

# A SYMBOLICAL APPROACH TO EXHIBIT DESIGN. THE CASE OF "MUSEO DELTA ANTICO" IN COMACCHIO

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## Abstract

After a design competition held in February 2014, the "NMC Comacchio" design group, formed by young Italian architects, was charged with designing a new archaeological museum in Comacchio, on the Adriatic coast of Italy. This paper deals with the design methodology experimented in this museum: the project is based on a "symbolical approach" in exhibit design, which tries to balance both didactic and emotional aspects of the exhibition, focusing on the comprehension of archaeological heritage and the relation between territory and cultural heritage. The museum, named "Museo Delta Antico", opened in 2017 with very good acknowledgement of critics and audiences.

## Keywords

Archaeological museums, Exhibit design, Museo Delta Antico, Comacchio.

## Introduction

Comacchio, in the province of Ferrara, is a beautiful town with a population of around 22.000 inhabitants. Situated in a lagoon just north of the mouth of the river Reno, after an early and prosperous occupation proven by the discovery of the ancient settlement of Spina, Comacchio was added to the Roman Empire and continued to enjoy prosperity during the Middle Ages. It owed its fortunes to its salt pans and its strategic location on important commercial routes.

In February 2014 the Municipality of Comacchio launched an architectural competition for the design of a new archaeological museum. The aim was to preserve and show to the public a collection of about 2000 findings covering the broad period from the Early History to the Middle Ages in the area of Comacchio. The museum also had to contain the cargo of a commercial ship of the Roman Imperial era, the "Fortuna Maris", discovered in 1981 and previously shown in a dedicated museum. Another significant part of the collection was the one coming from the site of Spina, an Etruscan port city discovered in 1922, about four miles west of Comacchio.

The Municipality decided to host the collection in an outstanding historical building, the "*Ospedale degli Infermi*". Promoted by Pope Clement XIV and erected between 1778 and 1784 by architect Antonio Foschini (1741-1813), this important example of the style and the social debate of Neoclassicism was opened in 1811 and remained in operation until

1973. Between 1997 and 2013 restoration works brought back the inner spaces of the building to their original shape thanks to the demolition of the walls that over the years had divided the vast halls of the building.

According to the results of the competition, in May 2014 the Municipality assigned the group formed by the architects Michela Biancardi, Angela Cazzoli, Nike Maragucci, Alessandro Tricoli, Rita Zambonelli and the archaeologist Gaia Cammarata to design the new exhibition. Architect Camilla Fabbri planned the construction site set-up and was the safety coordinator during the whole project. The museum, officially named in 2016 "Museo Delta Antico", opened to the public in March 2017, with very positive acknowledgement of critics (Mammini, 2017) and audiences.

## **Materials and Method**

The reason for this study comes from the direct involvement of both authors in the project and in their current experience in the field of "Exhibit design". The objective of the paper is to give a full description of some critical issues related to a complex exhibit design project like the one proposed as a case study. In particular, the authors intend to emphasise the approach used in the elaboration of the general concept of the exhibition.

This particular approach could be defined as "symbolical". In fact, avoiding to employ only the "rational" media used in the traditional scientific communication, the exhibition features many details intended to promote a fascinating comprehension of the collection and its history. In this sense, the suggestions and emotions created by images, lights, colours, materials, sounds and smells are of fundamental importance.

## **Results and Discussion**

Since the early sketches, the exhibition has been intended as a unique and suggestive narrative based on a strong and clear relation with the territory and its findings. The first argument discussed by the design group was the following: how is it possible to bring the landscape and its main features into the museum and its exhibition? Aiming to respond to such a question, two key components of Comacchio and its landscape, water and wood, have been chosen as main symbols for the display concept.

Due to the position of Comacchio in the River Po Delta, water is by far the most important feature of the habitat and its history, its economic activities and its local settlements. Inside the museum, water is not directly visible, but its presence and role in the landscape is constantly "evoked" by a wide range of media, working at a multisensorial level: the blue lighting reflected on the sandy "seabed" covering the main halls of the museum (Figure 1), the light blue colour of the flooring on the first floor, and, last but not least, the sound of waves in the section dedicated to the Roman ship "Fortuna Maris" and its cargo.



**Figure 1** - Blue lighting and sand recall the fundamental role of water in the River Po Delta.

Before industrialization, wood was the primary material in many human activities. In particular, timber was used in past centuries to mediate the relationship between man and water: in the area of Comacchio, it was used to build walkways, docks and boats, for example. To recall such an important historical role, wood has been widely used in the exhibition: first of all, wood slats have been chosen to create the setting of the section dedicated to the Roman ship "Fortuna Maris". In this case, the interior of the ship is not literally recreated but its atmosphere is recalled by a process of association generated in visitors' mind by the material of walls and floors.

The same concept has been applied to the section hosting the findings from Spina: wooden staves have been used to cover the raised platforms and the display cases (Figure 2) to recall the importance of timber in the construction of this ancient settlement.



**Figure 2** - Wooden staves recall the primary role of timber in the ancient settlement of Spina.

It should be noted that the "*Ospedale degli Infermi*" has been an exceptional and inspiring setting, suggesting many design solutions. For example, two low halls on the ground floor,

covered by wooden beams, have been used as an ideal setting for exposing to the public the cargo of the Roman ship. The aim was to create a mental association between the wooden ceiling and cargo hold, trying to give to the public, in combination with suggestive lighting, the sensation to be inside an ancient ship (Figure 3).



