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## Exhibition Interpretation and the Visitor Experience

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Exhibition interpretation and the visitor experience  
A case study of the 'Goodbye Dublin:  
The War of Independence in the City' Commemorative Exhibition.

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## 1. Summary

This case study explores the techniques used to interpret a commemorative exhibition staged in Dublin city library between the 14th of August and the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, 2019. The case discusses the way in which multiple media were employed to communicate the exhibition narrative to visitors, and how this resulted in very emotive, personal and meaningful visitor experiences. Through the use of a range of audio-visuais, original images, text, memorabilia and guided tours, the exhibition provided a multi-sensory experience, that engaged different cohorts of visitors with the collections, information and ideas on display. They provided a powerful means of immersing visitors, linking key events, conveying information through both textual and visual narratives, and offered different ways for visitors to interact with the exhibition.



*Figure1: The 'Goodbye Dublin: The War of Independence in the City Exhibition*

*Source: author*

## **2. Background to the case**

This case study was developed using research undertaken as part of two projects. Some of the data comes from the Sustainable Industry Event Knowledge (SEIK) project, ([www.seikproject.com](http://www.seikproject.com)) funded by TU Dublin Impact, The National Forum of Teaching and Learning and The Higher Education Authority. The case study draws on data generated from interviews with a number of industry practitioners. It also draws on data gathered through the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) funded Festspace project (<http://festspace.net/>).

The research explores the tools and techniques used for interpreting a commemorative exhibition and the impact on the visitor experience. It highlights how the use of multi-sensory media creates an immersive environment that engages visitors, rendering the exhibition narrative more meaningful and memorable, prompting visitors to make their own discoveries and form their own understandings and meanings.

## **3. Methodology**

The primary research informing this case study was conducted between the 14th of August and the 31st of October, 2019. It involved interviews with organisers of, and visitors to, the 'Goodbye Dublin: The War of Independence in the City' commemorative exhibition in Dublin City library. Also included are insights from interviews undertaken with event industry practitioners as part of the Sustainable Event Industry Knowledge project (SEIK). The empirical research was supported by secondary research.

## **4. Setting a context**

Exhibitions are both a form of communication and a medium of creative expression (Lorenc et al., 2010). A challenge for all exhibitions is finding ways to bring the content to life, to make it meaningful, memorable and accessible. In this context, organisers employ a range of tools and techniques to interpret the content to make the exhibition accessible to wide and diverse audiences, and create memorable, interactive experiences (Haesler, et al. 2016). Interpretation is a process of communication that is defined by Dobbins (2019) as the way exhibitions engage their audience with the collections, information, and ideas on display. It refers to what can be done to make sense of the exhibition content (e.g., develop understanding, enhance knowledge, reveal meaning, connect emotionally), as well as to what is encountered in the space (e.g., text, graphics, models, interactives, etc.), (Dobbins, 2019). Well planned interpretation helps the exhibition visitor understand and appreciate the collections on display, it supports learning, arouses interest and provokes curiosity. All of this makes the visitor experience richer, relevant and more meaningful. Interpreting an exhibition can be a complex and varied process, it involves interpretation of the individual objects on display, each with their own story to tell, as well as the creation of a central narrative that underpins the entire exhibition. It is achieved through careful selection, organization and presentation of the objects in the exhibition. Interpretation, McKinty notes, goes way beyond merely providing information about something, it has to do with communication, and the total visitor experience, from the minute they set foot inside the door, to the moment they leave' (1999: 3). It is core to creating memorable and engaging experiences, immersing visitors in the exhibition narratives, enticing them to explore the

stories being told, and prompting them to make their own discoveries and form their own understandings and meanings.

