

The Material Culture of Road Safety: Road safety as museum display?

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Abstract

The museum does not usually spring to mind as a site for road safety promotion but no other institution has so much involvement in collecting and displaying the material culture of motoring and interpreting its history for the general public. Safety is part of the motoring story and should be part of its public history. This paper considers the place of motoring within museum culture and looks at trends in some of the biggest and best-known museums in Europe, the United Kingdom and Australia to introduce the visiting public to the idea of road safety as part of motoring history.

Introduction

Those concerned with promoting road safety have turned first, and naturally, to advancing automotive and civil engineering, introducing restrictive legislation, increasing powers in law enforcement and changing driver behaviour. They have tried to raise the public profile of road safety as an issue in the media, through the courts and in parliament. While the focus has been on the present and the future, little attention has been paid to the past and yet it is in a familiarity with history and heritage that the public's awareness of road safety may also be encouraged. The public history of motoring is traditionally presented in motoring and transport museums where collections of automobiles and motoring memorabilia are displayed as the material culture of motoring. However, motoring history also includes road safety and as museum curators think creatively about how to interpret their collections more broadly, the material culture of road safety is one segment of that history that is slowly being explored. If road safety advocates seek outlets for road safety awareness, then to include it in the public history of motoring as part of the museum experience may be yet another productive avenue to explore.¹

Museum culture

Superficially museums may be seen as simple repositories for the material culture of our past. Certainly they offer physical protection to objects considered to be of value because of their

rarity, intrinsic beauty or association with some event of historical significance. Under these terms the museum may appear nothing more than a public storehouse, but on the contrary, the museum is a politically and culturally loaded institution. Objects in a museum are selected for inclusion because of the values attributed to them. Such judgments are made on a range of social, cultural, political, economic or personal criteria, but regardless of the reason, an object's position in a museum is due to an act of choice. Moreover, the way in which the objects are displayed reflects the philosophy of time and place. Susan Pearce describes museums as 'deeply dyed with economic and ideological thrust of the times' [1]. The positioning of objects, their juxtaposition against other objects, their manner of presentation, their relationship to and accessibility by the visitor are not random but all reflect a predetermined understanding of the purpose of museums and the function of display within them. The subsequent interpretation of museum objects and their place in themed exhibitions is determined by what curators deem important whether that be provenance, technical specifications, description or function.

The museum is therefore much more than just a storehouse - it gives meaning to the objects in its care. 'Museums hold the stored material culture of the past', explained Susan Pearce, 'and the associated documentation which makes it intelligible' [2]. The role of the museum then becomes one of mediation between the object and the visitor and it is this aspect which provides so much opportunity for manipulation and control of the way we collectively think [2, 3]. The influencing power of the museum emanates from the architecture of the building right down through the curatorial policy to what is written on the interpretive panels attached to each object on display or what is said in the audio guides. The museum itself is an artefact of culture and therefore a complete package of influence [4]. Explicitly and implicitly the museum constructs a complex narrative about objects and their relationship to humans, those who built, made or used the collected objects and those who come to view them.

¹ This paper is based on research undertaken in the collections, displays and public materials available at and produced by the following museums during 2008-09: National Transport Museum of Ireland, Howth, Ireland; Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Belfast, Northern Ireland; Glasgow Museum of Transport, Glasgow, Scotland; Cars of the Stars Motor Museum, Keswick, England; Heritage Motor Centre, Gaydon, England; Coventry Transport Museum, Coventry, England; Haynes International Motor Museum, Sparkford, England; National Motor Museum, Beaulieu, England; London Transport Museum, London, England; Swiss Transport Museum, Lucern, Switzerland; Landesmuseum für Technik und Arbeit, Mannheim, Germany; Mercedes-Benz Museum, Stuttgart, Germany; Musée National de l'Automobile, Mulhouse, France; Musée de la Voiture et du Tourisme, Compiègne, France; National Motor Museum, Birdwood, South Australia.

