A brief history of exhibition design

There are two caveats one must accept when attempting to trace the history of exhibition design. The first is that, as with many phenomena, not to mention disciplines, pinpointing their beginnings in time or place is often quite difficult. Springing as they do from innate human urges and responses to external factors, they often present themselves in various cultures simultaneously and manifest themselves and develop at different rates. The second consideration lies in the fact that defining them can be tricky. They continue to evolve; they are slippery and hard to catch. In the case of exhibition design, we speak of a mode of communication that has meant different things at different times, continues to change and expand, and, in fact, is not even recognized universally as a discipline at all.

In scanning the history of exhibition design, it is nonetheless possible to note a few large-scale trends. For instance, that exhibitions have moved toward increased democratization. Once the exclusive province of the rich, the powerful, and the elitely educated, both access to and participation in the development of exhibitions has gradually come to include people at all levels of society. Another fascinating evolution has been the extreme broadening of the exhibition design vocabulary. From its beginnings in the static display of objects, we have seen forays into increased interpretation and didactic explanation, all forms of physical and electronic interactivity, multimedia presentations, architecture, theater, dance, performance art, and environmental graphics. And it is not by accident that we choose this point in time to assess and reflect upon the roots of exhibition design, for it has recently come fully into its own as a factor to be dealt with in the worlds of art, design, and communication. The public, as well as reviewers and commentators have begun to take notice of the important role that design plays in the character and success of visitor experiences of all kinds.

Universities have responded by offering programs and degrees in exhibition design; professional and lay publications critique the quality of design; museums, retailers, trade organizations, and other public venues rely on exhibit and display design to further their aims and achieve their goals.
Cabinets of curiosities
Cabinets of curiosities emerged during the seventeenth century as people began to privately display and classify objects from all areas of the world that were considered to be exotic. Some of these exhibits were thought to represent models of the world, in that they contained as many specimens as possible. They were often organized and displayed in very unusual ways. Frequently composed as fully immersive environments, with objects seemingly arranged more for aesthetic effect than scientific explication, items were grouped together simply because of their color, or because they were all birds or flowers, or all the same shape. Some may call it an irrational organization but it was one that was based on a kind of primitive taxonomy. While taxonomy in the scientific realm was more concerned with classifying objects according to type or genre, species or origin, these miniature spectacles might appear to be specifically designed to create an astonishing presentation of grotesque oddities.

Francesco Calzolari's, Museum Calceolarium
Cabinets of curiosities were designed to display collections belonging to individuals. Francesco Calzolari's cabinet exhibited his natural history collection.
Palaces
While many royal palaces and historic houses have become publicly visited artifacts themselves, they have also frequently been converted into museums and art galleries. The Louvre Museum in Paris was originally built in the late twelfth century as a fortress, was then transformed into a palace for Charles V, and has been updated several times since. Early versions of the Louvre were akin to large warehouses, cramming as much into the space as possible. Even now, paintings in the larger, taller halls are stacked three high on top of each other. A recent renovation of the Louvre was mandated to, among other things, help reorganize reflection in a way that would make some historic and linear sense. The Hermitage in St. Petersburg, was built as the winter palace of Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century. With 1,050 rooms, it is now among the largest art museums in the world and can take weeks to appreciate in even a cursory way.

Church museums
For centuries, the Catholic Church had been collecting and bringing back to Rome artifacts, paintings, sculpture, mosaics, and religious icons from around the world. All around the city, storehouses filled with these objects were bursting at the seams. In the late eighteenth century the Church campaigned to create what is now known as The Vatican Museums. The Museums were designed in scale and purpose for specific types of display. There was an obvious interest in showing off objects in ways that elevated their level of grandeur
so that each piece was seen as a great work of art or of great significance, reflecting the power and wealth of the Church. In large part, this was achieved through design, with niches, color, and architectural ornamentation lending the works tremendous impact as well as a sense of place and importance. It was an early example of “design as interpretation” being harnessed to contextualize and enhance the display of objects. The design was meant to interpret, celebrate, reveal, and enlighten.

