



Setting the Stage for Meaningful Exhibits

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Exhibits designed specifically to support meaning making can help visitors find order, connections and compassion in their environment.

Museums are finding themselves among big spenders in a highly competitive “entertainment” market. When intensely stimulating environments, high-risk recreation, and billion-dollar theme parks are competing for a visitor’s attention in any given city or park, how is it that exhibits in museums and visitor centers will engage the visitor of the future? We suggest that museums will retain, and even grow audiences, by tapping into people’s natural desire to find order, connections, and compassion in their environment. Unlike more adrenaline-based, fast paced attractions, museums have the opportunity to offer authentic, engaging experiences which can resonate with an individual or group, and allow visitors to extract real meaning for their own lives.

Techniques for enabling visitors to extract meaning involve the decision to trust that the museum audience will “go the distance” with curators and other individuals who have a passionate interest or investment in the material. We have learned, of course, that each visitor’s interest level and learning style will be different. But setting the stage for meaningful exhibits requires more than recognizing that different people absorb information in different ways. It is also necessary to engage on emotional ground, understanding that visitors come with rich and varied life experiences that lead them to be open, closed or indifferent to exhibit materials and designs.

How can we make it more likely that visitors will be willing and able to extract meaning from our exhibits? The six suggestions below are not meant to be an exhaustive catalog of methods. They are, instead, ideas about how to acknowledge the human desire to make connections and relate things to our own experiences. This in turn can help exhibits be relevant and memorable to their audience, laying the groundwork for emotional investment and a meaningful experience.

1. Help visitors make sense of things.

To provide the opportunity for visitors to have a meaningful experience, we must start by creating a coherent overall environment. We are “hard wired” to find patterns in our sensory world. In other words, our brains are set up to extract meaning from particular spatial configurations and to try to understand their use. It is clear that designers can and do order the environment to make it more legible; it is important to note that this is likely to make elements of a space more meaningful to the visitor.

Design implications:

In order to make a museum visit coherent and legible for the visitor, designers must use “spatial language” effectively to reinforce and reflect the messages and intellectual organization of the exhibition. Exhibits can certainly be paced and choreographed to create a dramatic presentation, but legibility should not be sacrificed to novelty; while this may sound elementary, it can be more interesting to “break the rules” than to work to find ways to creatively apply them. As a profession, we can benefit from having more explicit conversations about how designers and visitors encode and decipher the environment.

2. Give visitors a “feel” for the subject.

People find learning experiences most meaningful when emotion and cognition are connected (Caine and Caine 1994). Emotional engagement also helps to make experiences more memorable, increasing retention, understanding and transference (Khalsa 1997). In addition, much of what we find meaningful is linked to our emotions. Emotional information is one way we can access memories and connect new experiences to previous ones, and it provides a link to understanding what an object or event meant to someone else. An emotional connection can enhance visitor engagement and provide



the foundation on which visitors construct their comprehension of the material at hand.

Design implications:

Exhibit content that acknowledges emotion as part of the story, as well as exhibits that allow people to relate to their own emotional experience, can allow visitors to relate to materials in an empathic or even compassionate way. Exhibits should be staged so that visitors feel comfortable having an emotional reaction to the content. Providing access to the emotional richness that underlies the objects, experiences or facts of an exhibition can facilitate visitors in making emotional connections, thus making the exhibit more engaging, memorable, and meaningful to its audience.

3. Foster relationships.

As children, human interaction is the first tool we have to construct meaning for ourselves in the world. As individuals in a social landscape, relationships with other people remain a powerful source of our expanding knowledge of ourselves and our environment. In museum experiences, the inclusion of opportunities to understand or foster human relationships can strengthen visitors' connections to a given subject.

It is the visitors who have experiences and the visitors who make meaning.

Design implications:

It is clear that physical, emotional, or intellectual relationships with other people can be fostered by an exhibit. Indeed, the inclusion of "storytelling" suggests for the visitor that a real or imagined storyteller is present. This can happen in at least three separate settings: 1) Museum personnel (staff or volunteer) should be on the floor, interacting with visitors. Abstract concepts and difficult ideas are made more accessible and clear by human interpretation. The animated presence of a person can give relevance and life to a subject that seems distant to human interests. Exhibits can provide the stage for human interaction on this level. 2) Visitors need to (or are made want to) interact with each other and the exhibit. This may be as simple as fostering an atmosphere in an exhibit where visitors do not feel like they have to whisper or be silent, but could instead interact with their companions. In a more hands-on setting, interaction can occur when some exhibit outcomes are tied into teamwork, cooperation or negotiation among visitors. 3) Real or imagined people can be illustrated and documented in the exhibit itself. Presentation of a real person or character who is involved with, was affected by, or is passionate about the exhibit topic can serve to make the subject matter more real and relevant to the visitor as a fellow human being. Empathy, and figuring out what "you would have done" can help people identify with the issues or objects at hand.

