men and the conquerors. Early human settlements are represented by a cave (with a pregnant prehistoric woman), a round tent (yurt) of the nomadic Hungarians, a cabin of a mediaeval hunter-fisher, a well typical in villages and a kitchen of the 20th century blockhouse (with some exhibits

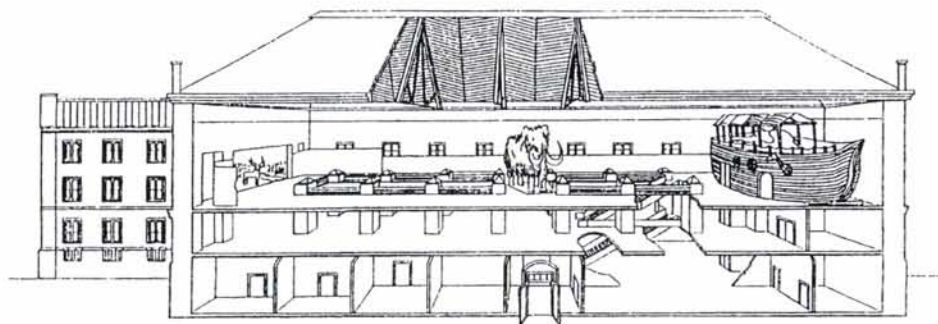


Fig. 1. Longitudinal section of the exhibition of the Hungarian Natural History Museum.

explaining the development of cities). Recently DE JONG (1999) listed some remarkable means how the life of people might be interpreted culminating in factual "visitor participation". We have, so far, not been able to work with actors or other trained animators (except in special events) but try to involve our visitors through texts and exhibits by putting personal questions, offering hands-on, interactive, familiar objects etc. This may go as far as to e.g. offering a simple sort of individual role-playing. There is a group of face reconstructions from the time of the Hungarian conquest, and the heads are fixed on postaments in the original height of their owners (calculated on the basis of the bones found in their grave). The postaments are uniform in shape (different for men and women) and are positioned so as to form a group of people e.g. on a marketplace. An empty postament is offered in front of a mirror "to put your head on", as if you were one of the reconstructions or the reverse, making them more living. By a scale on the mirror you can compare your height with the average of the conquering population. We learnt from many visitor reactions that this is well accepted and enjoyed.

The lack of glass or glass cases makes guarding and maintenance somewhat more complicated, but e.g. in the cabin of the medieval hunter-fisher the smell of freeze-dried mushrooms added significantly to the effect of the exhibit. In featuring the importance of wood (coming from trees) the feeling of involvement is heightened by putting some everyday objects among the traditional, beautiful or almost exotic objects of the near or distant past. There are several hands-on objects simply left close by or offered for trying. Individually planned and designed interactive exhibits are the highlights. These were our first experiences, and for various reasons many of them were designed and even completed by workers of the museum. During this process several of them went under great development, together with our staff. We learned too, that perhaps there is no visitor-safe interactive exhibit, and – as the saying goes – whatever might be misunderstood, that will be misunderstood. The new interactive exhibits suffer less from the "children diseases", are less destroyable, use less number of buttons, but are more attractive and understandable.

We are among the first museums so widely opening towards the visitors in Hungary, and, as we gathered these directions were well accepted and greeted by the public. This involving attitude in a museum is, however, considered perhaps childish, and true enough we receive more children visitors than anticipated.

TEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS

So as to make our new location known far and wide among the various segments of the potential visitors of museums in Hungary, we often stage smaller or larger temporary exhibitions. In the period since October 1996 there were 32 such exhibitions opened. These show a great variety of fields, topics, layouts and target audience.

Besides palaeontology, anthropology, mineralogy, zoology, exhibitions were opened about biodiversity, expeditions of museum colleagues and others, diving, nature protection and green NGO activities, and we had art (paintings, graphics, sculptures, photos, textiles) shows in the museum as well as joint exhibitions in other locations.

EVENTS

On the very first event, opening addresses were given by BÁLINT MAGYAR, minister of Culture and Education and WIM VAN DER WEIDEN, director of Naturalis, Leiden. Next week a two-day teacher training was held on "Interactive tools in the process of education". Ever since there are a great number of professional and social events in the various rooms of the building. Scientific, nature conservation, environmental, environmental education, museum related bodies, committees, societies and associations have their meetings, lecture series, conferences, general assemblages. Teacher trainings, student courses are frequently organised by either the museum or universities, high schools and civil societies. There is an increasing demand for the Exhibition Hall as a place for public and professional events.

