

Fig. 1. The 550-square-foot Wachenheim Gallery is often overlooked by visitors. For *Scriptorium*, an attention-grabbing “light-box” activity table glowed, drawing people into the room.



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Designing “Fun” at the New York Public Library

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Under the majestic gazes of Patience and Fortitude – the stone lions that grace the entrance to the New York Public Library’s (NYPL) Stephen A. Schwarzman Building – visitors from around the world stream across Fifth Avenue and enter the library’s flagship location. Here, they are invited to admire the building’s stunning Beaux-Arts architecture, discover NYPL’s proud history of serving New York City, and explore the holdings and resources that comprise the library’s collections. Here, special exhibitions beckon, and visitors can step into captivating stories, tour moments in time, and engage with artifacts and ideas.

The mission of NYPL’s exhibition program is to cultivate awareness of – and expand access to – the library’s collections. Exhibitions are designed with the goals of attracting diverse audiences, providing a range of entry points and experiences, and fulfilling NYPL’s promise to welcome the public. In striving to engage the widest possible audience, the library’s exhibitions department has identified a reliable and ultimately enriching strategy: Encourage visitors to *have fun* as they encounter fascinating displays, intriguing experiences, and scholarly content.

The road to designing “fun” is paved with outlandish concepts, prototype-do-overs, and samples of ultimately unsuitable fabric swatches. Since 2007, the multidisciplinary design studio Pure+Applied (P+A) has worked with NYPL on a number of special exhibitions that have transformed the Schwarzman Building’s stately spaces into fields of play, where visitors can try on ideas, experiment with fresh perspectives, and form their own responses. Experimentation was a vital part of each exhibition development process, as were P+A’s post-opening visits to the gallery to observe and learn from visitor behavior. Close collaboration with the small team at NYPL has fostered an ongoing conversation – across projects and years – to evaluate what has worked, sort of worked, or failed, and how to build on “lessons learned.”

For me, Urshula, as co-principal of P+A, working in the magnificent Schwarzman Building has also proven an opportunity to revisit and apply ideas introduced in scholar Donna Haraway’s work. Haraway’s 1984/1985 essay in *Social Text*, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy,” in particular has informed our thinking about spaces constructed for display and preservation as well as the

symbols and landscapes of those spaces.¹ In addressing specific examples (from statuary to environments to dioramas), Haraway illuminates the need to consider the headspace of the visitor, and to attend to and evaluate as much of the experience as possible. What visual cues and information might the visitor pick up on in a space? From a design perspective, what kind of responsibility does this imply? With respect to NYPL, P+A wondered: How might elements of fun be used to nuance visitors' expectations, shift the rules of engagement, and communicate in different modes?

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An early opportunity to push the limitations of traditional display came with the library's *Scriptorium* special exhibition (created with master calligrapher Karen Gorst and on view in the 550-square-foot Wachenheim Gallery from October 22, 2010, through February 27, 2011). Designed to complement the simultaneously running exhibition *Three Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Islam*, the *Scriptorium* also provided a fun standalone experience – especially for younger visitors – on the strength of the activities it offered. Visitors practiced calligraphy on a custom-designed, illuminated “light-box” table, with legs designed to look like the nibs of pens (fig. 1, p. 50). As they learned how to write Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin characters, they were surrounded by instructional videos created by experts, many *touchable* samples, and walls and cases featuring displays of pigments, inks, pestles and mortars, quills, pens, brushes, palette knives, papers, vellum, gilding foils – and just about anything else one could need to be a scribe. This “room for writing” was the first library exhibition

ever to invite parents and children to enjoy activities together (with stools of different heights readily available). It was an experiment not only in intergenerational engagement, but also in the possibility of allowing visitors to *create* in the gallery.

In keeping with its engagement mission, the New York Public Library largely gauges an exhibition's success through attendance figures. Of the massive crowds who come to see the iconic Schwarzman Building – and who often do not know that there are exhibitions on offer until they arrive – the number of people tempted to spend time in a gallery is telling. For a special exhibition of a very modest size, *Scriptorium's* daily attendance was noticeably higher than previous shows; it eventually totaled 42,082 visitors. The library staff noted that even as the gallery saw groups on whirlwind tours of New York, it was also starting to see repeat visitors. Here was a new criterion – among some visitors (especially the local ones), “fun” should inspire return trips.