#### **4.1 Interpretative techniques**

There are a wide range of interpretative techniques that can be used depending on the objectives of the exhibition, the collection on display, the profile of the visitors, and the messages that need to be conveyed. A further consideration is the need to achieve a balance between the quality and the quantity of information provided, as an overload of information may impact negatively on the quality of the experience. Interpretation may include for example, the use of audio-visuales, photographs/images, personal interpretation by a guide, static and graphic media or interactive models and projections, wall texts & labels and other forms of written descriptions or explanations, lighting, as well as digital technologies and interactive experiences. While traditionally exhibitions were designed primarily as visual experiences, increasingly they are employing a range of multi-sensory techniques that engage a range of senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste) to facilitate more interactive and immersive experiences. The [Museum of Food & Drink](#) for example, used edible exhibits to inspire and educate visitors on the history, culture and science behind food. While the [Van Gogh Live](#) art exhibition, is a multi-sensory art exhibition incorporating light, color and sound, to create 'an unforgettable multi-sensory experience' (<https://grande-experiences.com/van-gogh-alive/>).

The use of different audio-visual technologies can make the exhibition more immersive and appealing, creating meaningful experiences for visitors of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. It is important to remember, however, that the interplay of audio-visuales, displays, technologies, lighting etc. all need to be considered in the context of what is most appropriate for each individual exhibition. What is key to interpreting any form of exhibition or display, Frost (2017, p.) explains in his blog post 'A question of interpretation', is to keep in mind that it is not just 'about providing information that visitors passively absorb, but more about encouraging visitors to actively engage, to look closer at objects and to reveal something relevant that they might otherwise have missed'.

There are many different types of exhibitions and each have their own aims, objectives and approach to interpretation resulting in a range of different experiences. The following case study focuses on one particular type, a commemorative exhibition, and explores the ways in which the exhibition was interpreted, and the resulting experiences of visitors to the exhibition.

#### **5. The Case Study: 'Goodbye Dublin: The War of Independence in the City' Commemorative Exhibition**

The 'Goodbye Dublin: The War of Independence in the City' commemorative exhibition was staged in Dublin City Library & Archive, between the 14th of August and the 31st of October 2019, as part of the annual Dublin Festival of History. Commemorative exhibitions are unique in that their intention is usually to affirm and reinforce memories that provide a sense of heritage and identity (Frost & Laing, 2013). They frequently depict scenes of war and conflict, and '... offer products which revolve around death, suffering or the macabre with an often commemorative, educational and reflective message' (Stone, 2006: 153). This particular exhibition commemorated the role that Dublin city played in the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921). It related the key events leading up to the war and charting the many atrocities, ambushes, raids and loss of lives that occurred in Dublin during the period,

emphasis was placed on telling the story from the perspective of ordinary citizens caught up in the conflict. In staging the exhibition, the library had a number of key objectives and challenges including:

### **Key objectives of the exhibition**

- To promote the library's collections and making them accessible to a wide and diverse audience.
- To share knowledge, information and create educational opportunities.
- To provide a new and different way of presenting the story of Dublin's role in the Irish War of Independence.
- To focus on telling a local story, that visitors could relate to.
- To increase the number & types of visitors to the library.

### **Key Challenges**

- Finding ways to impart a difficult, contested and complex story.
- Meeting the needs and expectations of diverse audiences with differing levels of knowledge and understanding.
- Facilitating different learning styles.
- Providing different layers, avenues and ways for visitors to access the story.

## **6. Interpreting the exhibition**

The exhibition was staged in the main Dublin City library building, which has a central position in Dublin city centre. Signs on the street outside the library informed of the exhibition and admission was free. Once in the foyer of the building, visitors were directed by signage to a room directly opposite the public lending library, it was here that the exhibition was displayed. While the overall numbers of visitors to the exhibition was lower than the organisers had hoped for, it did manage to attract a range of visitor types including recent and more long-standing residents, as well as tourists visiting the city. Many of these were new visitors to the library, while others had not engaged with libraries for many years, and had returned once more because of the exhibition.

The exhibition employed a number of techniques to tell the story of the war; this included original film footage, images/photographs, memorabilia, artefacts, text panels & labels, as well as tours/talks. The main narrative of the exhibition told the overarching story of the War of Independence in Dublin city, and an important theme running through the exhibition was the impact of the war on ordinary civilians and everyday life. The following sections discuss the different interpretative techniques in more detail.

