

What's New in Exhibits?

As someone who has worked on history exhibitions for more than 30 years, I am often asked what is new in museum exhibits. I have a two-fold answer: nothing and everything. Some things haven't changed. Whether they are 19th-century cabinets of curiosity, 20th-century interpretive exhibits, or the technology-rich presentations promised by the 21st century, successful exhibits engage visitors in social learning and satisfy their expectations to see the real thing.

At the same time, everything about exhibition development is changing because the environment in which we work and the basic assumptions about that work are changing. In my current position as director of The Historical Society of Washington, DC, I am involved in the process of planning exhibitions for a new City Museum of Washington that will open in 2003. As we develop these new exhibits we realize that they must look forward to addressing the issues of the 21st century as well as accurately portraying the past. In particular, we have identified several broad trends that we think will affect the exhibits that we are designing now and for the future. The world we live in is increasingly characterized by greater complexity, more diverse populations, changing audiences, and multiple perspectives. Decentralization of information means that there is no

longer a single source for information, and even historical expertise is moving away from centralized authority toward greater local involvement and new formats. There is a growing recognition that old boundaries are changing as we see new configurations in which "neighborhood," "regional," and "global" are becoming the dominant categories for everyday interactions and identi-

ties. Perhaps most importantly, technology and the Internet are changing the way we think. Hypertext and the concept of non-linear connections have created opportunities for linking information and people in new relationships. For The Historical Society and others creating exhibits and working with cultural resources of all kinds, these trends are having an impact on what we do and how we do it.

It is already possible to see the evidence of these changes in current museum exhibits. The Minnesota History Center's exhibits pioneered a non-sequential approach that abandoned a chronological structure for exhibits in favor of themes that allow visitors to take multiple paths through the exhibits and to access information in a more random and individually directed fashion. *Minnesota A To Z* pioneered a new approach to history exhibits based on a random access and non-linear approach that has been widely adapted by other exhibitions. Conveying history through multiple perspectives has also become a common practice in many history exhibits. The voice of the curator is increasingly joined or even replaced by the voices of first person accounts. An exhibit on communities at the Minnesota History Center explicitly used the voice of the community members to tell the story of communities as diverse as a small town, the deaf, a

Minnesota A to Z at the Minnesota History Center. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.



neighborhood, and Vietnam veterans. A new commitment to shared authority in exhibits can also be seen in the use of exhibition teams representing different specializations, in the participation of community advisory groups and in consultation of specific subject specialists in the exhibition development process. In this new environment, the curator of an exhibition is much less likely to serve as the only authority for an exhibition. The changing attitudes toward education and entertainment are another example of the blurring of traditional boundaries. Audience research consistently shows that visitors to museums want education and entertainment. Heritage tourism, the History Channel, visitation to museums, genealogy, and reenactments all fall into a category that defies distinction as either entertainment or education. The exhibits we produce are part of a new category of leisure-time learning. Multi-media shows and museum theater programs in museums are evidence that performance is now part of our educational missions.

The work of exhibition developers will continue to be influenced by these trends, just as exhibits have always responded to changing audience needs and to changes in the society. Nineteenth-century exhibitions began as cabinets of curiosity that were based on collections that had been assembled with or without the benefit of particular themes and agendas. The exhibit was the collections with very little additional explanation. The 20th century saw the refinement of the interpretive exhibition in which ideas became the defining element and were often more important than the collections. Perfected by the generation of historians who entered the field of public history since the 1960s, these exhibits were, and still are, often based on research papers that are then translated into exhibitions by designers and curators, using objects as visual illustration. At their best these exhibits were good history, at their worst they could become the infamous “book on the wall.” The operative word in exhibits these days is “experience.” What is the look and feel of the exhibit? How does the design convey the messages of the exhibition just as much as the labels or the artifacts? Increasingly museums speak about the visitor experience, and how we are creating memorable experiences. In large part that experience is based on the tangible evidence that museums collect, the material culture that defines and describes everyday life. Part of the job for exhibition developers whose goal is

to create an experience includes planning for what visitors will do in the exhibit, not just what they will see. The big question for museums and exhibit developers today is not whether things are changing, but rather how we should react to the changes that are shaping our field. What will exhibits in the 21st century look like and how will they differ from what we do now?