The Capitoline Museum
The Capitoline Museum in Rome was built around 1734 and features artworks in a type of domestic setting. Arranged in the center of the room as well as the perimeter, these displays are less self-conscious than earlier attempts at similar presentations. The display of artifacts is somewhat random and haphazard, giving space to each object by putting them on pedestals, but certainly not interpreting them in any contextual or symbolic way.
who had the means to collect objects and display them, in a quite literal sense, Peale pulled back the curtain, exposing culture's history and treasures and inviting us all in.

**Expositions**
The exposition was an early stepping stone toward public museums and the idea of display for everyone. Beginning in the nineteenth century, these colossal events were similar to the cabinets of curiosities in that they consisted of found objects from exotic places. They differed, though, in how they also explicitly celebrated broader themes like faith, technology, and, above all, the driving force, spellbinding variety, and jaw-dropping spectacle of human progress.

Objects were displayed on a huge scale, exoticism and familiarity vied for attention, and for the first time it was all accessible to the emerging middle and working classes. At the Paris World's Fair in 1900, large pavilions were purpose-built for specific exhibitions, though there was still the compulsion to present absolutely everything you could get your hands on that was deemed of importance without a thematic storyline orientation. Later, World’s Fairs began to feature government and industry-sponsored pavilions, which were designed to deliver stories and iconography, not just for the display of precious objects. In this way, World’s Fairs were precursors to themed entertainment parks and museums of science and industry.

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**Self-portrait of Charles Wilson Peale**
This painting shows Peale pulling back the curtain to open up history and culture to a wider audience.

**Charles Wilson Peale**
Peale is credited with opening one of the first public museums in the US in 1786, which he called The Museum of Rational Entertainment. A model for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, his museum was to be the “nation's closet” or repository of all things worth saving and studying. Peale was among the first to take the collection out of the governmental, church, or royal gallery and present the museum as a place for collecting, preserving, and displaying culture. Whereas museums began as private venues for organizations and individuals
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Retail department stores
Early department stores, particularly in large cities, were not only purveyors of goods, but were also responsible for major advances in display and design communication. Often, items were displayed in thematic exhibitions without the direct intention of being sold, but rather to sell the store’s overall brand—its power, reach, and sophistication, and of course to induce people to come and see the spectacle in the grand halls of the store. These exhibitions sought to display culture and elevate the store’s brand in the eyes of consumers, through offering a kind of free, social entertainment.
Who do we design for?

It is impossible to communicate effectively if you don’t who you’re talking to. Your listener’s personal history, cultural background, gender, age, abilities, and learning style have a tremendous impact on how the information you wish to share is received, processed, and understood. For this reason, when we set out to interpret a story through design, we start with defining our audience.

More than ever, exhibition environments are conceived of and utilized as places of intense social interaction. In fact, this group dynamic is one of the features that makes museums and other venues unique. Increasingly, mixed visitor groups are the norm. It is important to work with a client to determine the types of visitors they already attract, as well as those they want to bring in, if they are to reach them successfully through their exhibition. Do they tend to have older, more educated visitors? School groups? Families with children? Retired tourists? Do visitors come with significant foreknowledge of the subject, or will they consider the information alien and esoteric? Without a clear sense of some of these parameters, we might just as well be talking to the wall.

A little knowledge of your audience can go a long way. And the characteristics we seek to recognize will affect both cognitive and physical design. While older people with failing eyesight might appreciate brighter lighting and larger type on labels, teenagers conditioned to a life of video games and other interactive media will probably respond more favorably to environments full of visual and audio stimulation. Toddlers take in information tactically, have short attention spans, and can be put off by spaces that are dark and dramatically lit. And, sadly, not only do most interpretive signs and labels go unread, but aiming the reading level too high is a sure recipe for confusion, even in exhibitions designed for educated visitors.