The Museum, Modernism and Motoring

The museum in the western world developed along with the Enlightenment and grew to prominence with the rise of modernism. The museum as an institution was a kind of material culture encyclopaedia that would serve to educate the visitor about history or art or science. Such learning was undoubtedly one-way, involving the direct transfer of clear, specific and unambiguous knowledge from the museum object to the visitor [5]. Learning from objects was believed to be in itself edifying and there was a certain moralism attached to bringing objects of beauty or importance to the gaze of people who could never see them in any other way. Apart from the supposed intrinsic worth of the objects and what they could convey the museum collection was ordered rationally according to agreed understandings of progress, growth and development. There was as much importance placed on the formal ordering of objects and their systematic display as on the objects themselves because in this way the modern world could be presented as controlled and orderly. The museum was, if nothing else, an authority. ‘The idealised space of the modernist museum’, explained Eileen Hooper-Greenhill:

“was positivist, objective, rational, evaluative, distanced and set aside from the real world. The museum visitor was accorded the status of the neutral observer; walking in an ordered fashion through galleries that were in themselves ordered, well-lit, and laid out for the acquisition of knowledge – the knowledge that could be construed from objects, that, once properly arranged in the neutral space, would speak for [5].”

This was the general pattern followed by museums begun in the nineteenth century but it was a pattern that particularly suited the motor or transport museum.

The motor car, first developed in 1886 and spreading across the western world by the turn of the century, was ideally suited to display in the ‘modern’ museum. In many ways the motor vehicle was, and still is, the most easily recognised symbol of modernity. Functional, the epitome of technological progress, indicative of the transportation revolution that serviced the twentieth century and the mass production that fed its economy, the motor vehicle was both the product of modernism and its agent. It is not without just cause that Henry Ford can be described as a modern man and Fordism the guiding philosophy of twentieth century industrial production [6,7].

Not surprisingly, throughout the twentieth century, collections of motor vehicles in private hands and within museums steadily grew. Temporary displays were first staged in England in 1909 and Germany in 1911, and more permanent museum exhibitions were built by 1927 in France and 1936 in Germany [8, 9]. The motor museum began and continued as a specialised example of the modernist-style museum to the point where Colin Divall and Andrew Scott could say that ‘object-centred and minimally interpreted transport exhibitions are heirs to the celebratory and progressivist legacies of the nineteenth-century museum!’ [8]. It seemed that transport museums stayed

firmly trapped in the formalist and ‘Whiggish’ style of nineteenth century practice. It is not difficult to see why.

‘Whiggish history’, explains Divall and Scott ‘conceptualizes technological progress as an asocial, apolitical process, presenting technological knowledge and the technical qualities of artefacts as matters divorced from the rough and tumble, the messy complexity, of everyday existence’ [8]. Motoring history as presented in modernist museums is totally geared to the primacy of the motor vehicle as the obvious and preferred material culture of motoring and, what is more, these vehicles are most easily displayed in isolation from ‘the messy complexity, of everyday existence’ which includes, of course, crashes and road trauma. The restored motor vehicle is the material evidence of technological progress, engineering refinement and mechanical success.

Vehicle improvement is the central theme of any museum collection reflecting the passion and interest of the collector. Some such as Daimler and Benz collected the products of their own creation – the Mercedes Benz Museum opened in 1936. The Schlumpf brothers collected European models, especially Bugattis, and this eventually became the basis of the Musée National de l’Automobile in 1982. Cars were collected and grouped to show the progressive development not only of the motor vehicle as engineering but as art as well. The motor museum display was also about love.

At Haynes International Motoring Museum in England red cars are grouped together for visual and aesthetic impact [Figure 1]. The souvenir catalogue explains that: ‘As you walk from the darkened entrance displays depicting the Dawn of Motoring, you can be forgiven for drawing breath as you step into the vibrant ambience of the stunning Red Hall’ [10]. There are other examples. In the Musée National de l’Automobile in Mulhouse, France, Bugatti engines are on display. Here it is possible to sit on comfortable chairs while looking at a selection of Bugatti engines spotlighted against a black backdrop and at the same time push an audio cue to enjoy the individual purr of each engine as well.

