



Teaching Exhibition Design: A Survey of Graduate Programs in the United States

by Barbara Brennan

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Exhibition design is fun. In fact, I can't imagine more rewarding or satisfying work. Yet, like many professionals in the field today, I stumbled into my career accidentally. When I joined the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum (NASM) staff in 1980, the exhibition design department consisted of an illustrator, oil painter, architect, fashion designer, and graphic designer (me). Most museum exhibitions at that time were "designed" by curators or scientists, occasionally assisted by artists, who created dioramas or dramatic stage sets for the display of exotic curiosities. Since then, changes in the museum profession have resulted in the need for design staff trained in

museum theory, architecture, interactive technology, graphic design, and the use of social media to develop exhibitions that interpret challenging content and engage diverse audiences.

In addition to designing exhibitions for NASM, I have taught graduate exhibition design for George Washington University's (GW) Museum Studies program since 2005 and, after retiring in 2012, became Co-Director of their GEDC. Every semester, at least one student asks what he or she must do to prepare for a career in exhibition design.

I get the attraction. Exhibition designers research period styles, colors, materials, and structures and dig deeply into curatorial content, expanding their knowledge with each project. They work on teams, forming close relationships and learning to problem-solve, while putting their unique creative vision onto a public stage. Exhibition designers are artists, story-tellers, educators, historians, scientists, writers, performers, diplomats and coordinators. It's the perfect profession for someone with a broad range of interests, both academic and artistic.

Where can students go to acquire the specialized training necessary to become exhibition designers? There are now in the United States over 100 museum studies programs or museum studies courses offered within art history, anthropology, arts administration or historic preservation programs. Yet, only six offer graduate level training in exhibition design. Students who become enamored of the profession while in graduate school may need to take courses in graphic design, typography, or CAD at



The National Gallery of Art's Senior Curator and Chief of Design, Mark Leithauser, and Senior Architect, Donna Kirk, lead Corcoran School of Art + Design students in a critique of exhibition models. Interaction with design professionals is a critical feature of the Corcoran's program, and they frequently are invited to share their expertise as guest lecturers or through teaching specialized courses. Photograph by Clare Brown.

a local community college if they lack a bachelor's degree in fine arts, design, or architecture.

This paper will examine the six graduate programs in the United States that offer exhibition design training, focusing on the importance of developing community relationships to provide students with the opportunity to interact with design professionals and to design and install exhibitions in public spaces. Each of the highlighted programs reaps the benefits of being located in or near a large city with many museums, design companies, and non-profit organizations with whom to form educational partnerships. Two (UC Davis and GW) are part of larger universities with museums on campus, where students may intern and work on exhibition design teams. They offer a wide variety of disciplines to complement the design programs, with opportunities for collaboration and cross-pollination of ideas. The others are within schools dedicated to the arts, where students attend 4-hour studio classes and are able to delve more deeply into design projects. MICA and UC Davis have a strong curatorial focus, GW and University of the Arts bridge exhibition design and development, and FIT and the Corcoran are more design-based.

Graduate Program Descriptions
Corcoran College of Art + Design MA in Exhibit Design
48 credit hours

At the time of this writing, an agreement has been signed to bring the Corcoran College of Art + Design into George Washington University. The impact of this collaboration on their respective exhibition design programs is



Students assist in fabrication of an exhibit they designed to promote the new GW Museum and the Textile Museum, opening on campus in 2015. Each semester, students design exhibitions that are installed on GWU's campus, or at the National Air and Space Museum, with the primary goal of providing hands-on design and installation experience. Photograph by Barbara Brennan.

yet to be determined, but the process of programmatic and curricular integration has begun, with the shared goal of creating a unique and dynamic arts program.

Currently, the Corcoran's program is a studio-based master of arts that can be completed in two years of full time study. Through memberships in the Society for Environmental Graphic Design (SEGD), student organizations, and internships at Washington, DC museums, the 54 students currently enrolled have many opportunities to interact with design professionals.

In addition to the links with SEGD, a close working relationship with BRIVO, a local tech company, has benefitted both organizations. Students review the company's new technologies for possible museum applications, and in return BRIVO provides internships. In the spring of 2014 BRIVO sponsored the program's 14 thesis students' attendance at a design conference in London.

