

## Visitor Circulation: Is There Really A Right-Turn Bias?

Stephen C. Bitgood  
Jacksonville State University

Since Melton's (1933) publication describing circulation patterns of visitors in museums, the belief that visitors turn right when entering a museum gallery has been frequently cited. Of course, there is substance to this belief. In a variety of museum galleries, Melton found that 70-80 percent of visitors turned right and followed the right-hand wall as they circulated through the gallery. This tendency to turn right has been found by many other investigators and in other types of public settings. For example, we found a similar right-turn bias in shopping mall user circulation. However, others have found that people do not always show the right-turn bias (e.g., Bitgood, Hines, Hamberger, & Ford, 1991; Yoshioka, 1942). Yoshioka found that visitors at the 1939 New York World's Fair exhibit halls tended to turn toward landmark exhibits. Bitgood, et al. found that visitor circulation through a changing exhibit gallery at the Anniston Museum of Natural History was dependent upon the layout of exhibits and partitions as well as a tendency to continue in the same direction in the absence of landmark exhibits. Thus, the right-turn bias seems to be only one of the mechanisms that influence visitor circulation.

Based on empirical studies, it appears that there is a hierarchy of forces that influence visitor turning at choice points. At this point the hierarchy I am proposing is somewhat speculative and needs empirical comparisons. Given this caution, here is my best guess as to the forces influencing circulation.

### The Hierarchy for Visitor Turning at Choice Points:

1. *Goal-directed circulation.* When visitors have a particular destination in mind, this will have the strongest effect on turning at choice points.
2. *Attraction of landmark objects/exhibits.* The second most powerful force influencing visitors appears to be the attraction of large objects (landmarks). Evidence for the force of this factor has been provided by studies such as Bitgood, et al. (1991) and Yoshioka (1942).
3. *Attraction to an open door.* Melton (1933) found that an open door has its own attracting power over visitor circulation. A large proportion of visitors exit a gallery by the first open door they encounter.
4. *Inertia.* In the absence of any of the above factors to attract visitors, people tend to walk in the same direction. Thus, if a visitor enters a gallery along the left-hand wall, he/she continues walking along this wall (unless a force higher on the hierarchy is operating).
5. *Right-turn bias.* Finally, in the absence of any of the stronger forces described above, visitors tend to turn right when entering a gallery.

Other factors may also play a role in circulation, but in the absence of careful studies, it is difficult to assess their importance. Three other possible factors are: tendency to approach other people, tendency to remain on the same floor surface, and tendency to remain on a main pathway rather than select a secondary one.

Readers are encouraged to report to *Visitor Behavior* any relevant data on this topic. In the absence of such data, I hope some of you will be encouraged to collect data to prove, disprove, and/or refine the ideas suggested here.

### References

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