



Teaching Exhibition Development and Design

by Polly McKenna-Cress and Kym Rice

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Creating exhibitions as a professional pursuit has evolved well beyond the days of static display. The process once defined by object placement, material and color selection, and Design with a capital D has morphed into a more collaborative and inclusive enterprise centered on the end-user. None of our previous assumptions remains unchallenged. Processes now are open-ended and customized, and developers and designers must be flexible and adaptable. Technological innovations proliferate, but with lower budget thresholds and higher visitor expectations, exhibition creators must prove to be more agile than ever. So how do we teach this new agile model? It is timely for the *Exhibitionist* to take on the topic of “teaching and learning about exhibition development and design” to mark this phase. As the Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt Museum technologist Seb Chan recently told graduates of the SUNY-FIT Exhibition Design M.A. program, “there couldn’t be a better or more exciting time to be graduating into the exhibition design profession” (2014).

Chan’s talk recognizes this as a time of transformation for museums and their future staffs—challenging but also invigorating. In Museum Studies (MS) programs, we work in collaboration with students to find creative ways to approach three “big picture” questions of general concern to the profession: Who should decide what the museum should be? How will the “exhibition” be designed and defined? What future skills and adaptive thinking do museum professionals need? As educators, as we evolve our approaches to teaching exhibition creation, sometimes we feel as Chan does that “we’re building

a house in the middle of a fast flowing river” (2014). How do we prepare the next generation for a field that is shifting so rapidly? How do we stay current, or more importantly, support innovative thinking?

Critical Considerations: The *How* and the *Why*

For this article, we focus on some critical considerations for Museum Studies Programs—*how* we teach, what we teach, and *why* exhibitions should exist at all.

The “*how* we teach” our courses—meaning how we structure and run a course—offers faculty effective methods to engage students. Many MS programs have broken away from a standard classroom lecture format where a body of information passes from professor to students and then is parroted back in different forms. Instead we endorse methods that support innovation as well as openness and transparency. Students may learn museum history and theory, but class discussions concentrate on important strategic issues or changes in museum practice over time including, for example, the move away from authoritative curatorial models for exhibitions. Whether students focus on exhibition development or fundraising, they all acquire a toolkit of specialized skills intended to promote the critical and strategic thinking in combination with communication methods necessary for working successfully in today’s museums. MS programs foster student knowledge and experience by curricula that encourage students to:

- work on team-based projects outside the classroom, usually in collaboration with clients, audiences, or communities;

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- participate in interactive charrettes and critiques (“crits”) with fellow students, faculty, and museum professionals;
- attend and contribute to museum-focused symposia and conferences;
- experience behind-the-scenes visits to museum collections or exhibition design facilities that enhance knowledge of digital media, experience design, and other methods with potential such as game theory;
- build understandings of best practices in museums with respect to critical areas such as environmental sustainability, visitor studies, cultural property, and digital engagement;
- take on-line courses (for credit or as MOOCs), sometimes sharing a virtual classroom with individuals interested in museums from all over the world;
- travel to other areas, regions, and countries to experience other practice and cultures.

The other element of *how* is unpacking the way that the exhibition process unfolds for any particular project. In exhibitions, we focus on *how* a development and design team not only conceptualizes themes and content but also addresses the skills and resources needed to undertake a project. Students draw comparisons too from in-depth case studies presented by museum professionals that highlight their individual/institutional experiences. Additionally, *how* explores new practices in technology, media, visitor accessibility and sustainability, Equipped with an awareness of how museums

create exhibitions, students can think strategically about new ways to approach a particular problem.

The question *why* an exhibition at all?” can be complicated. We not only emphasize content and communication with audiences but also a critical assessment of each decision as it occurs. Whether examining the simple choice to use a particular wall color or a more complex decision to involve visitors in helping to design an exhibition, students must be able to articulate clearly the *why*, e.g. *Why is this important, why is the exhibition format the way to communicate a topic?* They build on what they are learning in the classroom, creatively adding, adapting, and applying their ideas to the field in innovative ways. In some programs, these discussions move beyond the classroom and out into the public realm for testing with clients and potential end-users. By piloting or prototyping their ideas with audiences to further shape content and understand resonance, students acquire new understanding that is key in their exhibition making. The simple act of stating why decisions have been made, particularly for end-users, is profound. Following up with evaluation to assess how it “works” can be even more empowering. These investigations are not limited to the classroom but can be shared and discussed on local, national and international scales.

As Leslie Bedford states in her introduction to *The Art of Museum Exhibitions*, “It is critical to examine the why and not leap immediately, as we often do, to the how and the what of our work” (2014).

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Attendees at the Creating Exhibitions Symposium discussing and debating under the interactive landscape of floating parasols by FLUX Foundation, October 11 & 12, 2013. The University of the Arts, Philadelphia. Courtesy of Richard Cress, Alusiv, Inc.