Although no formal agreement exists, BRIVO's strong commitment to working

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with students through the completion of each collaborative project is critical to the relationship's success. Similar relationships with local businesses provide real design experience. They are closely vetted by the professors and by a select group of students to ensure companies will follow through to the end and provide a true learning experience rather than simply asking students to complete a design task. The Exhibit Design program has two full-time professors and 16 adjunct professors who are working professionals that bring a wide range of expertise and projects into the classroom. In addition, a large portion of the program's budget goes toward guest speakers from different museum specialties. By graduation, Corcoran students have had experience in exhibition design, curatorial studies, artifact conservation, museum management, and many other fields of study related to the museum profession.

George Washington University Graduate Certificate in Exhibit Design
18 credit hours

GW's program can be completed in one year and is geared toward working professionals or graduating seniors holding undergraduate degrees in interior or architectural design, graphic or multi-media design, museum studies, fine arts, or theatre production design. The six to eight certificate students customize their programs, selecting courses from Museum Studies, Theatre and Dance, and Interior Architecture Design depending on their career goals and learning objectives. They may replace one of the six required courses with an internship in a professional exhibition design department at a Smithsonian museum. A critical component of the

program is hands-on experience, and students may have the opportunity to design and install up to three exhibitions at NASM and on GW's campus.

GW has a long-standing collaborative relationship with the Smithsonian Institution, and twice a year an exhibition design course is taught at NASM, where students have the opportunity to observe real-life examples and design a poster exhibition on a topic related to current research and exhibition development projects at the museum. They work closely with NASM curators, designers, photo archivists, and script editors, and the student-designed exhibition remains on public display for up to six months. A formal agreement includes a tuition sharing program through which a portion of student tuition goes to museums willing to host interns or provide classroom space. This arrangement creates a strong and effective incentive to participate and ensures that students have access to museum professionals and real-life exhibition design experience.

In addition to contact with professionals in the Smithsonian and other Washington, DC museums, GW is in the process of building a new museum on campus that will serve as a laboratory for students in all areas of the profession. In the spring of 2014, students enrolled in an Advanced Exhibition Design course designed two inaugural exhibitions for the GW Museum's Albert H. Small collection and an exhibition for the Textile Museum, scheduled to open in 2015. A previous advanced exhibition design class designed an exhibition for NASM's *Flight and the Arts* gallery that was on public display for six months. Design work included the



Students participate in a concept brainstorming exercise, where they experiment with design disciplines to interpret museum collections and create unique public experiences. Cultivation of creative logic, conceptual thinking, and storytelling methodologies are core goals of FIT's program. Photograph by Brenda Cowan.

entrance treatment, graphic panels, object labels, a banner, and promotional signage. In all cases, the students and George Washington University receive credit for their work.

**Fashion Institute of Technology, SUNY
MA in Exhibition Design
36 credit hours, 65 contact hours**

FIT's program encompasses a broad range of exhibition design applications including museum exhibitions, trade show installations, retail, and new media. They are sponsored by and have a formal agreement with the Exhibit Designers and Producers Association (EDPA). Their sponsors are closely involved in program advising and curriculum development, bringing industry experts into the classroom and providing professional one-on-one mentors, in addition to providing internships in member organizations.

Due to the intense course load, students must be familiar with drafting, 3D rendering, and the Adobe Design Suite

to be accepted. A BA or BFA in a related field is required, and portfolio requirements are very tight. The 15 students in the program matriculate full time and complete the MA as a cohort in two or three semesters.

The students are an eclectic group (75% international), who design multiple projects for sponsoring institutions, including EDPA members (producers, exhibition design firms, and the trade show industry), museums, and non-profit organizations such as the Smithsonian Institution, the Intrepid Museum, the New York Botanical Gardens, and the National Park Service.

The program focuses on human factors, audience evaluation, and the user experience. Exhibition design skills apply to multiple settings, from museums to corporate events, and understanding how narrative drives design is critical to successful design wherever it is applied. Students are encouraged to try it all and to remain open to careers in a variety of venues.

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In partnership with Maryland Traditions and the Latino Providers Network, Devociones y Fe (Devotions and Faith) investigates how Latino spiritual traditions express faith and devotion, and how those spiritual traditions create a sense of belonging. Installed in El Tesoro restaurant, the exhibit explores the use of non-traditional space and is informed by fieldwork, one-on-one interviews, and surveys within Baltimore's growing Latino communities. Photograph by MICA student Michelle Gomez, who designed and curated the exhibition.

