Syllabus Overview

Interpretive Exhibition Design: Creating Experience in the Museum Space

Interpretive Exhibition Design is the creative process by which spaces become designed environments in which the visitor is engaged in an orchestrated experience—one which inherently and explicitly imparts meaning and perspective, engages the emotions, may offer contemplation, encourage curiosity and afford discovery and learning. The creation of exhibition experiences in the museum and alternative spaces is a growing and fascinating field; one which increasingly draws upon new interactive technologies, and seeks to encourage social dynamics.

Understanding the interpretive role of design as a mediator between content and the audience, is helpful in both planning and deciphering underlying messaging and values embedded in any exhibition experience. The interpretive exhibition design process is important in developing a deeper appreciation for and understanding of expression in art, science and the natural world, time and history, society and of ourselves. It is interesting to note that the practice of interpretive design is an important means of expression that informs, and is informed by the work of conceptual and installation artists, some of which are among its most interesting practitioners.

Museums have evolved to become rather more specialized over the past century and a half, and we will construct a museum typology based on the range of experiences they offer visitors, and identify their key differentiating characteristics, audiences and roles as interpreters. The two museums we will focus on are the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, both exemplars of their types and each offering a different approach to the exhibition experience.

This course is a hands-on introduction to this kind of exhibit design: the interpretive process of creating experience in the museum space. The scope of our work begins with visiting a range of museum-based exhibitions that we experience and deconstruct, to learning about the professions that come together to collaboratively create them and finally to apply what has been learned about the interpretive exhibition design process by creating a design proposal for a hypothetical exhibition.

For the first half of the course you will visit and discuss in class a range of exhibitions. After each visit, students will record a number of observations, submit them and be prepared to discuss in class. These experiences form the basis for team midterm presentations, comparing the broad range of visitor experiences and the varying role of interpretive design in shaping each exhibition.

During the second half of the course we will hear from guest experts on various design practices that contribute to creating the museum exhibition experience. Design professionals discuss their process and training and describe how they shape interpretive exhibitions. Later we discuss how effectively they realized their design intent, managed the content and then imagine other possibilities.

For the final project—creating an exhibition experience—students will choose an exhibition topic and museum venue, and present an interpretive design proposal for a compelling experience. Students will consider all the design elements, techniques and media that designers of the museum-based experience employ—like 3D design, media and both media and hands-on interactivity, writing and environmental graphics, lighting, artifacts and evidence, models and environments—and their role in creating a potentially powerful and unique experience in the museum space. Students will present at ITP to a group of guest museum professionals from the American Museum of Natural History.

Goal

To foster a deeper understanding of the roles that various design practices play within art and natural history institutions, interacting with curators, writers and others, interpreting
content for the public by creating a range of designed environments, both permanent and temporary, and the importance of the visitor experience.

Approach
We sample a range of exhibition experiences and learn to deconstruct them to understand how content has been interpreted through design—then “reverse engineering” these interpretive design experiences in the second half of the course. Contrast the art and natural history museums—through the practices of the members of design teams—to understand them as venues. We learn by hearing directly from, and asking questions of, guest designers and a writer and a curator. Students approach their final project essentially “reverse engineering” their own interpretive design proposal for a hypothetical exhibition in one of these museum spaces.

Class Venues
All classes are held at ITP, with the exception of two sessions: Classes 5 and 11 will be at AMNH, and held at the usual day and time.

Student Deliverables

Weekly:
Students will be assigned to visit exhibitions outside of class and answer these questions, focusing on the experience and how the content is presented and interpreted through the exhibition’s design. In a way, we are deconstructing or reverse engineering each exhibition experience. Be prepared to hand in and discuss your observations in class. You are encouraged to write, type, sketch or diagram and find the best way to record your observations.

Key points to comment on when visiting each exhibition:
• What do you think is the exhibition’s main idea or purported purpose?
• How well does the exhibition’s design convey that main idea or purpose?
• Decipher and write down the exhibition’s basic content outline as you walk through it.
• How do you think the designers interpreted the content you outlined?
• Did the design contribute to an enhanced perspective on the topic of the exhibition? Did the exhibition reveal new information or insights for you? Were you incented to learn more afterward?
• What was the exhibition’s “look & feel” and how did it contribute to the main ideas or purpose of the exhibition?
• How would you characterize the contributions of 3D, graphic, media, and lighting design? Were any of these design elements outstanding—or lacking?
• How might you have approached interpreting the content differently through the design of this exhibition?
• How would you characterize the role of design in this institution, based on this exhibition?