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National and International Conversations on our Changing Field

Field-wide conversations about exhibitions offer another opportunity for students, professionals, and practitioners to tackle these issues—and more. In part, their purpose is to spark the next generation who will eventually implement these ideas. Several Museum Studies programs recently convened broad discussions among thought leaders, professionals, faculty, and students as a way to further unpack ideas and disseminate new thinking. The June 2013 conference *Discursive Space: Breaking Barriers to Effective Communication in Museums*, hosted by Ryerson University and the Art Gallery of Ontario “provided a forum for deliberation concerning the integration of art, design, and architecture in the creation of memorable and immersive museum experiences, while balancing the public’s expectations of self-directed expression and engagement” (Macalik, 2013). Another, *Chaos at the*

Museum: Re-envisioning Exhibit Design co-organized by UC Davis and hosted by Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London, in May 2014, debated new thoughts on “designing for audience engagement, interaction and participation” (further discussed in this issue). A third, the *Creating Exhibitions Symposium*, was organized for the launch of the book, *Creating Exhibitions: Collaboration in the Planning, Development and Design of Innovative Experiences* (McKenna-Cress & Kamien, 2013), and held over two days in October 2013.

Conceived as a conversation and workshop format, this symposium, hosted by the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, with support from NAME and DesignPhiladelphia, convened under an interactive landscape of hanging white parasols designed and installed by FLUX Foundation. Some 150 participants (including students from four different MS programs) engaged with museum

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and creative endeavor thought-leaders in integrative design thinking. Keynote speakers Mark O'Neill, Head of Arts and Museums Glasgow, and Elaine Heumann Gurian, Senior Museum Consultant, The Museum Group, sounded a museum wake-up call. Both speakers discussed the power and social purpose of museums as civic spaces for socializing, learning, and interacting. The two talks prompted audience members to reflect on how museums will move from being instructional to being invitational. The Philadelphia symposium firmly restated and reinforced the idea that a broad array of audiences needs to feel welcomed by the museum. They must be invited to make the museum into a place that works for them rather than be asked to conform to an ideal of who the museum wants them to be. Groups shared ideas in interactive round-table sessions and through an evening charrette. Problem solving discussions continued over dinner tables in local restaurants, and attendee conclusions were presented in the morning. Everyone was involved and engaged.

Gurian's focus on the significance of "welcome" stuck with me. "The patrimony belongs to everyone," she said; "therefore, everyone needs to be in your institution." Because I believe in a real open door policy...even if sometimes that means just using the restroom, I appreciated her suggestion that such visitors "haven't come to ruin your place—they are humans and take up human space." If it had been a ball game I would have called out a hearty "Woo-hoo" on that point! April Bryan, graduate student in GW's MS Program. (Personal communication, August 5, 2014)

It seemed to me at the time that the group assembled was collectively qualified to resolve almost any issue facing the museum field today... The chance to collaborate in a charrette process with some of the field's living legends was truly amazing and I would have to call the symposium one of the most meaningful experiences of my museum career. Noah Kane-Smalls, MFA in Museum Exhibition Planning + Design '14, The University of the Arts. (Personal communication, August 5, 2014)

Overall, these national and international discussions created and hosted by MS programs are beginning to set the stage for a completely re-imagined field. They provide topics that reflect the new museum studies approaches to engage in big thinking, to broaden conversations, to let go of authority (even within the classroom) and, in some cases, to apply design thinking processes to the approach to teaching. MS programs seek to become laboratories to model the participatory nature that is being called for in museums. We are pushing to break disciplinary silos and take on more exchanges that are democratic.

Challenges During a Time of Transition

These new approaches to rethinking the field offer great opportunities for both museums and their employees; however, we recognize many challenges remain. As has been true in most economic downturns, pressure is exerted to produce leaner and more cost-effective museum productions. While this may lead to more innovation and creative practice, it can affect the job market negatively, particularly for emerging professionals. Many MS programs are frank with

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students about employment realities. Though the museum field, like others, has suffered cutbacks, alumni have found opportunities to be adaptive—using their familiarity with the contemporary museum, its structures, processes, and required skills. By honing skills in multiple areas, recent MS graduates are increasingly versatile in their approach to finding jobs.

As part of the leadership of the AAM professional network Committee on Museum Professional Training (COMPT) we have watched the growth in our own programs, as well as others. It is important to note that while over 100 museum training programs exist in American colleges and universities alone, the museum field has not yet established any standards or methods of ranking for these programs. They vary widely. For example, some training programs offer

their classes completely on-line, while many others are located on campuses. For an insightful overview about those teaching design, please see *Teaching Exhibition Design: A Survey of Graduate Programs in the United States* in this issue.

As this issue's articles suggest we must continue to push our students towards experimentation, risk taking, creativity, and innovation in their work while at the same grounding it in an understanding of what has come before. As a result, our programs aim to graduate individuals who understand how design and exhibition development processes can work, and why they need to strive always for collaboration, considering new approaches and global issues. At their core, they must seek ways to make exhibitions more inviting and inclusive for potential audiences. ✨