Love for historic vehicles means that museums are often places of pilgrimage for enthusiasts where the focus of attention is the vehicle itself, divorced and isolated from its contextual history. Some curators have recognised that the museum must offer more than a site of veneration and they have tried to put the car in context by painting a broad social history for their exhibits [11]. Cars are displayed against the backdrop of timelines, or set in period street scenes. They are placed in historic tableaux, such as the story of the bombing of Coventry, or the 1938 highly detailed garage display at Beaulieu. Some are displayed with themed music to give a period context. At Beaulieu the invention of the motor vehicle is placed within the broader history of man’s search for mobility in a themed ride called ‘Wheels’.

The most difficult context of all for museum curators is to put the element of human engagement back into the history of the motor vehicle especially when museums are so object-centred.



Figure 1: The 'Red Room' – Haynes International Motoring Museum

Certainly the main figures of motoring history are often mentioned in this way – Benz, Daimler, individual racing drivers, collectors such as Montague or depicted at all. Some vehicles are displayed with mannequins in them dressed in the period costume pertaining to the vehicle's production date. This no doubt suggests the place of the driver and his passengers. At the Motoring Heritage Centre visitors are permitted to sit in a couple of vehicles to 'get the feel' of a vintage car. At the Coventry Transport Museum visitors are afforded a ride in a simulator to recreate the sensation of breaking a land speed record.

The National Motor Museum in Birdwood, South Australia has made a conscious effort to repopulate its motoring story with owners, drivers, car sellers and designers. One of its most important characters is Harry Monsoor, a hawker with a 1927 van who transported goods to the isolated families of the far north of South Australia. Oral histories that record reminiscences of vehicle use and vehicle manufacture sometimes are used to bring the motorcar user back into the picture. Many museums exhibit some minor pieces of driving clothing such as goggles, hats, coats, gloves and the like, books, maps, travelling knick-knacks but these pieces of motoring paraphernalia are encased in glass and objectified.

Motor Museums and Road Safety

Motor museums built from particular collections, and set to attract the visiting enthusiast who shares the passion for the automobile as an object of mechanical art, seems hardly the place to display road safety. Any mention of road safety suggests that road travel is dangerous, that motor vehicles are associated with death and that the motoring experience is far

more complex and 'messy' than that depicted by the 'Whiggish' display of shiny cars. The contradiction seems obvious and yet there is scope for road safety to be considered as part of a museum display and in some motor museums a move is being made in that direction.

Automotive Engineering - the vehicle

The most obvious way in which road safety can be introduced into motor museums is through the interpretation of the motor vehicles themselves. Most commonly motor vehicles are displayed in chronological order or by make and model. Interpretive signs are usually concerned with the provenance of the vehicle and its technical specifications but the engineering developments that took the motor vehicle from Benz's Patent-Motorwagen through to the present day were not only about speed, performance or comfort, they were also about safety. Collapsible steering columns, crumple zones, seatbelts, airbags, anti-lock brakes are all obvious and well-known examples of recent safety developments. Equally important are less well documented features such as design changes and the relationship between styling and safety; improved lighting; enclosed driving compartments; changes in construction material from wood to steel; development of the pneumatic tyre; synchronisation of gear shifts or even bringing the gear shift lever into the car body from outside; attachment of rearview mirrors and dipping mirrors for night driving, indicator lights and windscreens made of toughened not plate glass; compulsory fitted speedometers and horns; recessed door handles, bumper bars and more. The history of the motor vehicle is the history of improved provision for safety perhaps