Creating fun exhibition experiences sometimes requires closing the gap between a scintillating topic and a series of items that literally fall flat. Our next opportunity to work with the library – on an exhibition on food – offered the bonus of a subject brand new to NYPL exhibitions. But a draft object list largely comprised of menus and recipe books threatened a reading-heavy experience. To broaden the exhibition's horizon, we hit the road with the library's exhibitions team for cultural-artifact shopping in Brimfield, Massachusetts. The trip, along with some strategic eBay purchasing, yielded much of what was needed to evolve the original concept into what would become *Lunch Hour: NYC* (curated by Laura Shapiro and Rebecca Federman; on view November 1, 2012, to February 17, 2013).

Presenting an exhibition in NYPL's 6,400-square-foot Gottesman Gallery – where *Lunch Hour: NYC* and the following two exhibitions were featured – entails particular challenges and opportunities (fig. 2).

It requires considering density and dispersal as well as designing in conversation with the ornate marble, plaster, and carved-wood interior. In designing “fun,” we begin by exploring ways to open new possibilities within a space. In a typically hushed gallery, the studio experiments with inspiring visitors to talk and discuss; in a space that has presented largely open-plan exhibitions, P+A considers spatial subdivisions to allow for more intimate storytelling and moments of discovery.

For *Lunch Hour: NYC*, Pure+Applied created—through the middle of the majestic Gottesman Gallery – a “New York City street” where visitors explored the history of street foods and their vendors (fig. 3, p. 54). An oyster cart featured casts of oyster shells and a timeline of oyster prices; a hot dog cart featured a video of its inventor, Ed Bella, speaking about his invention. Visitors flowed into the gallery and, for the first time in an

NYPL exhibition, there was the constant hum of conversation. In the varied environment, visitors passed from the lively “street” to surrounding “interiors” to learn more about everything from school lunches to power lunches.

The presence of the recognizable-but-outdated (such as the cook’s luncheonette lingo or long-gone kitchen implements) made for a tangible strangeness that urged visitors to seek explanation or substance in the collection items on display. The synergy in and among the exhibition’s environments, books, objects (including realia from beyond the collections), and ephemera gave rise to the best kind of dialogue, with multiple entry points leading visitors to better appreciate whichever elements held less automatic appeal for them. The fun of the unexpected connection was meant to increase their receptiveness to content they may have otherwise glossed over.



Fig. 2.

A life-sized photo of a food truck served as the *Lunch Hour: NYC* title wall, greeting visitors as they entered the exhibition. Here a visitor taking a break also appears to occupy the driver’s seat of the food truck.

Fig. 3.

The center of *Lunch Hour: NYC* became a “New York City street” where visitors learned about typical and historical street foods including oysters, deli, pretzels, hot dogs, beef patties, and other take-out favorites.



JONATHAN BLANC

One of the key *Lunch Hour: NYC* objects and analog interactives was a resurrected automat from Horn & Hardart – a rare sight – that dispensed recipes. Another popular interactive invited people to sit at a lunch table and consider a real-life challenge from the early 1900s: “What would you buy for lunch if you had only 10 cents to feed a family of four?” A clock accompanied the introduction to each section as a visual leitmotif reminding visitors of the time of day common to most lunches. To convey the history of lunch in school, we fabricated an old-school lunch table and benches, with lunch trays featuring a timeline of the development of school-provided meals for children. In a nod to home-packed lunches, we collected and displayed used lunchboxes. Visitors enjoyed pointing out which lunchboxes had been “theirs” (fig. 4).

“*Lunch Hour: NYC* changed the way [NYPL] approached the design of exhibitions,” explains Susan Rabbiner, Associate Director of Exhibitions at the library. “After that exhibition, it had to be welcoming; it had to be fun.” The exhibition earned a positive *New York Times* review, ultimately attracted

470,761 visitors, and contributed to a significant increase in shop sales. While visitors could not actually enjoy food in the gallery, an extravaganza featured five food trucks outside on the plaza, connecting the exhibition to the real city experience.

The library approached each new exhibition as an opportunity to explore, through particular subject matter, how to transform a gallery space. The special exhibitions described in this article were created through iterative design processes – which greatly benefited from the close collaboration between P+A and the library’s exhibitions department – and through extensive research that fueled the creative work. As we researched photos from the NYPL collections, for example, we identified many of the materials and scenographic elements that were then tracked down or made for display.

The scenic framing was crucial to the family-friendly exhibition *The ABC of It: Why Children’s Books Matter* (curated by Leonard Marcus; on view Jun. 21, 2013, to September 7, 2014). With this exhibition, we had to face head-on the challenge of



Fig. 4.

