
VISITOR STUDIES IN GERMANY: PAST, PRESENT, AND POTENTIAL

by Volker Kirchberg

This paper was presented at the Session International Marketplace of Ideas at the American Association of Museums 94th Annual Meeting, Cleveland, Ohio, on April 26, 1999. Comments are welcome addressed to Dr. Volker Kirchberg, University of Lueneburg, and Basica Research Institute, Glockengiesserwall 26, D-20095 Hamburg, Germany, e-mail: V.Kirchberg@t-online.de or kirchberg@uni-lueneburg.de

1. The Development of Socio-Demographic Visitor Studies in Germany

Visitor surveys are a very old and also a very young phenomenon in Germany. The tradition is old even for Americans. A surprisingly comprehensive study was conducted by Ms. Else Biram-Bodenheimer in 1911-1912 (cf. Klein 1998). In her cultural sociology study, *The Industrial City as Foundation for New Art Development*, Ms. Biram described and analyzed the cultural life of the city of Mannheim. She interpreted statistics about sales and customers, observed and talked to museum visitors, and distributed more than 12,000 questionnaires in cultural institutions and high schools. In the questionnaire, she asked about structure, frequency, and assessment of various cultural activities, about the kind of apartment furniture, about the recognition of architecture in the city, and about the motives to play a musical instrument—and all this without the simplifications of today's computer support! Her analysis had been initiated by the local social democratic *Freier Bund* and its early workers' education program under the leadership of the director of the Mannheim art museum, Fritz Wichert, one of the most progressive museum directors of his time in Germany (cf. Klein & Bachmayer 1981). However, it seems that Else Biram was too far ahead of her time. Nobody took interest in her work, and with the forced downsizing of German sociology and the emigration of many German sociologists from 1933 on, visitor studies came to a complete halt.

The re- or new emergence of visitor studies in Germany (West Germany) occurred in the second half of the 1960s, although the emergence was quite feeble. As with sociology in general, visitor studies was re-imported from the USA. For the record: the first documented new visitor survey in Germany was conducted in the Germanisches

Museum in Nuremberg in 1964. The introduction of structured and scientifically based visitor research can probably be pinpointed to the year 1973 when Heiner Treinen, one the most important museum researchers in Germany, formulated several approaches toward a sociology of museums (Treinen 1973, cf. Klein 1996). Museum visitor research in Germany is still primarily conducted at universities. For the last two and a half decades, studies of museum visitors in Germany have been concentrated at two locations: the Sociological Institute at the University of Karlsruhe (directed by Hans-Joachim Klein), and the Institute for Museum Studies (*Institut für Museumskunde*) at the State Museums of Berlin (*Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*) (directed by Bernhard Graf).

Since 1981, the Berlin Institute for Museum Studies has documented annual numbers of visits to German museums. In 1997, more than 92 million visits were counted in 4,274 museums. The most frequent types of museum visits were to local history and life museums (18.1 million visits), followed by art museums (14.4 million visits), science and technology museums (13.6 million visits), history museums (12.6 million visits), and natural history museums (6.7 million visits), with visits to multi-purpose museums making up

the total (Institut für Museumskunde 1998).

In a meta-survey of visitor studies in 1978, Klein and his colleagues from the University of Karlsruhe sent a questionnaire about causes, time, size, objects and representativeness of visitor surveys to 177 large museums in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Klein & Bachmayer 1981). Klein estimates that only 3-5% of all museums did a visitor survey at that time, mostly in the second half of the 1970s. Most of these surveys relied on short questionnaires placed in the entry area that people could voluntarily fill out or ignore, resulting in a considerable response bias. Only museum personnel counted and analyzed the results, without skilled help from outside the museum, and most museums produced only internal reports. Although many different visitor traits were investigated, almost all analyses simply listed frequencies without applying correlation analysis or other statistical methods. The monofunctionality of these surveys, concentrating on imminent local goals and studying mostly demographic features of visitors, led to absence of questions

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about other leisure time activities and interests, and to ignorance of issues such as barriers for non-visitors.