less consciously determined and scientifically developed before the 1960s but there all the same [12]. Sometimes this history is complex and needs to be exposed through the work of historians but the evidence for it exists in the material culture of the motor vehicle sitting on the museum floor and can be drawn out for curators to use in their interpretations. For example, Kurt Möser has written about developments in the interior design of the motor vehicle arguing that the developments in style and function had much to do with the concept of seeing the car interior as approximating a living room [13]. This conflicted with the idea of restraining passengers with seat belts for their own safety and resulted in changes to the design features of the seat belt such as its retractability within an interior casing, colour co-ordination and the invisibility of the seat-belt mechanism. The seat-belt has a history of its own, coming as it does from aviation, and a material culture to display as a singular engineering object, but that history can also be told in conjunction with the material culture of the vehicle itself as Kurt Möser has demonstrated.

The story of automotive engineering can be told from the road safety perspective if there is a will to do so. Some museums are beginning to take that direction but at the moment it is largely geared to brand promotion. The Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart is perhaps the best current example of how to integrate the story of road safety into the museum context. As a company, Mercedes-Benz has always prided itself on its attention to safety research and development and not surprisingly this features prominently in their new museum, opened in 2006. Here they emphasise Mercedes-Benz's contribution to passive safety through the work of its 'doyen' Béla Barényi [14]. They emphasise the development of crumple zones, the passenger cell and more sympathetic interior style features and link that with the production of the 220 S in 1964.

Here the visitor is able to see the Mercedes-Benz models, hear audio information and read about the safety philosophy of the company on interpretative boards. One of these boards puts the development of safety engineering into the company's perspective. Of the road safety issue emerging after the 1965 publication of Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at any Speed*, the Museum concluded that 'the debate also spilled over to Germany, but it took a while before vehicle manufacturers seriously dealt with the topic – the sole exception: Daimler-Benz.²² In this way the company was able to present itself as holding the leading edge in safety design and to reinforce that view through its museum displays [Figure 2]. However, at the same time, the visitor to the Mercedes-Benz museum is encouraged to think about safety issues and to see them in historical and technological context. Awareness of road safety is effectively integrated into the museum's purpose.

Similarly, other companies with an overt interest in safety have sponsored special displays such as the Volvo display at the National Motor Museum in Beaulieu. Here safety developments



Figure 2: Crash dummies - Mercedes-Benz Museum, Stuttgart

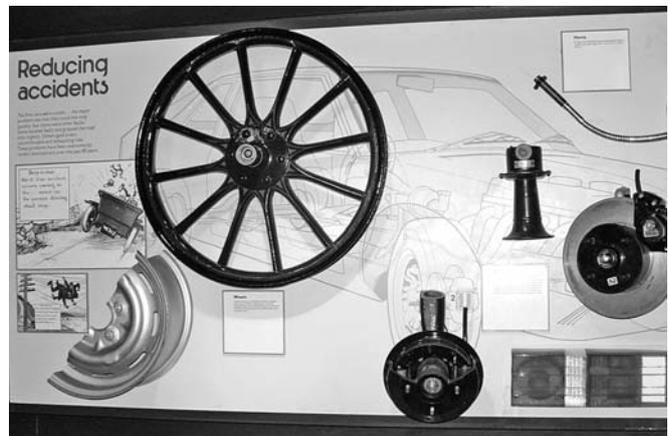


Figure 3: Safety improvements in vehicle engineering display - National Motor Museum, Beaulieu



Figure 4: Airbag display – National Motor Museum, Beaulieu

2 Notation from an interpretive board at the Mercedes-Benz Museum, Stuttgart, Germany, 2008

are linked chronologically with developments in Volvo engineering. Images of historic cars and descriptions of their various engineering features developed with safety in mind are displayed covering windscreens, bumpers, seat belts, developments in vehicle styling, doors and handles, indicators, lights, mirrors, and tyres. The display effectively takes the material culture of road safety including air bag mechanisms and various automotive parts, detaches them from the motor vehicle and mounts them onto a generic car body drawn on the display [Figures 3 and 4]. The effect is to make a clear link between the museum as a repository of objects and the material culture of road safety. Although the vehicle collection at Beaulieu takes prominence and is in some ways detached from the safety display which is set in an alcove, still visitors are encouraged to think about road safety within the context of vehicle engineering and as part of a broad collection of the material culture of motoring.