Here *Lunch Hour*: NYC visitors reminisced about the lunchbox or bag they carried as a child. The lively display of used lunchboxes was set off against the institutional green background of the “Charity Lunch” section.

designing a show that was essentially all about books. The power of children’s books is felt most deeply in the act of reading them and traveling their imaginative landscapes, often at the lead of beloved characters. Traditional display techniques alone are ill-suited to this particular magic. Especially for those unfamiliar with a given volume, the experience of gazing at a chosen page, through glass, may fall short of compelling. But even when gallery visitors cannot enter the reading-space of a book, perhaps the design of the space *around* the book can still allow them to step into the story.

Children’s books often bring up vivid memories that are part illustration, part imagination. In *The ABC of It*, we created an environment that sparked these memories and inspired memory-making. In an

environment that is usually programmed for walking or standing, we designed toward encouraging visitors to also sit, kneel, stoop, crawl, pose, wander, read, write, type, or swipe. In some instances, the displays and pass-throughs to other spaces were specifically placed at children’s heights. Installations within the gallery provided a page-like, recto/verso experience. Visitors walked through a giant, golden, crown-shaped wall – a passage inspired by Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* – to discover, on the other side, that the crown was covered in fur (fig. 5, p. 56). A section of approximately 1,500 books created a vertical “rabbit-hole” and showcased items related to the rare edition of Lewis Carroll’s beloved 1865 novel, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, displayed in a glass case. Alice herself also made an appearance. Her motion-activated,

Fig. 5.

In *The ABC Of It*, tactile elements, such as the furry side of the *Where the Wild Things Are*-inspired “crown” wall, were a major design feature.



JOHN HALPERN

Fig. 6.

We used a 19th-century illustration of Alice by Sir John Tenniel to create the motion-activated Alice figure whose neck stretched. Her neck was made of an accordion of books; their spines quoted her description of the size-altering potion she drank in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.



JOHN HALPERN

expanding neck conveyed how changes in scale (or in Alice's own size and perspective) can add to the weird joy of exploring a wonderland (fig. 6).

To tell the story of children's-bedside reading, we repurposed an (upturned) bed to reveal what the kids were *really* reading – comic books. The studio designed and had fabricated Milo's car and tollbooth from *The Phantom Tollbooth*, a 1961 fantasy adventure novel written by Norton Juster with illustrations by cartoonist Jules Feiffer. Visitors were welcome to hop into the car – a favorite photo op that saw the likes of children's author Judy Blume take the steering wheel on a visit to the library – while the tollbooth doubled as a vertical display case (fig. 7). Parents and children could read books together in the exhibition space, which was a first for Gottesman Gallery shows (fig. 8). NYPL noted the unprecedented number of strollers parked outside of the gallery. The exhibition also spoke to the broader significance of children's books and the attempts to control or curb their content. Part of the section on “Censorship in Children's Books” made use of an ominous black shaft displaying the titles of hundreds of books that have been banned in the United States. At its base was a quote by segregationist Alabama Senator E. O. Eddins: “This book [*The Rabbits' Wedding* by Garth Williams] and many others should be taken off the shelf and burned” – prompting visitors to contemplate the seriousness of censorship.

Our current adventure with the NYPL – designing *The Polonsky Exhibition of The New York Public Library Treasures* – has already introduced new dimensions to Pure+Applied's understanding of “fun.” Featuring more than 200 of the library's rarest and most significant artifacts, and expected to be on view until the year 2095, *Treasures* (curated by Declan Kiely, NYPL's Director of Special Collections and Exhibitions) is in many ways a world apart from our studio's previous work with the library. However, the ambition of the design



Fig. 7. The Phantom Tollbooth car, display case, and Jules Feiffer map were located not far from the gallery entrance – unmissable invitations to explore. Visitors kept trying to turn the (stationary) steering wheel; rearview mirrors and other parts needed replacing over the course of the exhibition.



Fig. 8. The “Goodnight Moon Room” became a reading space where visitors could take books from the shelf for their own story-time activities. The benches had originally been bright yellow but were so well-used that they had to be repainted a more forgiving dark green.

work remains to entice and empower visitors to dive into the exhibition experience, explore with intellectual abandon, and make personal connections with objects and histories that amaze. That, too, is a kind of fun.

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1 “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–36,” *Social Text*, no. 11 (Winter 1984/1985): 19–64. Available online: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Teddy-Bear-Patriarchy%3A-Taxidermy-in-the-Garden-of-Haraway/aed3d9d217612ccdb8139ded3c7e153d943e346f>.