At approximately the same time in the USA, DiMaggio, Useem and Brown (1977), under contract from the National Endowment for the Arts, evaluated the quality and utilization of visitor studies. They analyzed 270 visitor studies and concluded that the quality of research depends on the financial resources and the professional background of the study director. Furthermore, the quality of the evaluated studies did not correlate at all with their later use; they had a symbolic value and not a practical purpose. That is, they were mostly of political value to legitimize internal management decisions or fundraising efforts, and the results only had an impact if they corresponded to the expectations of the contractor, if the contractor was powerful, and if the study director had professional authority. These results match the statements Klein and Bachmeyer (1981) formulated for visitor studies in Germany.

A triggering event in Germany to start visitor studies in the 1970s, however amateurish they might have been, was the political announcement by new social democratic governments on federal, state and local levels of a dramatic future “lack of educational skills” in this decade (cf. Bötzkies, Graf and Worsch 1994). Museums were requested to help educate the masses. Therefore, the function of museums as educating institutions with an emphasis on cultural justice and with a link to the social and political present steered the contents and interpretation of most surveys.

2. The Emergence of Evaluation Studies in Germany

This pursuit of education as a new major goal of the heavily state subsidized museums resulted directly in some of the first evaluation studies in Germany. According to Klein and Bachmeyer (1981), Bonfadelli, Strobel and Ullmann used survey techniques—such as entrance and exit surveys plus observations—in 1973 to quantify the educational impact and the potentially changing attitude (toward art) of museum visitors. Klein also did some of the first evaluations, intended to aid with the redesign several galleries of the

Deutsches Museum in Munich. However, a systematic evaluation of exhibitions, as introduced by Screven in the 1970s and continued by Bitgood, Loomis and several other American researchers, had no immediate and wide-ranging impact on the design of exhibitions. In the U.S. most of these researchers were psychologists; in Germany a majority of researchers were sociologists.

The 1990s saw a surge of evaluation studies in Germany. This change probably started with the planning of the new “Haus der Geschichte” (museum of contemporary history of the Federal Republic of Germany) in Bonn. During a period of six years, from the six traveling pilot exhibitions to the final design of the interior of the main building, this museum conducted the whole spectrum of evaluation methods, inviting American evaluation experts such as Harris Shettel and Ross Loomis to initiate this new type of visitor studies in Germany, but also conferring with German museum sociologists such as Hans-Joachim Klein and Heiner Treinen. Formative evaluation was the primary method used, but there also was some summative evaluation. In addition, these pilot exhibitions served not only as stages for continuous improvements but also as mock-ups within the context of a front-end evaluation. After the 1994 grand opening of the museum in Bonn, the series of evaluation studies did not stop. The

“Haus der Geschichte” continuously applies formative and summative evaluation, but also some front-end evaluations (cf. Schäfer 1996).

A few years later than the “Haus der Geschichte,” but definitely in the tradition of the educational policy of the 1970s, the “Anstiftung” Research Institute in Munich, the German Public Health Museum (*Deutsches Hygiene-Museum*) in Dresden, and the Institute for Sociology at the University of Karlsruhe, under the auspices of the Federal Agency for Public Health, evaluated a series of exhibitions. The common theme for these exhibitions was prevention of diseases through healthy personal behavior, and the main issue was whether and how one can optimize the educational value of these exhibitions (cf. Dauschek & Rymarcewicz 1997). A typical example was the exhibition *Baffling Beauty* about beauty,

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Visitors to the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican Museum in Rome.

health, and our bodies (cf. Munro 1996). The evaluation for this exhibition lasted five years, starting with front-end evaluations in 1991 and 1992 (i.e., face-to-face interviews, group discussions, focus groups, and an evaluation of this evaluation by an outside expert in 1992), followed by formative evaluations (i.e. mock-ups and interviews with cued persons, and publications about this method in 1993 and 1994), and ending with summative evaluation (i.e. observations, indoor-outdoor surveys, control surveys, telephone interviews a weeks after the visit, and qualitative interviews), plus book and video publications about the evaluation in 1995 and 1996. As a comprehensive evaluation study, this meticulous project is unparalleled in Germany.

