

Artefacts at the Smithsonian: a new long-term exhibition on the history of transport systems

Exhibit planners know that only a small fragment of their potential audiences have an intrinsic interest in specialised subjects – such as transport or transport systems. Automobile enthusiasts, for example, may come in sizable numbers to traditional automotive museums, but a very large part of the public ignores such institutions. Adding historical, cultural or other context is seen as the high road both to reaching larger audiences and to furthering a museum's educational mission.

Adding context, however, is a tricky business. A didactic overlay of 'system' incorporated in an exhibit of transport history may add cohesiveness but is likely to appeal to the same technologically inclined audiences that would have patronised the museum in any case. Taking other approaches that might be loosely tied to 'system', an auto museum may attempt to broaden its audience by treating automotive design or, as has frequently been done, by offering overt connections to nostalgia. 'Cars of the 1950s', with period advertising and 'road culture' included, may bring in new visitors for a while, but what of all those antique cars and their infrastructure beyond the direct memory of most people today? Appeals to nostalgia are inherently limiting, since they depend on visitors bringing into the museum an interpretive frame based on personal memory. Albeit powerful for some of us, the memories of one generation are not shared in the same way by people in different age groups, and such memories are simply not shared at all by people of different backgrounds. As to the concept of 'system', the problem is that it is in many ways an abstraction, and one obviously difficult to convey in a museum setting, with objects artificially excised from the complex interrelationships of which they were once a part.

In the mid-1990s, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (NMAH) began to take seriously the idea of renovating its existing halls devoted to road and rail transport – some 21,000 square feet of space. These areas had not been significantly altered since the museum opened in 1964 and desperately cried out for a 'contextual reinterpretation' and for rethinking in terms of historical transport systems. A breakthrough was an appropriation from the US Congress in 1998 for \$3 million, which could be applied to building, caring for

and exhibiting NMAH's transportation collections. Since that time, a team of 15 curators and specialists has been assembled, designers have been contracted, exhibit content and floor plan have been created and vetted, and an additional \$21 million has been raised from private corporations and trade groups to complete the required funding.

A word should be said about sources of funding, since it contrasts so dramatically with the usual European experience. With very rare exceptions, government money has not supported major exhibitions at NMAH since 1983; private funds have been essential. The explicit agreement with Congressional appropriators in the present case was that the \$3 million, if applied to an exhibition, was a 'public down payment' against which the museum would raise funds from the private sector; no other federal support would be forthcoming. The initial federal backing proved crucial to the fundraising strategy in two ways: firstly, by allowing the museum time to set the exhibit's themes, storyline, content, floor plan and budget well *before* other fundraising began, and secondly, by investing the project with the institutional commitment needed to attract serious interest from potential contributors.

After some five years of work, the interpretive approach taken by the NMAH team (and it is very much a team collaboration) combines the following:

Upgrade of the maritime hall

A major upgrade of the adjacent maritime hall is planned, while merging into one space the existing road and rail halls, together with a portion of the existing civil engineering hall. The area currently under renovation is over 26,000 square feet.

Land and maritime time lines

The time line of the revised but separate maritime hall, *c.* 1600–2000, is quite different from the time line of the land transport exhibition, which is set at 1876–2000, based primarily on the strengths of our collections. The year 1876 is also the centenary of the United States and so gives a convenient starting point for what we are interpreting in the land transport exhibition as primarily a twentieth-century story (other planned or existing exhibitions at NMAH cover aspects of pre-1876 transport). The land and maritime time lines, though separated for the visitor, come together in key ways: for example, the land and maritime exhibitions each include at least two historical treatments of ports. The idea of 'system' is front-and-centre in these treatments.

Historical 'settings'

Time lines are divided into more or less immersive and discrete historical 'settings'. Each setting has an explicit time, place and limited set of themes. Wherever possible, each setting has one or a

few central artefacts that fit precisely into the chosen time and locale. For instance, the first section of the land transport exhibition begins in the summer of 1876, in Santa Cruz, California. The themes are: the expectations in small American towns of the era that a railroad would ensure prosperity, the important new connections of mobility and commerce that were created, the unintended consequences that often ensued, and the great transformation in agriculture and agricultural distribution that railroads brought to the western US – and by extension to the entire country – during the final quarter of the nineteenth century. The central artefact is our locomotive *Jupiter* – which was built and delivered to the Santa Cruz Railroad in 1876. The themes are explicated by actual people and events: promoters of the railroad, Chinese who built the tracks and tended the new crops that came to the region, and the painful denouement of the railroad – founded as an independent line but taken over in a few years by the corporate colossus, the transcontinental Southern Pacific. Note that ‘system’ is an undercurrent throughout, but system in terms of the role of the railroad in changing human relationships. The story told of *Jupiter* is not its engineering details, nor its minor place in locomotive development, but its place in a much larger set of interconnected changes that directly altered lives. The Santa Cruz Railroad becomes a ‘case study’ that illuminates significant, nationwide themes of late-nineteenth-century economic and social history in the US.

Overlapping transport modes

All modes of transport – land, water; road, rail; public, private; horse-drawn, self-propelled – are included as overlapping and organic to an overall story of change in personal mobility and in the distribution and consumption of goods. For the first time at the Smithsonian, the story of transportation is given a central place in American history. To the team, it is a matter of ‘following the travelers, the migrants, the immigrants, the commuters, and the stuff people produce and consume’ rather than following the vehicles. The main idea is to reveal the ways in which Americans have chosen and built their transport systems and thus have changed their society.