Technology has had an enormous impact on exhibitions. Hypertext, the basis for web communication, is defined as an approach to information in which data is stored in a network of nodes and links and viewed through interactive interfaces that permit the user to traverse links as desired and to access information in a complex and non-linear fashion. Databases can assemble huge amounts of information and visual images and make that information available in exhibits as well as in your home. Layering of information in labels has now been extended to the possibility of an almost unlimited amount of information when a visitor chooses to access it. Wireless communication now makes it possible to make information available anywhere in the world through hand-held computers, telephones, and other electronic devices. The possibilities of this new technology can be daunting. Some museums are discovering the Internet as a new environment in which to present exhibitions. Toledo’s Attic is a project of a historical society that made the decision not to expand its facilities, but rather to present 20th-century exhibitions in an online museum with changing online exhibitions. The same issues of good design, voice, collections, and participation are just as important in the development of these online exhibits.

Although the Information Age and the concept of hypertext have reinforced non-linear and non-sequential communication, the Internet has also spurred a rediscovery of narrative. The voice in an exhibition is now more important than ever before. Who tells the story has become as important as what is told. In designing exhibitions, we have become more aware of the subtle distinctions between the voice of experience and the voice of curatorial analysis. Exhibition evaluation has taught us that public audiences prefer to learn from the voice of experience. Oral history has thus become an important component of many current exhibits. The Historical Society, for example, has just completed an exhibition on *Growing Up in Washington* during the 20th century that is based on more than 50 oral history

Home Place
Minnesota an
object theater at
the Minnesota
History Center.
Photo courtesy
Minnesota
Historical
Society.

interviews and features specific “poster children” who tell their story as the basic narrative for the exhibit storyline. Narrative—the human art of storytelling—is the way that people have always made sense of information. Now with the increased complexity and volume of information available to us, narrative has once again become an important vehicle for understanding and making sense out of overwhelming amounts of information. Increasingly, we see exhibits that use storytelling techniques in first-person interpretation, oral histories, or interactive computers that help convey the ideas and content in more accessible narrative formats. Exhibits in the future will need to access the power of narrative to be truly successful in communicating complex ideas and information.

Audience research is also teaching us that visitors are ready and willing to grapple with more complex and more difficult issues. Recent audience research for the new City Museum in Washington revealed that the residents of the Washington metropolitan area expected the new museum to address issues of race, slavery, and other difficult topics. This is already a growing trend in museums across the country. Colonial Williamsburg’s controversial portrayals of slavery have become some of their most popular and successful programs. The Underground Railroad program at Conner Prairie in Indiana has gotten rave reviews from participants who describe their emotional response to participating in reenacting the experiences of escaping slaves. House museums have discovered that their visitors are often much more interested in the life of the servants who worked in the house than they are in the owners. Rather than moving away from difficult topics, exhibition developers will be challenged to find appropriate ways to deal with difficult issues.

The Historical Society’s new City Museum is looking forward to developing exhibits that embrace these new trends. The 21st century that we envision in a new City Museum will have four attributes that I believe will be characteristic of successful museums and exhibits. First it



embraces the decentralization of information. The museum building as simply a container seems anachronistic as we look ahead to a museum concept in which architecture and programs must serve as channels for the flow of information. Second, exhibits will be connective in every sense of the word. The Internet will serve as both a vehicle for communication and as a model for the web-like relationships that will link organizations and collections. Third, partnerships and collaboration have already increased, but they will become essential in order to be successful in this environment. For organizations whose mission is to present place-based history, working without the full involvement of community members will be unthinkable. Fourth, the museum of the future, like the museum of the past, must be trustworthy. *The Presence of the Past*, the influential study published by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, has shown that history museums are rated among the most trusted sources for historical information by Americans. The challenge for developers of history exhibits will be how we learn to share authority with our communities and still retain our trustworthiness as sources of authentic information and real things. The 21st century offers new opportunities and new challenges to create exhibitions that harness the power of technology, partnerships, and authenticity in the truly connective museums of the future.

Barbara Franco is the Executive Director of The Historical Society of Washington, DC.