3. The Step from In-House Surveys to Representative Population Surveys

In 1991, Nuisl and Schulze assessed the staffs of most German museums and concluded that they were not only uninformed about their audiences but know even less about their non-visitors. Although more and more museum managers admitted the importance of evaluation studies for museum displays, they did not grasp the potential functions of representative population studies.

To change the focus from the visitor to the non-visitor would imply the admission that museums *are* embedded in society. The idea of actively and even aggressively outreaching to non-visitors is still a relatively progressive thought in German museums, not easily accepted by many museum directors. Most German museums do not understand that a visitor survey *in* the institution *cannot* substitute for a representative survey *outside* the institution. Repeatedly, social scientists complained about the lack of realistic data on non-visitors and about the level of ineptitude of museums trying to conduct visitor surveys. "*Measured by the conjured significance, statistical methods and*

the certainty of results are grotesquely underdeveloped" (Klein 1990:30). "*Sociologically advised analyses of visitor composition...need a representative sample of the whole population universe*" (Nuisl and Schulze 1991:24). Not many visitor surveys ask the question, "*Who does actually not come to the museum...All one can establish right now is only the fact that some people stay away. Barriers, a lack of information, prejudices, different interests—all this can be authentically investigated only in a direct survey of non-visitors*" (Klein & Bachmayer 1981:86).

Although outreach to people that may be future visitors is a common concept in the USA, this is not the case in Germany where substitution of "customer" for "visitor" and "market research" for "visitor research" still produces goose pimples among museum directors. However, museum directors, especially younger ones, increasingly follow strategic management plans that include visitor- and non-visitor research. Making museums more attractive is a direct reaction to the continuous decline of state subsidies for the arts. In Germany, this decline is partly an *absolute* drop in support monies, but mostly a *relative* drop due to a general increase of annual costs in museums without a corresponding increase of public subsidies. From 1985 to 1993, expenses of German museums doubled from 1.2 billion DM (approximately US \$0.6 billion, in 1999) to more than 2.4 billion DM (US \$1.3 billion).

Audience representativeness is an important criterion for visitor surveys that function as marketing tools. In the past, success of a museum was only dependent on its professional reputation and not on the museum's acceptance by a broader public. Recently, a slow transformation process has dawned on the high culture scene of Germany. As fewer, or at least stagnating, public subsidies make museum management aware that public monies are not infinite, the overall reliance on public subsidies is fading in Germany. Responsible museums that try to increase their attractiveness in new fields are seeking new financial sources, and one pillar of a modern art of museum management rests on market research. Thus, in the eyes of these museums, the visitors become clients. They are customers for a product offered by museums almost solely because of their demand. But the question remains: who is this customer, and who is the potential *new* customer?



Listening to the tour guide—St. Peter's Basilica, Rome.

4. Past Population Studies for Museums in Germany

Up to 1995, big random sample surveys of the population were still an exception in Germany. If conducted at all, they were mostly not representative for the whole of

the country, but rather for a single city. Also, they were always only a part of a general survey e.g., on urban leisure activities.

Only two surveys in Germany attempted to gather representative data on museum visitors and non-visitors before 1995. In 1977 in West Germany, 1,991 people were asked about frequency of museum visits, the purpose, and the barriers (Eisenbeis 1980). The main explanatory variable was, again, educational attainment. Thirty seven percent of the population were non-visitors in 1977. In 1992, the Center for Cultural Research in Bonn conducted a similar survey of the German population (*Zentrum für Kulturforschung* 1992), with a total sample of 3,065 people (now including both eastern and western Germany). Regarding museums, the main interest of Germans was visiting local history and local life museums: 38% of all Germans are interested in this type of museum, followed by art museums (24%). Sixteen percent claimed not to be interested in museums at all. In 1992, 39% of the population were reported as non-visitors. That is almost no change from 1977.