**Figure 3** - The wooden ceiling on the ground floor creates an association with the cargo hold of a ship.

About this kind of mental process, it can be useful to refer to the idea of “assimilation” proposed by James Strike:

*We have a natural tendency to group similar things together; we sort out the books in the bookcase, and we make neat assumption about similar people. We can make use of this tendency of “grouping” to link the new architecture to the historic fabric. [...] Assimilation can work in several ways; the design reference can be made to different aspects of the historic fabric; it is like arranging the books in the bookcase by different systems of classification (Strike, 1994, p. 95).*

After these general considerations, it may be useful to describe the four main sections of the museum and to focus on some of their most important issues. On the ground floor, beyond the entrance, two great stone artefacts dating back to Roman period mark the access to the exhibition areas. After this first encounter with the archaeology of the area, visitors are introduced to the collection by an evocative video, showing in a few minutes the deep transformation of the territory and its landscape from present time to the early period. This room has been conceived as a sort of “time machine”, able to fascinate every kind of public, not just adults or specialists.

The Roman section, named “A land without towns”, is the first one to be encountered. According to the intention of the design group, visitors are “forced” to enter the first hall of this section passing through two portals. The ancient doorways of the Roman *domus*, the *fauces*, have suggested this idea. In their conception, great importance was also given to the idea of marking in a very obvious way the beginning of the first section of the museum (Figure 4).



**Figure 4** - The two portals introducing to the Roman section of the museum.

The second and final room of the Roman section is dedicated to the theme “Life afterlife” and shows three beautiful marble steles, and some other findings related to the theme of death in the Roman Age. The synergy between different media lets visitors experience the atmosphere of a Roman cemetery from dawn till dusk, fully displayed on a big screen showing a suggestive video (Figure 5).



**Figure 5** - The Roman cemetery recreated on the ground floor.

The following section, “The Roman ship and its cargo”, houses the findings coming from the ship “Fortuna Maris” discovered in 1981 in Valle Ponti, north-west of Comacchio. Space has been conceived to render the shape and dimension of the ancient ship. This reconstruction, of course, is not exact and literal, but it aims to create an emotional atmosphere and bring the visitors back to the ancient times when the shipwreck of the “Fortuna Maris” occurred. Particular attention has been paid to the several amphorae found in the aforementioned shipwreck. They are displayed in an idealised section of the ship’s wooden hull (Figure 6).





**Figure 6** - The *amphorae* found in the shipwreck of the "Fortuna Maris".

The exhibition continues on the first floor with the section entitled "Spina – Crossroads of the ancient world" (Figure 7). In this part of the museum, located in a large T-shaped room, the design tries to recall the urban layout and landscape of the ancient city of Spina. Visitors can walk through an idealised reconstruction of this ancient settlement, organised in different "islets" surrounded by fences and connected by wooden walkways. Red boxes hosting important findings from Spina represent an abstract reconstruction of the rectangular houses of the ancient settlement. In the narration proposed by the project, the public, like ancient travellers, ideally reach the harbour of Spina, then, passing through the town, visit the necropolis, joined through a path that symbolically represents the passage from life to death.



**Figure 7** - One of the red boxes in the section "Spina – Crossroads of the ancient world".

The visit ends in a large L-shaped room, hosting the section "Comacchio: emporium on the sand", dedicated to Comacchio in the Late Antiquity and medieval period. Compared to the part dedicated to Spina, this section presents a slight change in the design concept, in particular in the relationship between land and water. Here there are no more wooden walkways, but a flat lagoon, symbolically represented by a light blue floor (Figure 8). Visitors

can experience the atmosphere of the ancient harbour, reconstructed in some details using scenographical elements as amphorae, barrels and sacks. The most important finding shown in the section is an ancient “monoxylon”, a wooden pirogue made from a hollowed tree trunk. It is important to note that for both the sections hosted on the first floor, an olfactory journey has been conceived, making the visit to the museum a real multisensorial experience.



**Figure 8** - The section “Comacchio: emporium on the sand”, dedicated to Comacchio in the Late Antiquity and medieval period.

Before concluding, some notes about the relation between the project and the conservation issues. The many artefacts in the museum had a great impact on the design of the exhibition, in particular during the construction phase. For example, the monoxylon was the first object that entered the museum. Due to its considerable size, the ancient boat has been carried into the museum through a window and has waited four long months protected by special sheets before being definitively restored and put on display.

On the contrary, due to their perishability, some very delicate leather findings, part of the load of the Roman ship, have been among the last objects that have entered the museum. This outstanding collection of ancient shoes and clothes is displayed in special air-conditioned showcases, in which the lighting system, activated by sensors, cannot exceed 50 lux. Except for their glass surfaces, these showcases have been totally hidden behind the new walls created for the exhibition. This is a good example of the complexity of exhibit design, a field in which conservation, communication and aesthetics should always find an effective interaction.

## Conclusion

Designing the “Museo Delta Antico” has been an important occasion testing on the field a conception of exhibit design based on a wider approach to communication. As Maria Clara Ruggieri Tricoli stated, in a museum “things are totally unable to speak by themselves” (Ruggieri Tricoli, 2000, p. 13) and this paper tries to demonstrate that there are many ways of communicating “things” in museums. In our opinion, it is very important the discussion

indirectly proposed by the paper: can we communicate history and archaeology in a museum using only a rational or scientific method? How vital are concepts like “atmosphere” or “suggestion” in an exhibition? These questions cannot just be discussed from a theoretical viewpoint, because giving back life to history always concerns also “artists, designers and dreamers” (Cellini, 2006, p. 76) as Francesco Cellini stated.

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