4. Connect to the visitor's sense of purpose.

Does the exhibit relate to the visitor's sense of what is real, relevant, and important in life? This is a version of the long-standing visitor question: "Why should I care about this material?" Caine and Caine (1994:97) state that "for there to be intrinsic motivation" to engage a subject, it must access "what governs a person's sense of purpose." They suggest that it is "deep meaning" that provides for an individual this sense of direction, "because it... governs what people look for and what they are willing to do." How can designers access these "deep meaning" structures that visitors arrive with, especially since they vary from individual to individual?

Design implications:

Exhibits that begin conceptually with what people already care about with regard to the topic will provide a jumping-off place from which visitors are initially comfortable. Recognition of that place suggests to visitors that what they about to encounter applies to their own lives in meaningful ways. Highlighting the relevance of the material serves to acknowledge the visitor's own sense of purpose. In the exhibit development process, designers can investigate to find out what makes a subject resonate with a given audience, and use that information as a "hook" to bring people further and deeper into a topic than they may have otherwise gone. It is also important that designers tap and trust their own inner sense of purpose. The process of asking what moves us about a subject—what we find meaningful—and applying that to design solutions can allow us to tap into a visitor's sense of purpose as well.

5. Connect to the visitor's points of reference.

Visitors do not come to a museum as "empty vessels" (Rabinowicz 1999). In fact the audience brings experiences and background knowledge to the museum; the recognition of that fact is important in the effort to make exhibits meaningful to visitors. In order to facilitate each visitor's opportunity to construct meaning in an exhibit they must have permission to explore and understand the material in their own way. Audiences are also diverse, differentiated by interests, demographics, heritage, learning styles, experiences, and many other factors. People use these varied backgrounds to organize the world around them; visitors will evaluate their surroundings to see how well the environment accommodates their ability to engage in it (Falk and Dierking 1992). Visitors will seek out ways in which new information or material links to what they may have already learned, or resonates with a learning style they have already developed (Caine and Caine 1994).

Design implications:

As suggested above, visitors who recognize their own experiences and knowledge base in the exhibit material may be more likely to move forward into newer territory.



Starting with aspects of the material that may be familiar to the audience can provide a sense of orientation, allowing the each visitor to feel that they are reflected and represented in the exhibit.

Also, as we have seen in many studies, new information presented in multiple ways will provide connections for people with varied learning styles and modalities (Gardner 1985). In order to maximize the opportunities for meaning making, we must consider varied points of reference by providing a variety of intellectual entry points for information and material. While we cannot predict exactly where and how a visitor will make her or his own personal link to a subject, we can provide a rich mix of potential links to increase the chances of reaching a broad audience.

Just as it is helpful to the visitor to start on familiar ground, it is important to come full circle at the conclusion of an experience. By ending with understandable, relevant ideas that can be brought out into the world when the visitor leaves the exhibit, we increase the likelihood that the material and its meanings will resonate with the audience when the experience is over.

6. Recognize that visitors create their own experiences.

Can we separate creativity from learning? Can we always count on pre-conceived outcomes? To what degree can we provide active visitor involvement that is meaningful through open-ended experiences? Perhaps these questions get at the heart of providing meaningful exhibits: it is the visitors who have experiences and the visitors who make meaning. We can only provide the enriched environment that makes meaning making possible. We should, however, work to create more effective stages for meaningful, even transformational, experiences.

Design implications:

As exhibit designers we are designing the stage and props through which visitors find the opportunity for meaningful museum experiences. By focusing on those experiences that we anticipate will give visitors insight into a subject, we can more directly address the time and place where learning (and thus meaning making) will occur. As

designers, we must have the same strong investment in the visitor's role within our exhibits as we do in the design of the exhibits themselves. It is not inappropriate in many cases that the design of the exhibit be "transparent" to the visitor experience.

In addition, the material should leave room for the visitor to explore and generate individual conclusions, connections, and meanings. Many anecdotes indicate that while many of visitors' most memorable experiences may not have been explicitly anticipated by the designer, the visitors still in fact made very good use of what the designer provided (Leichter and Spock 1999).

Conclusions

People access passion when deep meanings are engaged.

— Caine and Caine 1994:97

Creating a stage or opportunity for transformational experiences is more effective (and less frustrating) than trying to design the experience per se. Providing a coherent, rich and engaging infrastructure, permitting human and emotional connections to be made, tapping our visitors' sense of purpose and points of reference, and adding the ready audience, will yield meaningful experiences for staff and visitor alike.

Our brains are set up to extract meaning from particular spatial configurations.

Suggesting more open-ended exhibits, dedicated to allowing visitors to create meaning for themselves, addresses a weakness in some more traditional exhibit approaches. Having confidence in the visitor to recognize a "jumping-off point" is difficult, but the reward—visitors who are engaged in the depth and interest of the topic—is significant. In most museum settings, not every exhibit will tap into this meaning-generating pattern. Such an exploration of a topic may be presented within a series of broader, more traditional exhibits. But the capacity—in fact the tendency—of the visitor to build meaning and make strong connections should be acknowledged and utilized to the benefit of the material and the museum.

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