The Center for Urban Research at the University of Hamburg did a telephone survey on cultural activities in this city in 1984. The results are interesting because the author repeated parts of this survey in Baltimore in 1989; therefore, an international comparison was possible. Educational attainment was important in both cities for visits to museums; however, less in Hamburg than in Baltimore. In Hamburg, age had a positive effect (the older the visitor, the more visits), whereas in Baltimore age had a negative effect (the older the visitor, the fewer visits). In Hamburg, retirees were a major group of museum visitors, whereas in Baltimore people in an established family with children were a major group of museum visitors (Kirchberg 1994). This last comparison shows how erroneous it is to generalize from local surveys to other geographical entities.

Focusing on socioeconomic and demographic factors as explanatory for visits to four different types of museums, in 1995 this author examined a sample of almost 17,000 people in Germany about their museum behavior and attitudes. This is the largest representative population survey about museum visits and non-visits (cf. Kirchberg 1996b) in Germany to date. The general participation rate (i.e., persons that visited a museum within the last 12 months) was 26%. Again, more educated people visit museums more often; however, the impact is weaker for natural history museums and stronger for art museums. Income is also a strong determining factor: the more af-

fluent the visitor, the more visits. Furthermore, this survey found that professionals are not the main museum visitors, but rather students; while workers are less avid museum-goers. In general, the previous finding that age has a negative impact to visits of museums could not be confirmed; especially for *art* museums, the number and probability of visits *increases* with age. For *natural history* museums, however, the effect is in the opposite direction and the probability of visits *decreases* with age: the younger the visitor, the more visits to this type of museum. Gender specific effects on museums visits could be corroborated: more men than women visit science museums, and more women than men visit art museums. Living with children has a significant impact on museum going. Visits to natural history museums *increases*, and visits to art museums *decreases* if there are children living in the household.

It is absolutely necessary to differentiate the types of museums when conducting population surveys; otherwise, the results are misleading. One main result of this survey was the explicit contrast of art museum audiences and

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natural history museum audiences. On the one end of a socially structured museum audience continuum, we find natural history museum visitors; on the other end art museum visitors. Furthermore, characteristics of typical non-visitors are very similar to characteristics of typical visitors to natural history museums but contrary to characteristics of typical visitors to art museums. There is a *continuum* of social and demo-

graphic characteristics from the high culture museum visitor via the popular museum visitor to the non-visitor. Paralleling this continuum, the degree of educational achievement declines from art museum audiences via natural history museum audiences to non-visitors. In other words, there is no social distinction between *general visitors* and *general non-visitors*. The existence of this continuum should be an incentive to those museum representatives in Germany that are interested in outreaching to new visitors.

For example, research for the “Haus der Geschichte” demonstrated empirically that people in certain life-styles increasingly combine different leisure time activities that overlap with a visit to a history museum. Therefore, one of the recommendations was to organize *Kabarett* programs (i.e., staged comedy programs with a political content) in the “Haus der Geschichte” (cf. Kirchberg 1996a). Parts of the 1995 survey were repeated in 1997 and in 1999 to observe the changing attitudes and behavior of

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the German population toward this specific museum. It is evident that life-style approaches can be generally useful for museum marketing (cf. Kirchberg 1998).

5. Service Tests in Museums

Another type of visitor research with potential for future use in Germany are "mystery visitor" museum tests that I developed and conducted in 1998. Since the public sector has not been able to satisfy the increasing demand for funds from cultural institutions, municipalities are freeing many arts venues from the restrictive German public accounting system. For the first time, government authorities are giving arts institutions the legal and economic autonomy to raise funds and keep revenues for their own purposes. In the past bureaucratic accounting system, there was no incentive to increase revenues through entrance fees, for example, or from museum shops, because all revenues had to be channeled directly back into the municipal budget. The *commercialization* of museums in Germany, through the maintenance of their own revenue-generating offerings, started in 1993 (cf. Anheier, Kirchberg & Toepler, in preparation). Up to then, 90% of all museum expenses in Germany were covered by government subsidies. This share dropped to 87% in 1993 and lower in the following years. For example, in 1999 it was 67% and 63% respectively for art museums in Hamburg and Frankfurt. For the economic survival of these museums it became essential to examine potential visitors as customers and revenue sources.