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**Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA)
MFA in Curatorial Practice
60 credit hours**

MICA's MFA program is located in an area designated as an Arts & Entertainment District by the state of Maryland. Although it is a research- and writing-based program, requiring multiple practicums and a thesis, it is included in this paper because students are required to learn exhibition design skills and to design the exhibitions they curate. There are currently 10 students in the 2-year program, and they matriculate as a cohort. Courses touch on exhibition design as it relates to curatorial vision and push curatorial practice in new and interesting ways, while demonstrating that artists, community members, and curators can produce innovative, accessible exhibition designs through creative collaboration, a unique feature of MICA's program.

For practicum courses, students spend a year planning and implementing an exhibition or site-specific installation in the A&E District. Baltimore artists, designers, and museum professionals review practicum and thesis proposals and provide feedback throughout the project development process. Applicants come

from a variety of backgrounds including fine arts and art history, and plan to work as curators, educators, or gallery owners. Regardless of background, all are expected to learn exhibition design skills.

For their thesis projects students write detailed proposals to partner institutions including a vision statement, mission, goals, programming, timeline, and budget. The student and partner enter into a formal agreement for the duration of the project, and partners often contribute to the cost of the project. Students sometimes work on site at partner museums and are mentored by exhibition design professionals. This could be one day per week for one semester or two, and mentors serve on students' thesis committees.

Over the course of the program students participate in the development and design of four to seven public exhibitions. They are encouraged to experiment and to create unique exhibitions that incorporate site-specific public art, performance, language, and unusual collections. Students may also address social issues or use non-traditional sites such as a church, corner store, restaurant, previously vacant office, homeless services center, school auditorium or a library lobby and study area.

**University of the Arts MFA in Museum
Exhibition Planning and Design
60 credit hours**

The 9 to 12 students accepted into this studio-based program each year typically work in museums or exhibition and media design firms as exhibition developers or designers, so each class has a mix of academic and fine arts/design



Students in a University of the Arts prototyping class worked with professional staff at the Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site to develop early stages of an exhibition illustrating the dramatic rise in prison populations over 40 years. This composite image shows the cardboard and marker prototype and the 35' x 20' graph structure installed on site. Prototype photograph by Breanna Wucinich. Installation photograph courtesy of Eastern State Penitentiary.

undergraduate degrees. Design applicants submit a portfolio, and academic students must provide writing samples. Both groups complete the 2-year, full-time program as a cohort.

There are many layers of opportunity for students to work in design offices and interact with the multiple types and sizes of museums and non-profit institutions in the Philadelphia area. These include internships, curriculum-based partnerships with local institutions, and paid assistantships performed outside the classroom. At the beginning of each academic year up to 40 museums and institutions present possible assistantship projects to students, a process often referred to as “speed dating.” Students who plan to do an assistantship may be paid by the university or elect to do it as an internship and receive credit. Either way, they benefit from real professional experience, while building their resumes and portfolios.

Opportunities to collaborate with local institutions occur in visitor studies and exhibition prototyping courses. In a recent prototyping course, students worked with Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site to develop and design a 16 ft tall by 30 ft

wide exhibition illustrating the dramatic rise in prison populations over 40 years. Twice a year, students are involved in a professional “charrette” where a real world problem is posed by an outside client (museum or curator), the students brainstorm/problem solve for 24 hours, and present their findings to the client. In several instances the institutions have utilized these design concepts.

One of the challenges faced by this and other programs that straddle exhibition design and development is uneven skill levels. Students are encouraged to focus on their areas of strength, but all must become familiar with the processes and vocabulary of the museum profession. Students who don’t plan to be designers must at least learn to read technical drawings; designers must know how to conduct research, for example; and all must learn visitor testing and prototyping. If a student with no art background wants to be an exhibition designer, courses are available to help fill in the needed skills, one of the benefits of an exhibition design program within an art school.

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Exhibition Development and Design Program Web Sites:

Smithsonian Institution: <<http://museumstudies.si.edu/training.html>

Mark Walhimer of Museum Planning, LLC (Google page): <https://docs.google.com/a/email.gwu.edu/document/d/1Tif1BKIEuWW_cN-IjNk26hcFHQO1CMV1PHG8KI0ZL1c/edit

Mark Walhimer's blog: <<http://museumplanner.org/getting-started-in-museums/>

Programs Covered in this Paper:

Corcoran College of Art + Design: <http://www.corcoran.edu/degree-programs/graduate/master-of-art-exhibition-design>

Fashion Institute of Technology: <http://www.fitnyc.edu/2868.asp>

George Washington University: <http://museumstudies.columbian.gwu.edu/graduate-certificate-exhibit-design>