Though it is difficult to accommodate, let alone please every type of individual, designers can at least consider the visitor profile and plan for traffic flow and modes of presentation accordingly. If the exhibition is one in which a family may wish to stick together, then content and interpretive techniques should be intermixed so that each age group will be engaged simultaneously within any given area. After all, if toddlers are bored and impatient, parents won’t have the opportunity to absorb information at their own pace. Older children might fly by the text panels in search of greater stimulation, while their parents may rush through seeking a quiet place to sit where they are not assaulted by cacophony. Wouldn’t it make sense to strive to create environments which not only address visitors’ individual needs, but also offer them attractive opportunities to engage with the information together?

Finally, we must stress the absolute imperative that designers employ “universal design” in all their projects. Gone are the dark days when public venues could only be enjoyed by people with certain abilities. The concept of designing for “the handicapped” or “disabled” should also be relegated to the dust heap of history. People learn and interact in a myriad of ways suited to their physical and cognitive abilities. Universal design calls for us to provide
equally enlightening and fulfilling experiences and opportunities for all. This includes recognizing that Braille, adequate lighting, type size, and color contrast constitute good graphic design. It means providing closed-captioning and infrared hearing assistance with audio. Explanatory signage should be “layered” in such a way that visitors with varied levels of reading ability, as well as different levels of interest and familiarity with the subject, are all stimulated and informed. There can be no place which is off limits to wheelchair users or those with walkers or canes. But much more than following these and other simple and absolutely necessary guidelines, we must as designers think broadly and deeply about who our visitors are and how we can create fully engaging environments which communicate with them on multiple levels, and as richly as possible.
Everything old is new again

When we look at the myriad advances in the use of digital media in museum, retail, and trade show environments, we often forget that the underlying principles behind these technologies have been around for hundreds of years. With a short survey of the history of communication devices in exhibitions, it becomes increasingly evident that while the technology may have changed, the application has stayed fundamentally the same.

The magic lantern and the cyclorama
During the nineteenth century, the magic lantern wowed audiences with projected images, telling a story in an immersive space, while the cyclorama introduced the same concept using large-scale paintings to create an immersive experience. The Kodak Pavilion in the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair duplicated the same experience using lit images in a theater in-the-round. LED and projection screens are the modern day equivalents of these slide shows, and are now common devices in museums, visitor centers, and themed amusements. Incredibly though, while the technology has changed, the application of that technology has remained remarkably consistent, with an inverse theater in-the-round still a commonly-used feature. A public space where the reactions of fellow audience members can be seen and shared, is still seen as an attraction to visitors.

The moving and interactive image
Since the 1930s, incorporating moving images into an exhibition has been the goal of most progressive designers. Starting with costly and unreliable 16mm film, jumping to difficult-to-maintain U-matic videotape and then progressing to Laserdiscs, DVDs, Video Servers, and now Solid State Players, through each advance in technology designers have recreated the exhibition experience to exploit the advantages of new media. Designers have generally used moving image technology to push the exhibition in two directions; the large-scale spectacle, and the immersive environment. In both cases successful application rests with giving the visitor a holistic storytelling experience, with the image as a key support.

The Crown Fountain, Millennium Park
Designed by Jaume Plensa. This fountain in Chicago’s Millennium Park is a modern example of the moving image as spectacle. It consists of two 50 foot (15.2m) glass block towers, which include LED screens that project video images of local citizens.
Immersion
The guided tour is one of the oldest interpretive devices in exhibitions, bringing an unprecedented level of interaction. The use of human guides to tell compelling stories will never be truly replaced, but the use of kiosks, personal digital assistants, and the internet has enriched the storytelling experience. A new development is that audience reactions and additional stories can be archived and used to expand the experience, while adding additional imagery and depth. In this environment, the live tour guide can become a channel, taking the rich archive of experience and adding their own personal spin.

