

Cabinets of Wonder
Fall Term 2009
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Wed. 12:30-3
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Overview

If you were inventing a museum today, what would it look like? Who would it serve? What would its main purpose be? Before you answer those questions, let me tell you this: the people who run them don't really know the answer yet, either. Museums are at a crossroads: curators, trustees, designers, and even museum-goers are all struggling with these questions.

The first museums were called Cabinets of Wonder. Usually, a viewer with a guide, often the collector, would open doors and drawers to see what was inside--amazing things from different parts of the world, different times. They were windows on the world to places the visitors would probably never be able to go. The public was very limited; children were usually not allowed in. They were elitist institutions whose mission was archiving the past. Today, although most museums seek to educate and to include more and more diverse visitors, there are fundamental ways—attitudes, techniques, structural issues—that are still lodged in the 19th century.

Because of a very different kind of Cabinet of Wonder, i.e. the computer and other IT technologies, museums are able to display collections, demonstrate concepts, and reach their audiences in new ways. What is the purpose of a museum in the 21st century? How does the need for a curator change? We will look at different museums' efforts to use technology to take museums beyond the walls, to expand the notion of curators, to include people who don't have access, or don't know they do, to the places. And though we focus on museums...we also look at exhibits, and other public displays of information.

We will discuss the ways in which technology may enhance the museum/exhibit experience, and will evaluate the use of interactive technologies in museums and how that experience might be extended online. You will develop criteria for informal learning environments that differ from school(or formal) learning. But first we will observe and study what they do now. Before we invent a new wheel we'll try to understand the old one.

The Goal

The goal of this course is to take the time—before you go out in the world, get jobs at museums and exhibit design firms, or any kind of job that involves you with humans learning and interacting— and have to deal with everything people say you can't do and

what has always been done—to return to the first principles of the idea of museums and exhibits; see if anything deserves to be carried forward; and if so, what. We will start by taking a look back to understand what the original purposes were. And you will visit and analyze museums here in NYC, where there is the greatest concentration of museums and exhibits, probably, in the world. The city is the primary textbook.

What to Expect and What is Expected

The class is an exploration, observation, practical theory class—with a little bit of design and production thrown in. So, although you won't need any all-nighters, as you might for a production class, you have to be prepared to:

- devote time away from ITP...(and, remember, museums close earlier than the 4th floor!) The primary assignments are museum visits. You must take the time to visit at least one a week, (see guidelines, below)
- also familiarize yourself with its website,
- write short reviews of the places you visit (see guidelines, below)
- read assigned articles (and one book—a quick, fun read))
- be prepared to participate actively in class discussions.
- keep a list/journal of the things you like at each place, and things you hate. This will form the basis of your 'manifesto', your set of criteria for what a Museum/Exhibit should do in the future. Note that you will be asked to write that for an assignment in Week 7
- use the opportunity to question and challenge the outside speakers with long experience in the museum and exhibition world, who will come talk to the class.

The first half of the term our focus will be on the institutions and the museum-going experience. In the second half we will focus more closely on the design and curation of those experiences, and you will begin to zero in on the Final Project.

I will ask each of you ahead of time to be the discussion leader on readings. That means you should prepare a few questions/comments to provoke a lively conversation.

Final Project

Theory and abstract concepts tend to stick better if they are immediately applied to the real world. We have the opportunity this year on two amazing projects—that any exhibit designer would give their eye teeth to be able to work on and pitch. They are both forward looking 'institutions', not hidebound at all. I think, without even knowing each of you personally, will be better suited to solve their challenge than older, wiser, more experienced types & I'll tell you why in class!

The first is Museum of Chinese in America. (<http://www.mocanyc.org/>). It is formally opening to the public on September 23. Maya Lin is the architect and has been the driving force behind it. (Look her up). What she wants us to help with is: the museum is a place to gather, tell stories, share. How can you build a sense of community with Chinese-Americans around the country. So maybe the physical building is really a node in a vibrant community. Anyone can put up a Facebook page—so don't even start there. Think of why people come to museums. Why they gather together. Why people contribute to Wikipedia. About History...and more, you'll tell me.