### **6.1 The use of audio-visuals**

At the centre of the exhibition a documentary style film, depicting original footage and scenes of the city during the war, played on a continuous loop. As can be seen in the image above, seats were placed in front of a large screen, where visitors, surrounded by exhibition panels, could sit and immerse themselves in the story. The film provided unique insights into key events of the war and its impact on the city. It portrayed scenes of devastated buildings, soldiers and army tanks passing through city streets and revealed tangible evidence of the atrocities of the time where ordinary people, in the

course of their daily life, were forced to walk around dead bodies in the streets of Dublin. The film soundtrack was impactful in a number of ways, firstly it provided a story narrative, that included original sounds and newsreels from the period, but additionally, it provided a backdrop to the entire exhibition. Regardless of where they were in the exhibition, visitors were surrounded by the sounds of gunshots and warfare, bringing the entire exhibition 'to life' and giving a real sense of this difficult time in Dublin's history.

## **6.2 Original images/photographs**

Throughout the exhibition a range of original, primarily black & white photographs and images were displayed. These depicted images of well-known political figures, ordinary citizens as well as scenes of destruction and trauma resulting from the conflict. The images gave a sense of authenticity and realism to the exhibition and the lack of colour, through the use of primarily black & white images, was quite commanding, creating a dramatic atmosphere and giving a sense of the mood of the time. Many were iconic photographs showing for example images of key political leaders, or the First Dáil, a seminal moment in Irish history. Others were quite poignant depicting scenes of burnt out buildings, young soldiers in uniform, as well as children and women caught up in the conflict. These images served as reminders of the suffering and struggles of the people they represented, a sober depiction of the grim reality of life during the war. Alongside these images & photographs, maps were used to chart familiar sites in the city, helping visitors locate the places and spaces where key events of the war took place.

## **6.3 Text & labelling**

Text & labelling were used in different formats throughout the exhibition, this included for example the use of 'Titles and Headlines' for images and objects, where an attention-grabbing headline was followed by an explanation of the item. An example of this can be seen in the image of the woman with a shaved head, provided above, here the headline, 'Head Shaved as Punishment', acts as a way of grabbing the visitor's attention, while further explanation is provided underneath. The images themselves were placed on panels where graphic text was used to draw the visitors' attention to the core theme of the display. The panels on view in the above photograph for example, show 'Dubliners under Fire' and 'Civilian & Child Deaths' as labels that draw the visitors' attention. Additionally, large text using words like 'crossfire', 'children' etc. emblazon the panels, emphasising key messages. In some instances, examples of quotes or short ditties (a simple song), were used to provide first-person perspectives, and important insight into the feelings and impression of people living through the war. Along one wall of the exhibition posters hung like flags, highlighted key events for example, in the above image one such poster draws attention to the arrival of the Black & Tans in Dublin, and the 'Inflicting Brutality' that followed their arrival.

## **6.4 Displays of memorabilia and artefacts**

Memorabilia and artefacts were arranged in cabinets throughout the exhibition, including for example an original Black & Tan uniform (Constables recruited to assist the Royal Irish Constabulary during the war), original newspaper clippings, medals, flags, books, censored documents and other ephemera. These types of displays were what might have traditionally dominated an exhibition such as this, however, in the context of this exhibition they were just one, albeit important, element, and key to their interpretation were the small descriptive text cards/labels, which provided context for

understanding the objects. These objects offered authenticity and added a sense of presence to the exhibition, tangible items, that 'belonged' to someone during the war.