What conclusions can we draw from these histories? The most important is that, with all the changes in technology over the centuries, the way people perceive and enjoy space has remained remarkably similar. The desire to be surrounded by a story in a public space, to be told stories dynamically, and to have an interactive experience blended with real environments will forever drive design decisions. This means that no matter how far technology progresses, tried and true methods will still be used. The power of the human voice, the electricity of being surrounded by an audience, and the excitement of using light for movement will always have their places among the digital devices and holographic images.

The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route
Designed by Talisman Interactive. This heritage trail extends from New York to Virginia to commemorate and interpret the route taken by George Washington’s troops to attack the British army at Yorktown. The interactive kiosks, maps, and cellphone information systems interpret an historic environment that is invisible to the eye in most cases, using technology to interpret place, instead of graphics and stage sets. The project looks to a future where technology can help interpret and archive multiple levels of meaning in one place. Hundreds or thousands of possible interpretations can occur in this environment.
Experience design and themed environments

A concept and design process called “experience design” has long been a buzzword in the exhibition and environment design fields. Experience design has been used to explain everything from a process of developing products and services around customer behaviors, to developing unique educational models. Is experience design really unique though, or is it a design process that has evolved as a more advanced version of traditional storytelling that has existed for hundreds of years?

Why is experience design different?
Experience design is different from developing themed environments in a number of fundamental ways. This does not mean that experience design does not incorporate many of the values of theming. Experience design takes the concept of themed storytelling deeper, while questioning the nature of how environments communicate in a number of ways, which we will now examine.

Utilizing nontraditional models
Themed environments have fundamentally been a craft developed by designers using familiar models for environmental storytelling that have evolved over time. IDEO’s Fred Dust defines a key tenant of experience design as looking outside of traditional project types, turning a trade show display into a museum space, or looking at a retail display like a classroom.

Designing for behaviors
Demographics are considered a primary tool for the development of design concepts for audiences. Increasingly however, life states are not in line with age states and shared attitudes across generations suggest new ways to design. By looking at behaviors as a key to designing experiences, environments cut through demographic barriers.
Including audience input
Themed exhibitions are often passive, but adding interactive elements can dynamically change an exhibition. Advances in technology have enhanced this trend in recent years, with the internet capable of creating customized personal unique experience with users (most clearly seen with websites like MySpace). Participatory experiences are commonly used in children’s museums, where children can add to or construct environments that fundamentally alter the exhibit. Interactive elements are also used in exhibitions dedicated to current events, which often have spaces for visitors to add their comments, which are then incorporated into the display.

Designing for time, not place
Experience design focuses on the experience of the audience over time, not just in the exhibition space. This often materializes as exhibitions that include ongoing publications, discussion groups, shows, and summaries.

Reinforce learning with dialogue
The experience design process does not assume that audiences have understood the educational content or story behind an exhibition. By supporting dialogue through audience input or interpreter facilitation, the exhibition experience is incorporated into an ongoing conversation.
The Museum of the American Indian
Designed by Douglas Cardinal Architects, GBOC Architects, and John Paul Jones. The role of some museum buildings is to house multiple exhibitions by many different design firms. This does not mean though that the building should be designed outside the realm of the story. In the case of this large museum, the early stakeholder process defined a number of themes that would be reflected in both the exhibitions, the building, and the grounds.
Exhibition design for museums

Museum design is a specialized form of exhibition planning that is content-driven, informative, educational, and entertaining. Museum design is also a very varied discipline: exhibitions can be permanent or temporary, the design time frame can range from a few months to two or three years. The designer may coordinate the architecture, interior design, and exhibition design for the whole museum, creating an integrated and seamless design. More commonly, however, the designer will just be involved in designing an exhibition within an existing facility.

The content of museum exhibitions can be timeless and can be in place for decades, so the narrative and the design need to remain valid. This narrative must be accessible to all the various audience types who will visit the museum: children, teens, adults, and the elderly. The design may utilize a combination of static/passive and dynamic/interactive components to provide varying levels of entry points into the story. The exhibition can live in the physical environment, but can also extend into the virtual world via the internet as an educational resource to be used before or after the site visit.

