

INSTITUTION **Biology Building at Colorado State University**

LOCATION **Fort Collins, Colorado**

Celebrating Unexpected Exhibits

Exhibit experiences inside museums and visitor centers have the power to touch lives and create memories. Visitors who journey to such places – either voluntarily or in tow with families or school groups – arrive with some level of motivation or priming. What happens when we leverage the impact of exhibits in unexpected spaces?

Displays in the new biology building at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado, offer a brilliant example of physical exhibits that connect with users who stumble upon them (fig. 1).

Lining passageways on the first floor, exhibits effortlessly and elegantly transmit the message

that biology is broad, deep, and dynamic – and it happens here.

The atmosphere created in this house of higher education – where intense scientific research happens deeper in classrooms and laboratories – is refreshing and enticing. Displays feel more inspiring than educational, more



ALL PHOTOS BY BETH KAMINSKY

fig. 1. An effortless experience for viewers, displays complement the barrage of information students likely receive as they venture deeper into the building. Here, scale is explored along the length of the hall, from cells to ecosystems.



fig. 2. Objects hint at extensive collections stored elsewhere in the building. They convey the breadth and depth of scientific research, while simultaneously expressing art and nature.



fig. 3. Themes illuminate the beauty and wonder of biology with straightforward headlines such as “Exploitation” and “Reproduction.” The diversity found within species comes through powerfully in the sectioned titled “Variation.”

emotional than scientific, and more artful than academic.

Students speed by on their way to class, others linger – studying and socializing while waiting for class. Prospective student families, alumni, and other building users also engage with displays at varying levels. They comprehend broad notions quickly in passing and, compelled to pause, find additional depth.

Content feels appropriately dense, yet uncluttered. Images appear

striking in clusters and offer intriguing details viewed individually. Specimens embody science and art – often intricately mounted in backlit cases (figs. 2 & 3). Subtle nods to cross-disciplinary learning come through in quotes:

“Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?”
—H. D. Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*, 1908

“Nothing there is that does not love the sun.”
—Neil Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*, 2017

Unexpected audiences make connections with the subject matter regardless of their previous experience.

As museum professionals, let’s notice and celebrate opportunities to share exhibits in unlikely spaces (figs. 4 & 5). Let’s harness the great power of our medium to connect with surprised and delighted users.

Beth Kaminsky is an exhibit developer and writer.



figs. 4 & 5. Displays complement the architecture of the new facility, capture the essence of the content, and celebrate the spirit of the university.

INSTITUTION Science Museum of Minnesota

LOCATION St. Paul, Minnesota

Making it Okay to Talk About Mental Health

On a recent trip to St. Paul, I stopped in to the Science Museum of Minnesota and was intrigued by an exhibition with a topic I rarely see in science museums: mental health. *Mental Health: Mind Matters* is a 5,000-square-foot traveling exhibition that aims to reduce stigma against people with mental illness. It was originally created by Heureka, the Finnish Science Centre and adapted for North American audiences by the Science Museum of Minnesota.



fig. 2. The hand-drawn interior illustrations bridge the contemporary look of the slab facets with the antique look of the dark wooden furniture.

The exhibition is beautifully designed. Slabs of laminated veneer lumber set at angles create faceted spaces for each exhibit element (**fig. 1**). Antique wooden furniture contrasts with the smooth-lined contemporary structures. Scenic backdrops pull these wildly different looks together with black-and-white line sketches of Edwardian-inspired home interiors (**fig. 2**).

A particularly powerful exhibit element is the personal narrative booth. When you enter the booth and choose a story, a video of a real person appears sitting across from you, projected at near life-size. They narrate their experiences with conditions like depression, anxiety, and bipolar as if they were speaking directly to you. I imagine this may be the first time some visitors hear someone speak openly about their experiences with mental illness.