At the Glasgow Transport Museum the case is rather different. Without a brand to promote this museum uses a more general approach to incorporating its road safety display as part of its primary focus on vehicles. The road safety section includes a 1996 crash test car driven into a barrier at 40mph (64kph) in the Transport Research Laboratory of Berkshire and a video showing the car in action. Nearby is an ambulance and a Police patrol car from 1985 used in the local area. Large backboards display historic road safety posters and television advertisements from the 1950s through to the 1990s including one featuring James Dean. Interspersed with these are interpretive panels giving road safety statistical information and general commentary. The connection with the modern day is made through a panel which reads 'Around 1200 people visit the Museum each day. Nearly 70 will be seriously injured in a road accident during their life.'³ In this example the display presents vehicles with a road safety connection as part of the vehicle collection. At the same, the display includes an overt promotion of road safety by making use of historic campaign material.

At the Heritage Motor Centre in England large back boards discuss various elements of improved engineering, such as airbags, brakes and steering interspersed with diagrammatic and video representations of their operation, or, as in the case of the discussion on tyre types, actual examples behind glass. These boards are intended to suggest that cars are safer now than in the past because of engineering developments. 'Your car can help you if you crash!!' the board reads. 'Today, cars are designed to protect the people in them' but instead of showing incremental improvement in safer engineering the displays more generally compare the advantages of new vehicles over old. The improvements are therefore absolute and static. In this sense the displays may suggest to some visitors that we have already reached the safe state. The use of objects in this display

is minimal and therefore there is little connection between the issue of road safety and the motor vehicles on the museum floor. They remain the focus of the visitor's interest.

Road Engineering - the environment

Improvements to the vehicle, the driver and the road share a three-pronged responsibility for road safety. The museum curator must employ an imaginative use of vehicle parts or other relevant objects to make an effective road safety display about vehicle engineering but when looking at the role of road engineering the problems of material culture are exacerbated further. It is possible to replicate some aspects of road engineering in museums through the building and interpretation of models. This is easiest in transport museums which have a broader object base and interpretative purpose than the pure motoring museum. In the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Belfast and the Swiss Transport Museum in Lucerne, for example, improvements to road surfaces – from dirt tracks through paved, Macadamised, tarred and concrete roads to widespread use of asphalt - are depicted through models based on samples of the various surfaces but the limitations to effective display and discussion are genuine. At Beaulieu display boards are used to discuss roadside lighting, and traffic flow management with signs and traffic lights. In the Glasgow Transport Museum and the London Transport Museum road engineering, traffic reduction and traffic management are implicitly displayed through public transport exhibits, town planning designs and interpretive boards that discuss government planning and regulation. Traffic planning, better traffic flow and traffic reduction schemes are all part of the motoring story but difficult to incorporate with material culture.

Human Behaviour- the driver

The most controversial element of road safety for any museum curator must be the contribution of the driver or the human element. What is the material culture that effectively displays this aspect of the road safety story? The connection between road safety and the reinvigoration of the driver, through interpreting the driver's material culture as part of the motoring story, is not well made and, to be fair, difficult to do. When driver behaviour and road safety is the subject, museums usually resort to information boards along the lines of driver education promotional material. A number of museums have introduced interpretive panels that make general statements about road death and injury. Both Glasgow Transport Museum and the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu direct the visitor to contemplate the statistics of road trauma in relation to their own lives. Visitors to Beaulieu are reminded that 'While you enjoy your visit to Beaulieu, three people will be killed on our roads and seventy-five more will be injured'.⁴

³ Notation from an interpretive board at the Glasgow Transport Museum, Glasgow, Scotland, 2008

⁴ Notation from an interpretive board at Beaulieu.