Readings and a one page thought piece based on the reading.

Midterm:
Teams will combine their work to date and collaboratively present an overview and comparison of the range of experiences across the art and natural history museum spectrum and their analysis of the role of design in shaping the experiences they have characterized and in interpreting content through exhibition design.

Final:
Creating an exhibition experience. Students will choose an exhibition topic and museum venue, and present a proposal for how they would interpretively design a compelling experience on a particular topic, in that museum space.

Syllabus
Please note that this document will continue to change as the semester progresses

Class 1
January 28
Topic
Introduction: Experience, Interpretation and Intentionality in the Museum Space
Introduction to the arc of the course, goals and process. Distribute Syllabus, Reading List

Brief discussion on the evolution of the museum.

Students share an early or formative memory of a museum experience and describe what it was that you took away from that experience. Was there a narrative? How was it expressed? What did you learn? Why was it memorable?

Assignment

Visit before next class: The New 19th c. Galleries for Painting and Sculpture, MMA. Be prepared to hand in and discuss your observations in the next class. You are encouraged to write, type, sketch and/or diagram to find the best way to record your observations on this permanent art exhibition.

Reading

Reading from What is Exhibition Design? by Skolnick and Lorenc. and write a one page thought piece. Pdf will be posted.

Class 2

February 4

Topic

The Permanent Hall: Experience in the Art Museum Space. MMA history, role of design; discuss your impressions of the design and review the process to create the 19th c Galleries.

We discuss students’ permanent art exhibition experience; share observations on the interpretive design approach. Discuss how might you have approached the interpretation of the content through the design of this hall?

Assignment

Visit before next class: the Hall of Human Origins, AMNH. Be prepared to hand in and discuss your observations in the next class. You are encouraged to write, type, sketch and/or diagram to find the best way to record your observations on this permanent natural history exhibition.

Reading

Reading from The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage, by B. Joseph Pine, James H. Gilmore. Pdf will be posted. Based on this, write a one page thought piece. Is this new thinking for museums; what are the implications for the future?

Class 3

February 11

Topic

The Permanent Hall: Exhibition Experience in the Natural History Museum Space.

Brief history of AMNH and description, interpretation of science and the exhibition design process to create this Hall of Human Origins.

Discuss students’ exhibition experience at the Hall of Human Origins, AMNH; share observations on the interpretive design approach. We compare the natural history museum and art museum contexts; contrast the permanent exhibition experience in the art museum space with that in the natural history museum.

Teams

Assign teams of two students each for midterm presentations.

Assignment

Visit before next class: The Metropolitan Museum of Art to see Matisse: In Search of True Painting. Be prepared to hand in and discuss your observations in class. You are encouraged to write, type, sketch and/or diagram to find the best way to record your observations on this temporary art exhibition.

Reading

To be assigned

[No Class on Feb. 18]

Class 4

February 25

Topic

The Temporary Exhibition: Experience in the Natural History Museum


Temporary exhibition experiences vary greatly depending on the museum venue, and narrative, interpretation and design. We compare the natural history museum and art museum contexts; Prepare to contrast the temporary exhibition experience in the natural history museum with exhibition in the art museum.

In Class

Be prepared to hand in your observations on Our Global Kitchen at the conclusion of this class. You are encouraged to write, type, sketch and/or diagram to find the best way to record your observations, as per the key point to comment on, and try your hand at sketching the plan for the exhibition.
Assignment: Teams formed. Prepare presentations for March 11.

Class 5
March 4 (at AMNH, Monday at 6:00)
Topic: Temporary and Permanent Exhibition: The Curator’s role in Art and Natural History Museums.
Guests: Denise Leidy, curator, Met. Museum of Art and Laurel Kendall, curator, AMNH
Get the inside perspective on the curator’s formative role in design and interpretation for temporary and permanent art exhibitions at art and natural history museums.
Assignment: Prepare team presentations.
Reading: none this week

Class 6
March 11
Topic: Team Presentations.
Guests: Members of AMNH’s Exhibition staff will attend to discuss your presentations with you. Students have recorded their experiences and observations on each visit, and have practiced deconstructing exhibitions to learn more about interpretive design. Teams will have 10 minutes each to present their summary findings, by comparing the temporary and permanent exhibition experiences in different museum spaces, in an engaging format—graphics, sketches, etc. Include a description or diagram (a typology) organizing museums—art, natural history and include others as well—according to aspects of the experience, the role of interpretive design or some other attribute. Look for differentiators and commonalities we have noted on our museum visits and supplement these with research on other types of museums as well. Add at least one more exhibition of your choosing.
Assignment: Over break, visit one or these: a commercial art gallery or a commercial exhibition venue. Write on your exhibition experience and your observations on the interpretation and design approaches in this venue.
Reading: Chapter will be assigned from Exhibition Design, by Philip Hughes. Based on this, write a one page thought piece.