The second is another kind of challenge. The greatest photo agency of all time is Magnum Photos (magnumphotos.com). You'll see why on the website and if you do a bit of research. There used to be a lot of great outlets for photojournalism—magazines like LIFE, and Look, and more. Now they're gone, and journalism is on the ropes. But there are still serious photo-journalists, Magnum photographers, working to tell stories that need to be seen as well as read or watched. Susan Meiselas (Look her up) is one of the great Magnum photographers and is trying to figure out a way, through the Magnum Foundation, to get stories in front of people. We'll talk about this more thoroughly. The people who go to museums are, well, the people who go to museums. Maybe not even 9% of the population. How could we bring exhibits about serious topics to where people are?

For the first half of the course, you will be visiting, analyzing, criticizing the museums and exhibits you go to. And you will be reading articles on learning, interacting, a dabble in some theory. Not much. I don't buy theory in general. These projects should be on the back-burner of your mind as you go on your travels.

We will present the final projects to the staff of MoCA at the Museum on the last class.

Guidelines for Museum Visit Reports

You will visit at least one museum or exhibit a week. In the first few weeks, I will assign which museum to go to—to make sure you get familiar with the variety of types, and because someone from that museum will be coming to speak in class.

Every week you will do a visit report in the form of a review and post it to the class blog. See below.

Here is a list of some of the major museums/exhibits in the city that will dovetail nicely with our work.. The ones with asterisks are required and will be discussed in class and the week you should go is listed in the assignments, below.

American Museum of Folk Art

*American Museum of Natural History

Bodies

Botanical Garden (either Brooklyn or NY)

*Brooklyn Historical Society

Brooklyn, Bronx or Central Park Zoo

Cooper-Hewitt

Ellis Island

Guggenheim

International Center for Photography

*Manhattan, Brooklyn or Soho Children's Museum, or the Discovery Room at the American Museum of Natural History

*Metropolitan Museum of Art
*MOMA
Museum of Chinese in America
Museum of Jewish Heritage
Museum of the American Indian
*Museum of the City of New York
Neuwe Gallerie
New York Historical Society
Noguchi Museum
*NY Hall of Science
PS1
Rubin Museum of Art
Sony Wonders
South Street Seaport
Tenement Museum
The Asia Society
The Jewish Museum
The Whitney

POV Notes and Reviews:

Keep a journal...one that you can take with you for your visits.

For each visit, you are to record the experience in the following ways and post your comments to the class blog:

1. The Gestalt (first impression) write quick notes down of your first impressions *as a visitor*. You can do this almost right away. Don't think too hard. These are impressions...words, feelings, questions, drawings...don't worry about complete sentences. How do you feel at the entrance? Are you welcomed, overwhelmed?
2. When are ready to leave: sit somewhere, café, bench, steps...and jot down notes about the visit—now you are *an observer*—from 3 perspectives: emotional, informational, and social
3. At least a day later, write 3 short reviews (e.g not more than 200 words) from different perspectives. Every week pick different 'eyes' to look through: for example,
 - a) a Teacher with 30 kids
 - b) A kid under 12
 - c) Adult (35 yrs +)
 - d) Student (15-25)
 - e) Someone with a disability
 - f) A family group
 - g) A group of teenagers
 - h) Someone who speaks no English

Really role play this, get into character, be an anthropologist... imagine how it would be to get around, to get the info. One useful trick: shadow a group of people in the demographic you are studying. Eavesdrop on conversation (a useful way to see how people are interacting with the exhibit).

You can also write this as a review for a magazine that targets a particular group (e.g Parents mag); you can write it as a poem, a letter to a friend, an angry complaint to the Director of the place, a sketchy New Yorker type cartoon. Have fun with this *and* be serious. It hones your observation and writing skills. Remember it takes longer to write shorter, so give yourself time.

Be prepared to read your review—every week we will discuss what you took away from each place and I will ask a few of you to read your entry.

4. Be prepared to discuss what issues you think the curators and designers wrestled with and what you would have done differently.
5. Either for the museum, or if it's large, for one hall: What's the Big Idea? What do you think the Curators want you to know or feel after you've seen the stuff?
6. When you get there, go to the Restroom. After you have been there a half-hour, go again. How long does it take you to get there? Where's the food? The Store? What are the guards like?
7. Look at the Museum's web site. How many clicks to find out its location and hours? Anything interesting or innovative about the website? Does it extend the museum's offering/mission in any way? Would you use the website if you were not going to the museum? Etc.

Classes and Assignments

Class 1 September 9—What is a Museum? Who Needs ‘Em?