The museums' awareness of customer satisfaction is a new stage of understanding visitors. At this stage, museums, as leisure-time venues, feel accountable to the visitor. Museums acknowledge that visitors, like clients, have needs and wants; the museum is obligated to understand and meet these needs (Doering 1999).

This acknowledgment is evidenced by the cooperation of 21 museums in Germany in a mystery visitor test of service qualities in 1998. My institute carried out this study on the service quality of 21 major museums in nine cities all over Germany. We conducted a total of 126 tests (i.e., six professionally testing researchers in each museum), carefully selecting these testers along the representative composition of museum visitorships. We reacted to critical voices and tried to achieve representativeness, reliability and validity when gathering these data through mystery visitors.

Four major service fields have been tested: arrival ex-

perience and welcoming, orientation and peripheral service in the museum, personal communication with the museum personnel, and the quality of information transferal. The major criterion for selecting these service items was to replay what was going on in the mind of a visitor. What does he or she experience before entering? What happens when he or she buys a ticket? How does he or she get a first orientation to the museum offerings? How bright, quiet, or cool are the conditions in the exhibition area? How good and how accessible are the sanitary facilities, the museum cafe and the museum shop? How polite are the personnel? The major result of this study is that friendliness and politeness of the museum personnel are essential for museum services. The first experience when entering the museum is also important and leaves its imprint throughout the visit and beyond (cf. Kirchberg, forthcoming).

The Bertelsmann Foundation shared these results with the participating museums to implement improvements. There will be more emphasis on training museum person-

nel that are in contact with the public. Most German museum employees are state employees and therefore have the right to keep a state job even if they do not meet increased job performance expectations. The most competent people in museums are quite often not the people in contact with the public. To change this has been one of the functions of this type of visitor study.

"It is absolutely necessary to differentiate the types of museums when conducting population surveys; otherwise, the results are misleading."

6. Some Concluding Remarks

This paper documents five chronological phases of visitor studies in Germany. Each new phase, however, did not replace an older phase (or type of visitor study), but added to a cumulative variety of applied research in this field.

I would distinguish:

- a first phase with the introduction of *in-house visitor surveys*, asking mostly about socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of visitors (and neglecting sampling rules or other methodological knowledge). This phase started in the second half of the 1960s;
- a second phase with the introduction of a continuous, systematically, and methodologically more calibrated conduct of in-house visitor surveys and an institutionalized and centrally registered *counting* of visits to German museums in the first half of the 1980s;
- a third phase with the introduction of *evaluation visitor studies* in the beginning of the 1990s;
- a fourth phase with the continuous conduct of representative *population surveys*, not only for local catchment

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areas of specific museums, but for the whole of Germany in the middle of the 1990s;