[spring recess]

Class 7
March 25
Topic: Interpretive Design: Interpretation and Narrative
Guests: Director of the Rubin Museum, AMNH’s Senior Director for Exhibition Interpretation
We will learn how education goals and exhibition narratives are conceived, developed and written in both the art museum and natural history museums, and how understanding the audience is critical to creating the experience and approaches to learning.
Assignment: Submit a your topic choice for your final presentation for review. Focus on the exhibition that you will choose at any museum, for your final project.
Reading: Chapter will be assigned from Exhibition Design, by Philip Hughes. Based on this, write a one page thought piece.

Class 8
April 1
Topic: Interpretive Design: 3D Design
Guest: AMNH’s Director of 3D Design, and TBD
Notes: The designer discusses The World’s Largest Dinosaurs exhibition before it opens to the press and public. We learn about the design intent and process, how the designer worked with other team members to interpret the content, what were the goals, obstacles and strategies; what developed well and what did not, and the design/production lessons learned.
Assignment: Submit a draft outline of your final presentation for review. Think about how to present the main idea, design intent, content, and how you would design it!
Reading Chapter will be assigned from *Exhibition Design*, by Philip Hughes. Based on this, write a one page thought piece.

**Class 9**  
**April 8**  
**Topic**  
**Interpretive Design: Exhibition Interactives and Media**  
**Guests**  
Local Project, AMNH’s Director for Exhibition Media and Interactives  
**Notes**  
Description of the media department, staffing and organization. We learn about the recent design and development of media and hands-on interactives, animation and video production and plans for a future exhibition on space exploration.  
**Assignment**  
Work on your final presentation  
**Reading**  
Chapter will be assigned from *Exhibition Design*, by Philip Hughes. Based on this, write a one page thought piece.

**Class 10**  
**April 15**  
**Topic**  
**Interpretive Design: Environmental Graphic Design, Exhibition Lighting Design, Exhibition Project management**  
**Guests**  
AMNH’s Director of Exhibition Graphics, AMNH’s Lighting Designer, AMNH’s Director of Project Management  
**Notes**  
Learn how environmental graphic design and information design are important in allowing the exhibition experience to present sometimes very complex information in a visually compelling way, in graphic media that support the experience hierarchically, to suit different learners. The role of the lighting designer varies with the design intent, and with the museums in which they practice. Hear how lighting designers are manipulating the “look & feel”--the general ambience--shaping our experience by engaging our emotions while providing the right light levels for conservation purposes.  
**Assignment**  
Work on your final presentation.  
**Reading**  
Chapter will be assigned from *Exhibition Design*, by Philip Hughes. Based on this, write a one page thought piece.

**Class 11**  
**April 22 (at AMNH, Monday at 6:00)**  
**Topic**  
**Behind the Scenes Tour of an Exhibition and of the Exhibition Department design offices and studio**  
**Guests**  
Open to AMNH Exhibition Staff  
**Notes**  
View the exhibition *Whales: Giants of the Deep*. Tour the three floors of the Exhibition Department to see where the interpretive design process takes place, and see the stages of design and production in progress for next Fall’s major exhibition. See how the various exhibition design practices come together behind the scenes.  
**Assignment**  
Complete your final presentation!  

**Class 12**  
**April 29**  
**Topic**  
**Student Presentations**  
Students present their exhibition proposals, and show that they have considered the various design practices that are integral to the interpretive exhibition design process—including 3D design, writing and editorial, graphics, lighting, use of media and both media-based and hands-on interactive design, use of artifacts, dioramas and models—and their roles in creating memorable and unique experiences in a museum space.  
**Guests**  
AMNH Exhibition Department Directors and other professionals

**Reading List**

Students are to obtain: *Exhibition Design*, by Philip Hughes, Laurence King Publishers

Scans will be provided on Wordpress from:

*What is Exhibition Design?* by Skolnick and Lorenc, RotoVision Press. 2007
The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage, by B. Joseph Pine, James H. Gilmore


Additional readings will be posted during the course of the semester.