We organise visitor programmes on specific weekends and celebrate some environmentally relevant dates like Earth Day, The Day of Birds and Trees, International Museums Day, The Day of Hungarian Science etc.

VISITORS

From November 1996 till December 1998 we had altogether 255 518 visitors. The initial interest decreased after some seven months. The monthly data are plotted in Fig. 2, showing great variability but a certain regularity. As with other museums in Hungary, the visitors are scarce and far in between in the winter months. In spring the interest is grow-

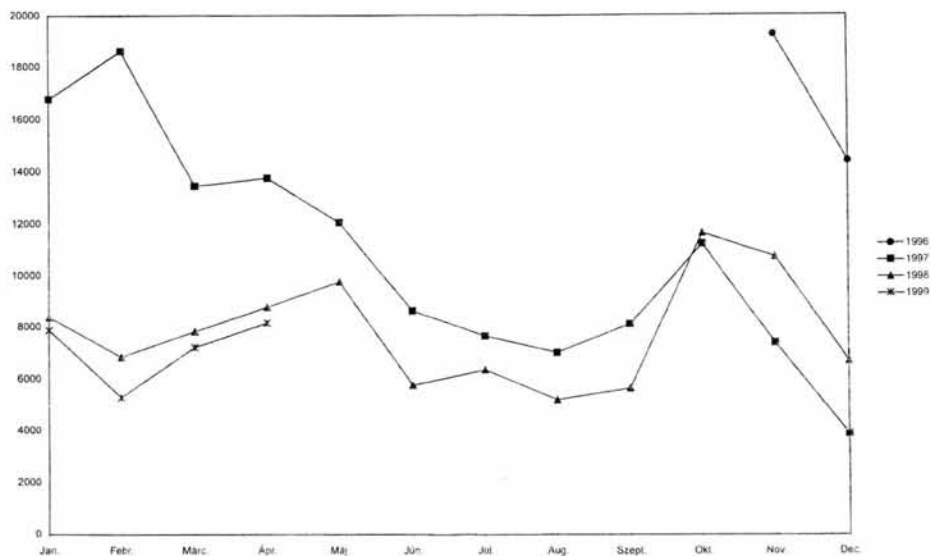


Fig. 2. Number of visitors in the exhibition of the Hungarian Natural History Museum.

ing, specifically by school groups until end of the school-year (June). We are not on a traditional tourist attracting location, thus, the summer months are again bad. In September, autumn starts to bring in school groups again, and around Christmas there is an increased interest by families and smaller children groups (not necessarily raising the attendance much).

On the average two-thirds of our visitors are children coming either in school groups, families or in small groups.

AWARDS

In the year of the opening we received the Architectural Niveau Prize of the Capital Budapest, in recognition of the reconstructed building and its fitting new function. The White Rose Prize was given to the staff of the Museum as the best educational institution in 1997, and our series "Lacertina booklets", giving background information about the exhibitions, was awarded by the Soros Foundation for its innovative content. Finally we received the Special Commendation of the European Museum of the Year 1998 Award as to be the first exhibition introducing the whole of the museum and for the attention towards children.

Our previous exhibitions were in the building of the Hungarian National Museum, and were often considered as the exhibition of the latter. The new building bearing our name, the new exhibitions, the openings, the events added considerably to the recognition of our museum. This as well as the awards, besides satisfaction, raise also the responsibility for permanent quality control and innovation.

FUTURE PLANS

We try to expand our exhibition facilities in two ways. Smaller and larger exhibitions are organised in other locations, partly together with other institutions. The other way is the (virtual) expansion of our location, involving the yard of the museum as well as the two neighbouring institutions, the Botanical Garden of the Eötvös Loránd University and the large city park, the Orczy Garden. The interest may be raised by organising joint programmes, by co-ordinating our programmes, so that two or three events are offered on the same weekend, by offering school groups indoor and outdoor activities etc. But the real expansion is also on the horizon.

In 1999 construction plans will be completed and the first steps made in excavating the ground between the buildings of the museum and constructing of an underground parking lot and an upper, glass covered visitor centre. The completion of which is due by 2002, the 200th anniversary of the establishment of the Museum when most of the reconstruction work, the rest of the main building and the third part of the visitor area will also be right underway. By some 10 years of permanent reconstruction and moving, the Hungarian Natural History Museum will be housed in a historic but well adjusted building complex.

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