The most enjoyable element of the exhibition for me was working the cathartic “Worry Shredder” (**fig. 3**). I wrote a worry on a slip of paper and fed it into the machine. As I turned the hand crank, I watched my worry get torn into a hundred tiny pieces and land in a pile of other shredded worries.

fig. 1. The faceted structures demarcate space for each exhibit element while maintaining sightlines throughout the exhibition.



fig. 3. The “Worry Shredder,” in all its retrofuturistic glory.

Mental Health: Mind Matters concludes with a selfie station featuring the hashtag #MakeItOK and a talkback space for visitors’ responses. From what I read in the comment book, many visitors have been personally moved by this exhibition.

Margaret Middleton is an independent exhibit designer based in Providence, Rhode Island.



fig. 1. Louvre Abu Dhabi's plaza.



LOUVRE ABU DHABI / MOHAMED SOMJI



MARC DOMAGE

fig. 2. In the Grand Vestibule.



fig. 3. Didactic panel at Louvre Abu Dhabi.

INSTITUTION Louvre Abu Dhabi

LOCATION Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

A New Take on Exhibiting Art

My experience visiting Louvre Abu Dhabi (fig. 1) in November 2018, one year after its public opening, was luminous.

From the bright walkway that leads from parking lots to an airy, light-filled lobby, I entered this spaceship of a building. The welcoming entrance and linear gallery plan seem appropriate in a region where most people are new to art museums. A ticket costs 60 dirhams (\$16 US).

The objects are extraordinary, their qualities highlighted through state-of-the-art installation materials and techniques (fig. 2). Some artworks were purchased or commissioned by Louvre Abu Dhabi, others are on loan from 13 museums in France. They are arranged chronologically with the goal of making connections between disparate cultures and universal themes. Two ancient fertility figures – one from Ecuador, the other from Syria – share the same case. So do a funerary vessel from Greece and one from China, both from around 450 BCE.

In a room of oil paintings of European kings, we walked around royal sculpture from Benin, Nigeria displayed in a crystalline vitrine.

Trilingual interpretative labels (Arabic, English, and French) have titles like “Faces of the Divine” and “Art in the Service of Power.” Exhibition preparators would admire the mounts, well-hidden security devices, and other magic tricks of the trade, all executed at a very high level.

Touchable 3D models of artwork and other didactic materials augment the displays (fig. 3). There are more hands-on types of activities in children’s areas in the special exhibition halls.

The centerpiece of the last gallery is *Fountain of Light*, a glittering crystal and steel installation by artist Ai Weiwei (fig. 4). I exited into an open-air courtyard, sat by a shallow pool of blue water and watched dappled rays of light dance on the walls.

A Michelin-starred dining experience is an apt metaphor to describe my visit: a 12-course meal of bite-sized, globally-sourced gourmet delights served inside an architectural masterpiece.

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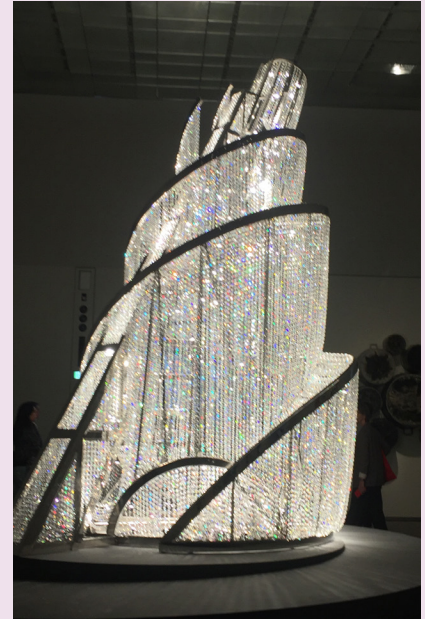


fig. 4. Ai Weiwei's *Fountain of Light*.

Have you seen an interesting new exhibition lately – something that touched you, made you laugh, or moved you to action?

Consider writing about it for Exhibits Newline! Entries should be brief (300 words max), breezy (tell what made it so great), and include three to four high-res images.

For more information, email: NAMENewline@gmail.com.