Background

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; to see things they would never otherwise be able to see. Museums were a great experiment in learning in a public place, a 3D space? How is that different from learning in a classroom? Is learning still a primary goal?

And now there’s television, movies, the internet and travel. Why do people go to museums now? Will they in the future? Today, most museums seek to educate and to include more and more diverse visitors than they used to. How do people learn in public spaces? How do we know that they do? How can they make use of the new interactive technologies and not lose what’s special about them?

If you were inventing a museum today, what would it look like? Who would be there? What would its main purpose be?

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. Most have not taken full advantage of these new tools or had the time to explore how they might change the nature of a museum visit or even what their role is in the 21st century. We’ll discuss ways in which technology may enhance the museum experience; evaluate their use of interactive technologies. But more important than the technology of buttons and kiosks, is how our technological age has changed the purpose.

Overview

The class is an exploration, observation and theory class with some design mixed in. Museum and exhibit visits are your primary assignments for the first half of the course—sometimes accompanied by a reading. Usually you will also make some record of our visit. Often someone from the assigned museum will come to class, make a presentation and receive your questions and critique. In the second half of the course, you begin to imagine how you might reinvent a museum.

The real topic of this course is designing experience, creating engagement with a topic. I call that interactive design whether it has technology involved or not. But we do
document together the ways in which technology may enhance the museum experience. We evaluate the use of interactive technologies in museums and how that experience might be extended online. But first we observe and study what they do now. We cannot invent a new wheel before we understand the old one. In this course we explore the different kinds of exhibits in museums (object-based collection, demonstrations of phenomena), historic or single topic museums (e.g. The Tenement Museum) and the varied kinds of venues for exhibits (museums, trade shows, traveling, nature centers). Students learn through experience and discussion a brief history of museums and exhibitions, discover criteria for informal learning environments that differ from school room learning.

And though we focus on museums…we also look at exhibits, and other public displays of information. Assignments include field trips to museums, readings, writing, making stuff and imagining and designing your own museum or exhibit. This year there will be more emphasis on design than in previous years.

**Background**

We’ll approach the study in 3 different ways: exploration, reading, and construction.

First you will observe and study what museums do now. The first several weeks you are sent out on expeditions to various museums around the city, asked to observe them as a natural scientist and comment on them in a variety of ways: how they greet you, how people interact within them, the quality of the information and its presentation. You will evolve from a visitor, to observer and critic, and then an inventor. We may go behind-the-scenes of one or two with a curator or designer, and speakers from these museums and exhibit designers will come to class. (or we’ll go to them. I like Field Trips!)

The first few weeks there will also be a few readings on learning. In class we’ll talk about how people learn, learning environments, etc. compare theory to what you see on your travels.

Each week, in addition to your visit you will report on what you saw and what you think about it in a variety of ways: writing, making, sketching.

You will develop your own ideas of what makes for a powerful, interactive, learning experience in a public setting. About mid-way through the course, I will ask you to write your own ‘manifesto’ of what you think that is.

Then I will give you a very generous budget (with imaginary dollars) and you will develop your own Cabinet of Wonders, an exhibit or museum idea, based on your manifesto of what makes a good exhibit or museum experience. First you will make a general presentation of the idea, receive crit from the class. Then you will refine that
idea, and develop in more detail a few interactions, a floor plan, the ‘case statement’ you’d put out to raise money or generate excitement.

September 8—Class 1
Class: Introduction: What are Museums for? Who are Museums For?
All Learning is Interactive: True or False?
While I am giving an overview of the class and some issues to consider…think about the following and be ready to discuss:
• do you go to museums and exhibits? why? what do you like about them? what don’t you like about them? What was your basic childhood museum (field trip at school, outing with family, etc.)
• have you ever collected anything? what and why?

Assignment:
• Get a Journal/Sketchbook: (to record your visits, ideas, etc. while you are out and about)
• Visit: (choose 2) Cooper-Hewitt, Museum of the City of New York, El Museo del Barrio, Studio Museum of Harlem, The Jewish Museum. Make notes/sketches in your sketchbook: who’s there, how crowded, how are you greeted, how are people interacting (or are they?). You can do a quick walk-through, but look for one thing that catches your eye. Stand in front of it for a while, draw it. Upload/enter what you’re willing to share on the class blog.
• Readings: Grover and the Everything in the Whole Wide World Museum, Educational Theory (I’ve noted what to skim, what to read more deeply—keep on hand.)

September 15- Class 2

Class:
Discuss: Readings and Visits
• How do you like to learn? What learning environments work for you, and don’t?
• Tell about a memorable learning experience.
• How would you teach ________? To ride a bike; to multiply numbers; History of X (boats, soccer, Persia, electricity, something you’re passionate about…etc.)