### **6.5 Talk/Tour of the Exhibition**

Tours of the exhibition were provided by Dublin City Council Historians in Residence, every Tuesday and Thursday as well as some Saturdays. The historians had been actively involved in designing the exhibition and each had a depth of knowledge that they freely shared with visitors, the tours were quite informal allowing visitors time to question and comment on aspects of the exhibition. Frequently, the tour began at the centerpiece in the middle of the exhibition, a representation of Nelson's Pillar, the monument that once stood on the site of the Spire in O'Connell Street (then named Sackville Street), where the guide explained the relevance of the monument and its subsequent fate. The guides then proceeded to walk the visitors through the exhibition, pointing out, and discussing key events. Frequently the guides asked visitors which aspects of the exhibition they were most interested in, and then tailored the experience to focus on these interests. This was possible because of the small numbers on the tours and made the experience very personal.

### **6.6 Exploring the exhibition visitor experience**

Employing these techniques, the exhibition told a multi-layered story, where the interplay of sounds, images, objects and text offered a multi-sensory, immersive experience. The film footage and original images were a powerful means of communication, and were perceived by visitors as being 'real', allowing them to see actual evidence of what people had lived through, and gain some sense of what everyday life was like. They placed the impact of the war on the ordinary citizen to the foreground, and enabled visitors to relate to 'all the unforeseen consequences for civilians', and for some this was quite an emotional experience. For others, the film, images and memorabilia triggered personal memories, helping them remember for example, stories that their grandparents or uncles had told them about the war. For these visitors, attending the exhibition allowed them to reminisce and reconnect with events from their own past, and the experience was very personal and poignant.

For other visitors the experience was more about reflecting on the role the war had played in the formation of Irish society more generally, and its implications for how Irish society and identity had been shaped. For these visitors the opportunity to reflect on the war prompted them to contemplate the meanings of these past events in the context of the present, here, surrounded by the sights, sounds of war they were reminded of the importance of learning from the past so that 'we're inspired to think differently about the past, present & future'. For these visitors the exhibition experience was very much about reflecting on Irish identity and how it had been shaped by the war.

For others the experience of seeing the city 'as it was', through the various images of the city streets, caused them to think about familiar sites in the city and how they had been impacted by the war. For tourists and recent immigrants to the city, they provided a way of getting an insight into Ireland and Irish people. The images and maps, with their explanatory texts, provided them with an understanding of the city and Irish society more generally. Similarly, the talks/tours helped shape the experience by providing an opportunity for those who took part to probe and question aspects of the exhibition that they had a particular interest in, making the experience very personal and meaningful.

## 7 Conclusions:

The 'Goodbye Dublin: The War of Independence in the City' commemorative exhibition employed a number of different means of interpretation to give a sense of the war to visitors. The multi-sensory nature of the exhibition provided an opportunity for immersive and meaningful experiences. The different interpretive techniques gave a sense of authenticity and realism that enabled visitors to emotionally immerse themselves and to 'experience' the events. While the original film footage, images and memorabilia emotionally engaged the visitors, the use of text, labelling and guided tours, drew attention to key events and facts, and provided greater levels of information and understanding. These different forms of interpretation offered a number of ways for visitors to engage with the exhibition; through images, text, film etc. or a combination of all, making the exhibition open and accessible, ultimately rendering the experience more personal and meaningful.

The exhibition experience was neither singular nor linear, it had relevance for a broad cohort of both Irish and international visitors, each of whom found different meanings, resulting in a range of different experiences. Through the various elements of interpretation, objects were brought together to provide new contexts and stories, providing a reference point for personal and collective memory and meaning. Visitors, regardless of their background or level of knowledge, were able to focus on different elements of the exhibition and develop their own meaning, depending on their particular interests. As a result, visitors engaged with the exhibition in very personal ways, and the various media allowed them to focus on the parts of the story that most interested or intrigued them. As such, each experience was a personal journey, that offered both an engaging and revealing encounter and experience for the visitor.

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### Questions for discussion

- How might the exhibition venue/setting influence the visitor experience?
- What particular challenges might be associated with interpreting a commemorative exhibition?
- Could the library do more to ensure the exhibition appeals to a more diverse audience? How?
- How might the experience of the exhibition impact the visitor beyond the exhibition visit itself?
- How would you set out to interpret an exhibition?