Other settings

Other specific settings – each telling of nationwide trends – include:

- Washington DC at the turn of the twentieth century, with the impact of the trolley on urban and suburban development (an 1890s Washington streetcar is the central object) and the transition in urban diets as food distribution expands from regional to nationwide patterns
- New York city in 1920, with a look at aids to navigation in a busy port, and the growth of New York into a colossus of finance,

manufacturing and marketing, while continuing to attract immigration

- a railway station in Salisbury, North Carolina, in the late 1920s, with a heavy Pacific-type locomotive of the Southern Railway of 1926 as the centrepiece – and with stories of travellers, of workers on passenger and freight trains, of the Jim Crow segregation¹ endemic to travel in the American South during that time, and illustrating the dependence of the nation's manufacturing, commercial distribution, and long-distance travel on the rail system
- a suite of exhibits on Americans' early adoption of the automobile
- a section on US Route 66 (complete with almost 50 feet of the highway's original concrete pavement from Oklahoma), the fabled road that connected Chicago with Los Angeles and in the Great Depression of the 1930s carried both migrants and increasing truck traffic
- a tourist cabin from US Route 1 in Maryland
- family tourism and camping by 'Trav-L-Coach' (i.e. caravan) at a vacation spot in Maine
- a 1939 school bus from Indiana and the transformation of rural education
- the new-car showroom of an actual Buick dealer in Portland, Oregon, in 1949, with a night-time street scene of a Portland 'strip' and a selection of late-1940s/early-1950s autos in the background
- the postwar Chicago suburb of Park Forest, Illinois, in 1955, followed by a large section on how expressways, buses, transit systems, and airport location decisions changed Chicago itself in the 1950s and 1960s (a walk-in exhibit of a recently retired Chicago transit car and on-board interpretation is featured)
- the story of containerisation and the ensuing radical changes to the ports of Oakland and San Francisco.
- two lanes of Interstate highway across the US South and Southwest in the 1970s–1980s (complete with a heavy freight truck and a variety of domestic- and foreign-built cars), with stories of truckers and tourists

The final section, 'Going Global', takes all the intertwined themes into the beginning of the twenty-first century – into our present world where systems of transport, personal mobility, communications, commerce, distribution, consumption, finance and marketing are truly international and inseparable.

A basic principle of museum design, we feel, is that visitors have a definite hierarchy of attraction regarding exhibit presentations. A museum is not a place conducive to deep intellectual enquiry. One is on one's feet, time is limited, and most visitors come in social or family groups. A museum's unique stock in trade is the genuine artefact. To tell meaningful stories with artefacts is the challenge.

Of least interest to museum visitors are abstractions, such as those we often try to convey with didactic labels. Of greater interest are subjects that meet a visitor's special interests. But such subjects, even with glitzy design, do not appeal to the majority who do not share those interests. One can imagine other steps ascending an 'interest hierarchy'. In transport museums, we know that big items (locomotives and airplanes, for example) can inspire awe. But that is usually all they do; the interest of most visitors is ephemeral. 'Interactive' exhibits are in fashion, and they appeal to both our sense of curiosity and our desire to take control of our learning activities.

Near the top of the hierarchy, I would argue, are exhibits in which stories of people are the touchstone. That is because all of us, as people, are innately interested in well-told stories of fellow human beings, especially in people with whom we can share some connection. At the peak of the hierarchy are stories of real and often ordinary individuals: every newspaper reporter knows this to be true. A story of a disaster, for example, may start with the simple facts: what, where, when, how serious. But within a few paragraphs, the reporter weaves in reactions and stories of individuals involved. Meaning is thus given, and the reader is absorbed in the story, seeking to discover how people dealt with the experiences described.

The team has thus chosen to convey most of the exhibition's content through human stories. Stories of migrants, promoters, workers, and travellers occur throughout. A story of Jim Crow is an example: Charlotte Hawkins Brown was a well-known African-American educator who frequently travelled through Salisbury, North Carolina, in the mid-1920s. Earlier in the decade, at a station in a different city, she was summarily evicted from her seat in a Pullman car by a gang of toughs who invaded the train; the Pullman Company officer aboard took no action to defend her rights. She later talked about her experience in lectures. We have her own words, and visitors to the new exhibition will meet Dr Brown and encounter Jim Crow through her eyes.

Added together, the team believes that the specific settings, artefacts and stories we have chosen add up to a provocative journey through a vital part of modern American social history. Our working definition of 'system' is stretched to include the places of our artefacts in sets of complex and dynamic human relationships. When the exhibition, called 'America on the Move', opens as scheduled for fall of 2003, our visitors will render a verdict.

Notes and references

- 1 Jim Crow was the common term for the legally enforced system of racial segregation in public accommodations in the southern and southeastern states of the US from the late nineteenth century until the mid-1960s.

Afterword

The new exhibition, entitled 'America on the Move', opens to the public on 22 November 2003. This is the largest exhibition to be mounted under a single banner in the history of NMAH, and occupies the full width of the east end of the museum's first floor. The design of the exhibition permits full access by unaccompanied persons in wheelchairs, and provisions are included for the sight- and hearing-impaired. An extensive Website open to all, as well as an education package for secondary schools, are part of the project. 'America on the Move' will remain open in the museum for a minimum of 20 years, with occasional refurbishments as budgets allow.