Physical / Digital Public History Review

Public history is a field of many faces and shapes, all of which follow a shared unifying theme of engagement and collaboration – between scholar and student, institutions and the public, and more. As digital tools become more prevalent and necessary for an increasingly digital society, public history will likewise adapt to incorporate the new possibilities they bring about, not to replace the old but complement with the new. Thus, for the purposes of this assignment, the Patriot's Point Naval & Maritime Museum in Charleston, South Carolina, provides an effective example of two such approaches regarding its USS *Yorktown* aircraft carrier public history exhibit.

Physical Site

The USS *Yorktown* exhibit is very much centered around the physical site itself, which makes it the better starting point for a comparison. Permanently moored across from the historic Charleston harbor battery, the carrier is divided into segmented exhibits on the ship's internal structure, service history, aircraft, and all relevant human elements of each, with a retrofitted hangar bay serving as a spacious nexus between them. Hence, the layout of the site is quite varied: on the one hand, visitors are directed through one clear winding path through the ship's interior exhibit from the main nexus, making traffic a negligible issue; on the other hand, those spaces are often narrow and the stairs remain dangerously steep, severely limiting accessibility outside the nexus and the flight deck. Although this lack of convenience is noticeably frequent throughout, the preserved structure of the ship effectively constitutes much of the public history exhibit itself, and each section of the decks are given ample descriptive texts to read. In addition, an array of retired aircraft is displayed between the hangar bay and the flight deck, with only one

having the interactive element of an open cockpit for visitors. Regarding interactivity, the physical site features several simulation-based attractions on aeronautic flight, all of which appeared popular. The intended audience, as revealed through their advertisements, includes all demographics interested in the ship's history: full families of children and adults were present, and advertisements include additional organizations like the BSA for events. Given that I saw all those demographics during my visit, it appears that they are still successful at attracting and engaging them.

Befitting the site's nature, the exhibit relies heavily on physical displays and materials to present its arguments and interpretations. On an overarching level, the physical ship constitutes much of the exhibit itself with all the different compartments, mechanisms, and related artifacts. There is high attention to detail in recreating individual spaces throughout the ship, including the use of mannequins and videos of crew reenactments. There are also examples of interactive exhibits where visitors can touch or hold specific items, and a surprising amount of the internals of the ship are available to feel, but the majority of preserved items are displayed behind glass. To complement these items, the site maintains a continuous presence of personnel in the connecting hangar bay area, including curators to answer history-related questions. They varied in age, including several younger volunteer docents who were stationed in specific points, meaning that visitors must specifically approach them for information. Regular tour guides are available on schedule; otherwise, visitors can follow the path through the ship themselves, along with an available audio tour that provides some additional information to the regular texts. Regardless of their location, personnel are always available to talk to, and the self-guided tour format itself still works well due to the strength of the exhibit.

Considering the plethora of physical items and displays about the life of the ship and those who lived in it, and especially considering the background of the museum's foundation, the overall argument embodied by the exhibit is that of a general patriotist or nationalist respect for said ship and crew. Outside of the mostly text-based segments dedicated to overall military history, a recurring theme throughout the exhibit is that of the human element – each part of the ship is described according to how people lived in it, used it, operated it, or otherwise interacted with it. This interpretive point is perhaps one of the strongest aspects of the site's approach to history, in that the records of the sailors' lives are emphasized first and foremost. The impressive preservation of the ship's detailed interior naturally complements this interpretive approach, and visitors are given a clear communicative vision of what life would have looked like in those spaces up close. Regarding the abovesaid military history segments of the exhibit, this interpretive approach is more varied: for example, although recorded interviews of veterans from the *Yorktown*'s years in service comprise a substantial part of the site's video displays, the included viewpoints invariably share the same positive outlook on the military, aside from some vivid denouncements of war's overall horrors. Still, there is a consistent and effective emphasis on the human factors of the site's past that elevate the exhibit's argumentative power.

Digital Site

The physical site is accompanied by an extensive website which hosts a myriad of complementary tools and information. The layout of the website is decently straightforward, quickly pointing the viewer towards several different aspects of the museum and exhibits, and includes a Spanish language option for increased accessibility. Compared to the limited information desks and personnel at the physical site, the website very clearly advertises how to

contact museum officials, but aside from hosting events or educational groups, it is not integral to its overall informational value. There is, however, an ongoing option for donations of artifacts and other materials facilitated through the website. The main interactive element of the website is a digital representation of the entire USS *Yorktown* exhibit, laid out as a two-sided map. Viewing either the hangar or flight decks, the map features up to thirty interactable points that offer either directional information or additional information to the physical site. A large portion of the interactive digital map is dedicated to the aircraft exhibits, providing a slightly more detailed description of some of the planes and their historic use than the physical site, where interpreters would occasionally discuss them individually. Thus, in this regard the website offers a cursory glance at the overall content of the physical exhibit, intended to be complementary but with a bigger emphasis on the physical.

Compared to the bulk of the physical exhibit, the website offers a very similar argument with different resources: the service of the ship and its crew should be remembered and preserved for future generations. The website offers this with numerous digitized collections of primary sources and materials, organized by topic and group. Most of these collections are focused on aspects of the sailor's lives or experiences, illustrating their role in the ship's history and how it shaped theirs in turn. Much of the language in the website appeals to the human aspect of the ship's history, heightening the emphasis on individual stories rather than one narrative of military history. As with the physical counterpart, the website intends for the viewer to place attention on how the lives of people contributed to the ship's history, rather than the other way around. However, there is still plenty of focus on military history throughout the website, and that facet of the site makes up much of the advertising theme, which is not surprising given the museum's connection with the military. Both the overall museum and the

website are maintained by the Patriot's Point Development Authority. The website appears to appeal to the same audience as the physical site, but given the availability of the digital collections and external resources, the website may be more suited to research-oriented audiences.

For a summative conclusion, both sides of the *Yorktown* exhibit are meant to be utilized for the fullest picture of its history, but the physical site is clearly the central component. Regarding the in-person experience, perhaps the biggest thing I would change would be to simply add even more interactive elements within the tour itself, such as recreated bunks or even an example meal from the ship's original menu. If possible, I also think that allowing access to the sources and materials from the digital collections in some form of exhibit would also enhance its impact. For the digital site, I would work to increase the amount of information featured in the interactive map, providing not just excerpts but using the digital medium to link other related resources, similarly to how the site already does with their Medal of Honor exhibit. Regardless of these shortcomings, I believe that the USS Yorktown exhibit is a respectfully effective example of a physical public history site with a similarly effective digital presence, even if the experience is in favor of the physical. Most importantly, the site is clearly keeping up with the flow of social change and technological development, and it continues to maintain a decent number of visitors, serving as an example of how such a site keeps its history relevant, available, and engaging.