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Mobile Guides to Historic Places in Action and Interaction

Museums and Heritage Sites increasingly offer mobile guides and Apps to encourage people to use their smartphones and tablet computers for the exploration of exhibitions, outdoor spaces and buildings. These Mobile Apps provide information in multimedia formats, text, pictures and video-clips. They sometimes also allow people to play games and send emails. In this short article we discuss two examples to highlight some of the opportunities and challenges offered by Mobile Apps.

The information delivered by these apps can draw people’s attention to particular exhibit features, make visible aspects of objects and artifacts that are invisible, hidden or have disappeared over time. Pictures and text shown by mobile guides, such as the 'Formative Histories Walking App', designed by academics at the University of Melbourne, allow people to compare the architectural reality in front of them with information on the device. This juxtaposition of material reality and virtual reality aims to stimulate interest in the architecture and urban history of Melbourne, and provides the basis for people's sustained engagement with buildings that they might walk past without noticing or appreciating.

The 'Formative Histories Walking App' has been designed as part of a project at the University of Melbourne, carried out by the authors, to explore novel ways to engage students with architectural history. In this case, the Mobile App was used as a teaching and learning tool that presented rich visual and oral information on an iPod Touch. Like a human guide, the App takes students on a two-hour walk along Collins Street, a prominent central city axis in Melbourne; the walk involves twenty stops at significant buildings from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Using a map and menu on the iPod Touch users explore the street and find and examine architectural features in light of the information displayed by the Mobile App. This information is comprised of short text and audio summaries at each stop and a limited number of images that elaborate on aspects such as key buildings set in their historical context, comparative
architectural examples from international architects or details of buildings that are not readily visible for the students. In this sense, the information delivered by the app replicates a slideshow similar to those architecture students experience in the classroom; pictures of objects nearby are juxtaposed with objects from different periods or by other architects and designers.

A second exploration of the potentials of the mobile digital guide for heritage, museum and architecture sites has been the design of a prototype iPod guide that provides visitors with information about the Shrine of Remembrance, a significant site and war memorial in Melbourne built in 1934. With this prototype the team aimed to allow people to see the Shrine in relationship to a wealth of currently unseen archival material. The mobile guide encourages visitors to juxtapose images, films and audio-recordings with the reality in front of them. By drawing less on conventional text, and more on visual information presented in innovative formats such as timelines, collages and close-up details the designers were interested in testing how user’s might share the screen with others and discuss the content and their experience of the site. encourage people to share the screen with others and discuss the content. Mobile guides and Apps like the examples briefly described here have great potential to create innovative media in the interpretation of museums and heritage sites that engage people in new ways with exhibits and exhibitions, architecture, gardens etc. They principally replicate two models of guiding visitors through a site that the researchers have found in many new Apps in the cultural and tourism genre:

- **the human guide model**: these guide direct people's exploration of a site with an identifiable guiding voice or presence on a predefined route. A number of stops are planned into the route where visitors are given information about an exhibit, building, plant, etc.

- **the interactive exhibition model**: these guides offer a wealth of content in various forms that visitors can use to interpret and features of a site. The route does not have to be preplanned and can be changed, shortened or extended at any point in time.

These models of guiding visitors – which are sometimes mixed together - are often used with a variety of formats of content: chronologies and timelines, spatially-organised information; slideshows offering both highly curated narratives and freedom of choice; archival film; and oral histories.

Our own research in Melbourne and elsewhere suggests that apps designed with the human guide model in mind can be successful in situations with a well-defined visitor route. Elsewhere an interactive exhibition model that offers people the opportunity to self-select what objects and artifacts to examine can be more engaging. In either model, reception is influenced by the way information is
structured and presented in the guide, and how this mirrors the physical reality. Text is not very popular with visitors while images, film and oral histories are. Chronologically listed information, for example, does not hold people's attention when confronted with a rich spatial panorama. A powerful approach is to juxtapose archival images and films with views of the present-day reality; a technique used successfully by the 'Streetmuseum’ app created by the Museum of London.

For a long time, research in the social sciences has argued that people's experience and learning in museums and heritage sites can be enhanced when they talk, discuss and interact with each other. Therefore an unresolved problem for designers is to develop mobile guides that facilitate and encourage social interaction and discussion between visitors. Our experiments with different kinds of app show that people tend to treat the use of the device as a private activity and experience talk with others as disruptive. Future experiments, maybe using larger displays, will show how devices such as tablet computers might be more conducive to social interaction and conversation.

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