Maryland Institute College of Art: [http://www.mica.edu/Programs_of_Study/Graduate_Programs/Curatorial_Practice_\(MFA\).html](http://www.mica.edu/Programs_of_Study/Graduate_Programs/Curatorial_Practice_(MFA).html)

University of the Arts: <http://www.uarts.edu/academics/camd-cross-college-programs/mfa-museum-exhibition-planning-and-design>

University of California at Davis: <http://gradstudies.ucdavis.edu/programs/program-detail.cfm?id=84>



UC Davis MFA student Emma Thorne-Christy designed a moveable pop-up exhibition to engage broader audiences in understanding difficult stories and complex messages. *Filed Away: The Undocumented Experience* was an example of crowd-sourced curation that used objects in file cabinet drawers to represent the experiences and emotions of undocumented young adults. Photograph by Emma Thorne-Christy, who designed and curated the exhibition.

University of California, Davis MFA Exhibition Design

72 credit hours

UC Davis has full-time undergraduate and graduate programs in exhibition design with 20-30 undergrads and one to three graduates. Graduate students work as TAs for undergraduate classes, and one of the program's principle aims is to train the next generation of exhibition design professors. Two museums on the UC Davis campus provide internship and exhibition design opportunities that allow students to develop and design exhibitions.

With a heavy focus on design theory and research, balanced with creative practice, MFA applicants propose a research project and select a faculty member to represent them when seeking admission. Proposals must include a thorough statement of objectives, and prospective students must meet with faculty partners in advance to receive their support. From proposal to completion, students are treated as professionals presenting their ideas to potential partners and clients. They take full advantage of the university's breadth of disciplines, tapping into expertise outside their core area to create content in fields such as computer science, anthropology, and engineering.

In addition to the proposed research project, students work on a variety of

community-based projects developing relationships with cultural, commercial, and public spaces. Host institutions must demonstrate a commitment to work with the students through the completion of each project, and students receive credit for their work. On occasion they are paid and can obtain grant funding. Community partners include several California museums, as well as international museums and design firms.

Additional Programs

This paper focuses on graduate exhibition design programs in the United States. Many schools offer undergraduate training in exhibition design, or graduate training in related fields such as Industrial Design and Museum Studies. For more complete listings of universities that offer undergraduate and graduate training in museum studies and exhibition design, including international schools, visit the web sites listed below. University curricula frequently change, and new programs or courses are regularly added. It is a challenge to keep program lists up to date, so please contact the web site hosts directly to request changes or additions.

A few national examples of programs that include exhibition design follow:

- Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, CA offers an MS in environmental design, focusing on

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hospitality, retail, office, exhibition, and event design.

- The College of Design, North Carolina State University teaches exhibition design issues within other required course work, such as graphic design.
- The Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia offers a directed study class in exhibition design.
- Parsons, the New School for Design offers an undergraduate minor in Temporary Environments and an MFA in Trans-disciplinary Design.
- Pratt Institute offers their graduate Interior Design students the option of replacing traditional thesis work with an Exhibition Design Intensive, a two-semester immersion into the design and study of exhibitions of all kinds.
- The San Francisco Art Institute offers an MA in Exhibition and Museum Studies that includes courses in research and writing, critical histories in museums and

exhibitions, global perspectives of modernity, institutional critique and art history. A practicum and thesis are also required, but not courses in exhibition design.

- School of Visual Arts in Boston offers an exhibition design elective within the graphic design department, open to graduate and undergraduate students. Multidisciplinary teams focus on problem-solving, story-telling, and offering museum visitors an experience.

Each of the programs detailed in this paper provides graduate students with the opportunity to learn exhibition design skills through close interaction and partnerships with museums, exhibition design firms, commercial venues, and non-profit organizations in the community. Each reflects the unique culture found only on that campus and in that particular city. While the programs are very different from one another, serving a wide variety of needs and career goals, students in all benefit from real-life experience that comes from working directly with professionals in the field. 🌀

Additional Programs:

Art Center College of Design:
http://www.artcenter.edu/accd/programs/graduate/environmental_design.jsp

College of Design, North Carolina State University: <http://design.ncsu.edu/academics/art-design/graduate-program1>

Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia: <http://art.uga.edu/>

Parsons, the New School for Design: <http://www.newschool.edu/parsons/subpage.aspx?id=100454>

Pratt Institute: <https://www.pratt.edu/academics/art-design/art-grad/interior-design-grad/>

San Francisco Art Institute: <http://www.sfaai.edu/exhibition-and-museum-studies>

School of Visual Arts, Boston: <http://www.bu.edu/cfa/visual-arts/prospective/graduate/design/>