Perhaps the Heritage Motor Centre has gone furthest by incorporating six bays with road safety information and displays produced by Warwickshire County Council. Each bay follows a different road safety issue as it applies to different groups within society. They are named:

1. Road safety affects us all . . . find out where to go for more information.
2. Giving up driving is a difficult decision, but it's one we all have to make.
3. The Highway Code: When did you last read a copy?
4. You are 40 times more likely to die as a motorcycle rider than as a car driver.
5. 1 in 5 newly qualified drivers have a crash within a year.
6. When teaching young children road safety keep it simple.

The bays mostly contain panel boards and take away leaflets but at the bottom of the fourth panel is a crashed motorbike and lying beside it a set of leathers and helmet stylised as a fallen rider [Figure 5]. The implication is unmistakable and represents the strongest representation of road death in all of the museums surveyed for this study.

Both the Swiss Museum of Transport and the National Motor Museum in South Australia have opted for interactive road safety exhibits that promote active safety. In Lucerne visitors are asked to consider impairments to perception especially through alcohol and drug consumption. They can engage in an interactive chat about alcohol and safe driving with the bartender at 'Bar Chez Johnny'. Another exhibit allows the visitor to test their reaction times. At the National Motor Museum in South Australia is the MAC Safe Driving Interactive which helps visitors to learn about tailgating, concentration when driving and the impact of speed. The museum advertises the inclusion of this equipment as fitting with the aims of the police to educate drivers, saying that 'It is hoped that this educational tool will promote the transference of knowledge in a meaningful way, and encourage a change in behaviour, reducing the incidents of road trauma' [15]. Perhaps it is the human aspect of road safety that is the most difficult to represent in a motoring museum and yet road death is a statistical fact and an undeniable part of motoring history. Occasionally it creeps into the motoring story as in Musée National de l'Automobile where we learn that the Paris to Madrid car rally of 1903 was cancelled at Bordeaux because of the large number of dead and injured among both drivers and spectators or that one of the Renault brothers was himself killed in a car crash. But on the whole, road death is difficult to mix with passion for the vehicle itself. It seems incompatible with the experience of admiration, indeed veneration which traditionally encourages patronage of motor museums. It is this contradiction in the motoring story that has always been difficult to express and remains so.



Figure 5: Heritage Motor Centre, Gaydon

Conclusion

In some ways the road safety exhibits in motoring and transport museums give the impression of being add-on extras. This is because they sit very much in the mode of road safety promotional exercises that could be found in any venue for the purpose of raising road safety awareness. Explicit road safety promotion is certainly valuable and part of the motoring story but it is possible to incorporate the road safety story into the museum in a more subtle way.

The key point to make is that road safety should not be seen as an add-on extra but rather as an integral part of the history of motoring. This history includes developments in vehicle engineering and an evolving complex relationship between human beings and their cars. In this the Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart has been very successful. To be effective in museums, road safety must become more integrated into the culture of the museum as part of the way in which the motor vehicles are presented, displayed and discussed. This may require a rethinking of the purpose of the motor museum. Moreover, it may require curators to consider developments in museology occurring elsewhere in the sector, especially evident for example in postcolonial museology and the emergence of community museums and post-museums which allow museums to tell competing stories, discuss uncomfortable knowledge and expose painful history in their exhibitions. Motor museums have been largely trapped in the nineteenth century modernist model whereby the motor vehicle is displayed in a rational way for visitors to enjoy and for enthusiasts to venerate. But museums offer something unique and that is an engagement with the past through the use of objects. This presents road safety advocates with a new opportunity to encourage the public to consider road safety in a much more integrated and involved way. The best road safety displays in museums are those that are intrinsic to the vehicle displays themselves, incorporated within the purpose of the museum and those that make creative use of the available material culture of road safety. Road safety may be about the present and the future but it is worthwhile also to consider the past.

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