

Critical Thoughts About Design

By Kevin Coffee, Principal, Kevin Coffee Museum Planning

If we assume that there are such things as good and bad exhibitions, are there qualities that are found among all the good ones, or all the bad ones?

I am going to share a few observations of my own about design features that might be considered during your next critique.

Objects Are the Thing (We Came to See)

After all the supplemental and interpretive material has come and gone, the knotty reality of the museum's collection is where the subject resides.

Without a doubt, the deadliest exhibitions I have seen are those where storytelling is being attempted without any or any significant physical examples. Even if authentic specimens are unavailable, re-creations may be crucial to drawing the connections a museum exhibition may be presumed to intend.

There are certainly a variety of methods that can be used to present display collections or their reproductions. The placement of these within the exhibition are central to making it work.

Graphics and Text We Can Understand

Interpretive graphics and text are supposed to translate to subject at hand for the audience. Successful translations do not simply convert from one language to another. Graphics should attempt to reveal hidden aspects of a display and contribute to a comparative analysis.

Decorative treatments should not be confused with interpretation, just as an abundance of words should not be assumed to be an explanation. Of course, it's also silly for developers to contrive an unnecessary severe limit to the number of works used in a block of label copy, but exhibit developers are not incapable of silliness.

The best method for developers to review interpretive graphics and text is, simply enough, to do so during development with members of the intended audience. Conscientious summative reviews of interpretive materials can help you fix whatever is broken.

A Welcoming Demeanor

What is the first thing you see as you approach the exhibition space? What kind of feeling do you get as you enter the gallery? Do you gradually get lost in a maze of inner rooms? Are you overcome with claustrophobia? Are you ever anxious to find the exit?

At some point in the development of museum programming as "public education," responsible parties began to design pathways in exhibition spaces in order to organize a story. Chapters work well for books, why not exhibition halls?

Whether every visitor is conscious of it or not, experiential learning is fundamental to a museum visit. Part of our experience is the feeling we get when we put ourselves in rooms full of Egyptian art, or articulated skeletons of dinosaurs, or wonderful collections of life-size habitat re-creations. The spaces we build to house these displays should be as evocative as the displays themselves. Why create interior architecture that acts as a trap, physically or emotionally?

Noise We Could Do Without

Sound is an important sensory ability. You can design an interior to amplify ambient sounds to maddening levels, or to suppress the hubbub and create the contemplative surroundings your exhibition deserves.

Since audio reinforcement has become so inexpensive to deploy, electronic components are perhaps the greatest contributors to second-hand noise in contemporary exhibition design. It's not just the placement of speakers or reflective surfaces, it's as much the unnecessary use of sound tracks for every damn little gee-whiz.

Carpeting and other soft materials used as surface treatments can be important solutions to limiting the noise in an interior space. So can the judicious treatment of audio reinforcement. You don't have to design narrow passages or hard surfaces into an exhibition, and you don't have to put a sound track on every single module either.

Lighting and Glare

Add to the list of deadly unintended exhibition techniques the Hall of Mirrors effect achieved when you combine brightly lighted displays with lots of polished surfaces. For the less attentive, here's a bit of advice regarding glare: the angle of incidence is equal to the angle of reflection.

A Seat with a View

What's wrong with people sitting in an exhibition?

The cruelest logic used to defend the lack of seating in a gallery is that visitors will sit on it and never leave. (You wish!) This justification coincides well with design schemes that treat exhibitions as rat-mazes or cattle-runs.

Assuming that your exhibition is neither and that many of your audience may just get tired from walking around all afternoon, please provide benches. Preferably, you can design seating that allows visitors to actually view your exhibits.

Designer, Heal Thyself

Don't spend all of your day, every day, sitting behind a desk, drafting board, or computer terminal. Spend some time observing how visitors actually use and respond to your exhibits. Develop an interest in what visitors think about your displays. Develop a questionnaire and record some responses. You may even use what you learn to design the next project.

The deficiencies listed in this essay can be found at museums with large endowments and at museums with limited operating funds. None of the problems I've defined are due primarily to lack of money, and all are remediable. The most egregious mistakes at those that are repeated.

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