Designing for museums is an activity that necessarily engages with the architecture and interior design of the building which houses the exhibition. In particular, the collaboration between all team members is critical in developing new museums since exhibitions can drive the architecture and interior design into a holistic design scheme. Of course, topic-oriented exhibitions are most commonly designed into existing museums.

Whether working with a space in an existing building or crafting a completely new space from the inside out, the designer scripts the story within the planned or existing traffic patterns. Many exhibitions rely on telling a sequence of events linearly. Explicitly linear storytelling can be different from the traditional art museum exhibition, which might allow visitors to browse or go directly to the piece that specifically interests them. The linear narrative exhibit is directed, as in Washington DC’s National Holocaust Museum (see page 194) where visitors venture down a given path as a group at a controlled rate. In this case, the museum was developed from the inside out and the story it tells is permanent and unchanging. Of course, the designer can craft a special exhibition into an existing museum to be similarly experienced, but the designer must keep in mind how it affects existing and adjacent exhibitions. Curators, registrars, education specialists, and funders are often part of the exhibition review process during the various phases of design.
Right and above: Pearls, American Museum of Natural History
Designed by the American Museum of Natural History's exhibition department. Both a science and a history museum, the American Museum of Natural History has a large in-house exhibition design department skilled in object display as well as media and interior design. Many of their exhibitions integrate object displays with interactive computer kiosks to make a visual connection that is successfully followed up at deeper levels. These exhibitions are excellent examples of the use of multiple levels of display information to captivate visitors. The museum also works with leading design firms like Pentagram and Ralph Appelbaum Associates on their large-scale projects.

Right: Imperial War Museum North
Building by Daniel Libeskind. Architecture by Alistair McCall Real Studios. This museum tells the story of how war has affected the lives of British and Commonwealth citizens since 1914. Constantly moving light is projected against the building and the artifacts inside to create a powerful effect.
Science museums

Science museums help to answer the question, “how?” Science is a living subject and new research and studies are continuously emerging. Science exhibitions are content-driven with topics, at times, up for debate. They provoke thought and raise public awareness. Exhibition design firms must create memorable experiences for visitors and translate scientific content into a form that the general public can easily digest. Trends in design for science museums have moved from passive and static contemplative displays to dynamic, hands-on experiences. Through interactivity, motion, experimentation, and sensory experiences, visitors learn by doing.

The key is to turn complex information into an accessible and immersive experience. Scientific data is often seen as complicated and dry. Designers can introduce artistic, creative, and appropriately whimsical exhibits in order to break this stereotype.
Art museums

Art museums are both educational and entertaining attractions, but also provide the most passive visitor experience. They display two-dimensional works, sculptures, multimedia works, or installations for visitors to contemplate and interpret. A museum’s in-house staff of curators and educational departments generally decide the layout of artwork in galleries. Exhibition design for art museums can range from simple painted walls with text panels to decadent interior designs that emphasize the characteristics of the art, such as the period in which it was created. Museum staff may outsource exhibition design for specialized cases, such as traveling exhibitions, children’s sections, or interior architecture.

Art and architecture have had a symbiotic relationship since the beginning of civilization, and art museums take advantage of adventurous architecture. The museum building can be as much of an attraction as the artwork inside. Exhibitions can be organized randomly, chronologically, by genre, or by artist. Visitors tend to wander through art museums in a random path when a museum offers compartmentalized galleries, leading to the design of new museum spaces that offer a more subtle transition of spaces with changing lighting, graphics, and displays.

Museo di Castelvecchio
Designed by Carlo Scarpa. Scarpa was ahead of his time as one of the first architects to gain fame mainly through exhibition design commissions including showrooms, tombs, and museums. A master of object display, Scarpa configured the sculptures in this museum on pedestals of varying sizes to frame them in different views.