Guest Speaker: Myles Gordon, Smithsonian in Abu Dhabi. Question: What If Nobody Speaks “Museum?”: The Challenges of Working in the Cultural Sector In A Country Where There Are No Cultural Institutions (May be rescheduled)

Assignment:
• Visit: (choose one): a Zoo, Brooklyn or NY Botanical Garden, the NY Aquarium. Also go out somewhere into nature (the park, the beach) and observe what’s
going on in nature, sketch make notes in your sketchbook.

September 22- Class 3

Class: Field Trip: The American Museum of Natural History.
Meet at 3:30 sharp at the AMNH (it’s the 81st street stop on the B,C)
We will go behind the scenes into one of the science collection and get a tour of the Exhibition Dept., David Harvey, the Senior VP for Exhibition will talk about designing environments.

Assignment:
• Visit: the AMNH on your own. Notice how long people stand in front of different kinds of exhibits. Eavesdrop on a few conversations (note them in your sketchbook). Follow one person or group for about 10 minutes. Pick one exhibit (a diorama, or object), draw it, write about…what is the story the object tells?
• Reading: Keep reading Mr Wilson.
• Make a diorama in a shoebox or liquor box, related to some aspect of Natural History (you have to be able to bring it to class, and put it on display). Prepare to talk about your display—like a curator—for 3 minutes. (What it’s about? What is the story? What you want people to notice? What’s the significance of what you’ve included, what have you left out?)

September 29- Class 4

Class: Diorama Display & Presentations…
Discussion of AMNH visits and readings.

Assignment:
• Visit: the New York Hall of Science(NYSci)…long subway ride on the 7 train, while you’re on the way there and back…
• Readings: The Constructivist Museum, Messing About in Science,
• Sketchbook: Develop the concept for an exhibit to demonstrate a scientific principle. (If there’s one at the NYSci you think was done poorly—how would you design the exhibit. Be prepared to show your idea and show how it demonstrates some of the principles in the readings.)

October 6- Class 5

Class: Discuss Readings, Show Exhibit concept ideas.
Guest Speaker: Eric Siegel, Chief of Exhibits, NYSci

Assignment:
• Visit: Art Museum Week (Choose one, more if you like): the Met, MoMA, the Frick, Guggenheim
• Sketchbook: Sit somewhere in front of some thing for at least 10 minutes. Draw what you see. Write about it…or what it makes you think of.. a poem, a song.
• Readings: Quick Reads—The Object of Art Museums, Pictures, Tears, Lights and Seats

October 13- Class 6

Class: **FIELD TRIP TO LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM: Be there by 3:30.**
Discussion (maybe at Katz’s deli of the varieties of museums we’ve visited)

Assignment:
Visit: Museum/ Exhibit of your choice. Take your sketchbook. See list of suggestions attached.
Review your sketchbook, start making note of the things you’ve liked the best, what bored you, what you wish you could see. Begin your Museum Manifesto.

October 20—Class 7

Class: **FIELD TRIP TO THINC DESIGN.**

Assignment:
• Readings: (last bunch!) The Museum and the Visitor Experience, Measuring Museum Meaning, Taking a Wider View of Museum Outcomes.
• Visit: TK
• Write/Post: Your Museum Manifesto
• Work on your Cabinet of Wonders ( 2 week assignment)
• (try to get a reservation at StoryCorps before week of November 10…esp if you have a family member in town)

October 27—Class 8

Class
• Discussion of Manifestos
• Guest Speaker: Michael Schneider, designer at ESI

Assignment
• Look at the websites of all the museums we have been to. I will assign leaders for the discussion of each.
• Work on your Cabinet of Wonders…prepare 5-7 minute presentation of it.

November 3–Class 9

Class:
• Presentation & Critique of Cabinets of Wonder

Assignment:
• Visit: TK
• Write: Rationale and Description of your Cabinet of Wonders as if for a brochure, or your ideal review of it (who’s it for, what do they do? what does it feel like?). How the design reflects your design philosophy as shown in your Manifesto.

November 10–Class 10
Class:
• Guest Speaker: Ian Curry, Local Projects
• Presentation and Critique of Cabinets of Wonder
Assignment:
• Revise your Cabinet based on critiques
• Revise your write-up

November 17–Class 11
Class:
Guest Speaker; Ilona Parkansky, RAA. Overview of RAA (Ralph Appelbaum Associates) “What you have to know about your exhibit before you start to build” How to put together a design brief/case statement of an exhibit
Assignment:
• Revise your Cabinet based on critiques,
• Work on your Case Statement.

December 1–Class 12
Class:
Assignment:

December 8—Class 13
Class:
Present your work to Outside Guests to
Assignment:

December 15–Class 14

Suggestions:
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 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