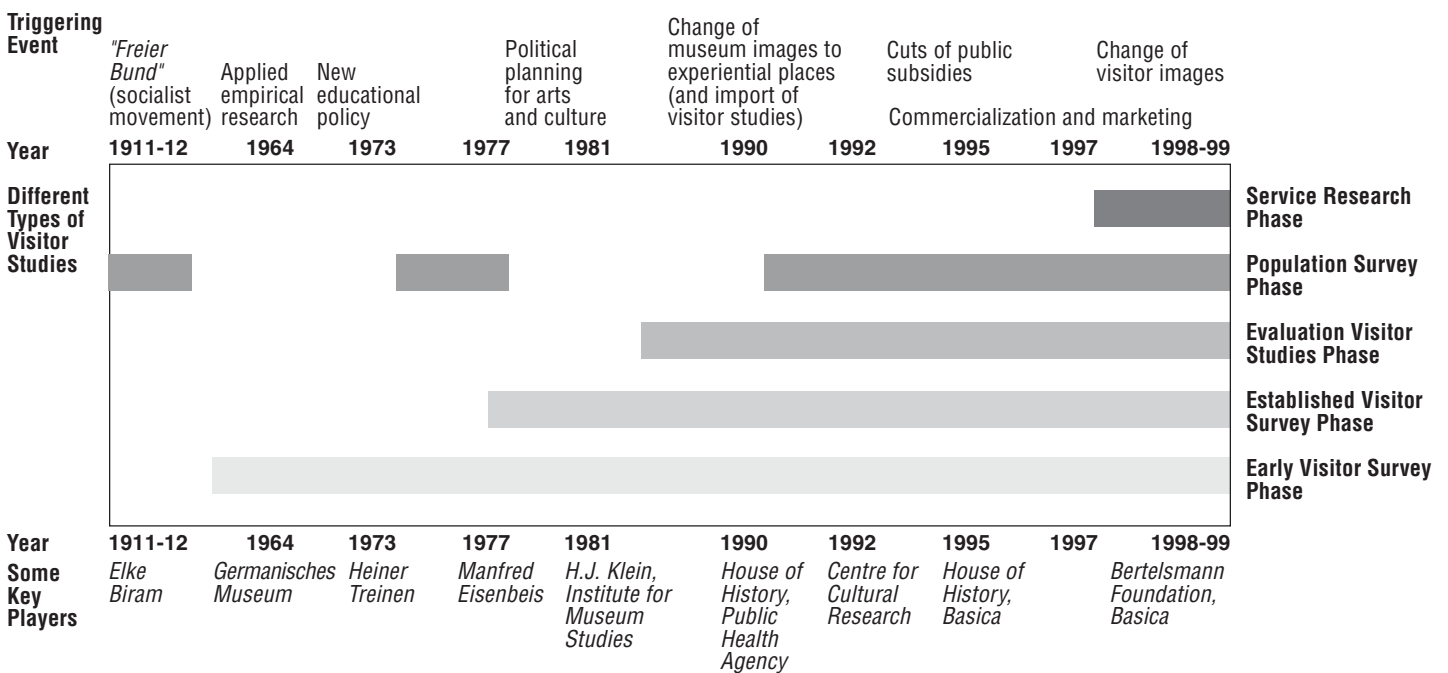
- and a fifth phase with the introduction of *service tests* by mystery visitors for improving the relationship between visitors and museums as institutions serving visitors as sovereign customers.

The introduction of each new visitor study phase can be related to a triggering event correlated mostly with changes in society. The **first phase** relates to the broad emergence of social empirical methods in Germany as tools, not only for academic purposes but for market research, in the beginning of the 1960s, and to the social democratic policy of general education not only within the school system but in arts institutions starting at the end of the 1960s. I label this as *early visitor survey phase*. The **second phase** relates to the need for political planning and to the appearance of new social movements (e.g., green party, neighborhood grassroots organizations, gender politics, peace movement) and the subsequent need to organize arts and culture as an important, class-overlapping part of German society at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. I label this as *established visitor*

survey phase. The **third phase** can be derived from the earlier political and social program for educating through museums and importation of evaluation methods from the USA, but also from the new public image of museums as entertaining leisure-time venues within an experiential society at the beginning of the 1990s. I label this as *evaluation phase*. The **fourth phase** has been triggered by cuts in state and municipal budgets for arts and culture and a continuous expansion of museums as places for several experiences (educating, entertaining etc.). I label this as *marketing research phase*. The **last phase**, still very new and fragile, is based on an increased significance of marketing in museums and awareness of the need to provide a wholesome satisfactory consumption experience in and around the museum for the visitor. I label this as *service research phase*. Once again, the older phase has not been substituted by a newer one; rather, all types of visitor studies co-exist. Nowadays, there are many in-house visitor surveys (in the somewhat unsatisfactory style of the 1960s), along with qualified long-term evaluation visitor studies and even some representative population surveys.

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Time Chart of Visitor Studies in Germany



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- Volker Kirchberg teaches sociology at the University of Lueneburg and at the Free University Berlin. He is writing a monograph on the social change of museums and on audience structures. He is also the executive of the Basica Research Institute, conducting mostly visitor research. He will move to Washington, D.C., this summer.*