Introductions

Brief Overview of the Course and Handouts

Discussion

Defining Terms: Art, Design, Entertainment, Education, Experience, Learning, Leisure Time, Preservation, Collections/Objects, Phenomena/Ideas, Obsession/passion

Assignment 1

Visit: MoMA, the Met + one smaller Art Museum (e.g. the Frick, Neuwe Gallerie),

Write: Reviews, Journal: Post to Blog

Read: Grover(handout), Messing About In Science (essay, handout) , *The Memory of History*, Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonders by Lawrence Weschler (buy, get at library. It’s a fun and fast read). I’ll divide you in to study groups to talk about readings, and that will lead formal discussions about the readings in the September 23rd class.

Class 2 September 16 —FIELD TRIP: BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Meet at Brooklyn Historical Society:

128 Pierrepont Street, Brooklyn, NY, 11201 at the corner of Clinton Street in Brooklyn Heights.

***Take:* 2,3,4,5 to Borough Hall, A,C,F to Jay St/Borough Hall, or M,R to Court St.**

Assignment 2

Visit: While it’s nice—go outdoors: NY or Brooklyn Botanical, the Zoo(Bronx, Brooklyn Central Park)

Write: Reviews, Journal.

Read: (articles)The Proper Business of the Museum: Ideas or Things?, Rethinking the Museum, The Constructivist Museum

Group Work: Prepare for Sept 23 class as directed.

Class 3 September 23—Discussions, Reviews, Questions.

Assignment 3

*Visit: Visit 3 of these at least, or go to a program at:*The Asia Society, the Japan Society, Museum of the American Indian, Museo del Barrio, The Jewish Museum, Museum of Jewish Heritage (Pay attention to how each culture expresses itself, who is the museum for, look at the websites, what kind of community do you imagine they have)

Write: Reviews, Journal.

Watch: Becoming American, The Chinese Experience. (At least one of the programs),
Review websites of MoCA and Magnum.

Class 4: September 30—FIELD TRIP ALERT: Final Projects Introduction

Meet at the Museum of Chinese Americans
215 Centre Street
New York, NY 10013

Meet with Sam Krueger of MoCA and Susan Meiselas of the Magnum Foundation

Assignment 4

Visit: American Museum of Natural History

Visit on the Web: Websites of Museums you've visited, look for website that provide a visitor experience.

Read: The Social Context: Groups in the Museum

Class 5: October 7- Traditional Science Museums FIELD TRIP ALERT

TBD. Either we meet for 1 hour of class at ITP, then up to the AMNH or go directly there to meet at 2 with David Harvey, Senior Vice-President for Exhibition, American Museum of Natural History.

Assignment 5

The NY Hall of Science, and one of these 3 children museums (Manhattan, Brooklyn or Soho Children's Museum), and the website of The Exploratorium (exploratorium.edu)

Write: Reviews, Journal

Read: Everyone is You...Or Me, NY Times Article, "At the Exploratorium and the Tech Museum, Educational Theory.

Class 6:October 14 Does Hands-on Mean Minds-on?

Guest Speaker: Eric Siegel Director & Chief Content Officer, NYHS

Class Discussion: on the NYHS and Informal Learning

Assignment 6

Visit: The Tenement Museum, and one other small single-issue museum or exhibit e.g. Museum of Jewish Heritage, or Design for a Living World at the Cooper-Hewitt

Write: Reviews, Journal

Class 7:October 21 FIELD TRIP TO THINC, DESIGN

(<http://www.thincdesign.com/>)

435 Hudson St. (near Leroy). We can walk over together.

Assignment 7

Visit: Free Choice Museum

Read: Handout: Storytelling, the Real work of Museums (by Leslie Bedford)

Write: Design Manifesto

Design: Begin Design of Your Cabinet of Wonder

Class 8 October 28— Story telling and Manifestos,

Guest Speaker: Leslie Bedford

Manifesto Sharing and Discussion

Assignment 8

Prepare Cabinet of Wonder Presentation.

Class 9: November 4

Cabinet of Wonders Presentations

Assignment 9

Final Project Group Work

Class 10- November 11

Finish Cabinet of Wonders Presentations

Assignment 10

Final Project Group Work

Class 11—November 18

Class Review of Final Projects

Assignment 11

Final Project Group Work

Class 12- November 25—Putting the Parts Together

In Class & Assignment

Final Project Group Work: Finalize Concept and Prepare Presentation

Class 13- December 2 Final Group Presentations to the Class

Class 14--December 9 Final Presentation to MoCA, and Magnum Foundation (at MoCA)