

Design Principles for Exhibition Curators (2005)

Jay Williams

General Considerations

Exhibit design assists in communicating concepts and ideas in your script.

Good design presents the museum visitor with an ordered environment. A well designed exhibit environment incorporates a clear hierarchy of visual elements—each with a clear order of importance. The hierarchy of objects, photo images, models and other components mentioned in your script should be echoed in your design. All elements of a given kind (pedestals, text panels for major sections, photo murals, etc.) should be treated in a consistent manner.

A well designed exhibition in three dimensions should abide by the same concepts of good design that are applied to two-dimensional graphics.

Graphic elements such as title panels, sectional text panels, case labels and other labels should have a “family resemblance.” (Contribute to a sense of unity and continuity.)

Color choices for walls, pedestals, banners, fabric coverings for backing boards and other environmental elements should coordinate with your graphics.

Traffic Flow

Always design with a sequence in mind—sequence of information, sequence of objects.

Go with the natural flow of the space, if possible. Impose a flow, create a path, if a natural flow from one subdivision of space to another does not exist.

Lay out objects in a sequence to reinforce the traffic flow. Create centers of interest in a defined hierarchy, major and minor stops, along the path. Use walls, partitions, hanging fabric, projections from existing walls, and arrangements of casework to provide places to stand still, gather, and/or sit comfortably.

Group objects with labels and signage to reinforce stopping points and create a visual rhythm.

Seating provides a necessary break in the traffic flow to prevent monotony and fatigue. Video and audio stations should be placed with rest and rhythm in mind.

Be aware of areas that may be congested and alter the layout to free up tight spots.

Consider the effect of lighting on traffic flow.

Be aware of entry ways and exits.

Consider location of electrical outlets, so that electrical/electronic equipment can be properly placed.

Consider the location of security equipment (video cameras, guard stations), to avoid blind spots.

Composition of Elements in Space

Objects, casework, graphics and other exhibit components in 3-dimensional space interact in much the same way as visual elements in two dimensions. However, these relationships can change as visitors change their points of view.

Use a gallery diagram and graph paper or tracing paper to sketch possibilities.

Optimally, there should be no "dead" areas on a wall or in the exhibition space. These are not simply open areas but areas not reached by viewers' eyes, non-activated areas. Just as a viewer's eye is lead around all areas of a good 2-dimensional page layout, viewers should be drawn into the exhibition space and their field of vision activated. Visitors' eyes should naturally move to all important objects and other components that you want them to notice.

Open space: Visitors need areas of open space, in contrast to "dead space," in floor areas and on walls. Open space in three dimensions functions like white space in a two-dimensional graphic layout. Space allows visitors to perceive relationships between the components and elements that you, as designer, are manipulating.

Bridging space: Visitors bridge open space by inferring relationships between elements. A visitor's eyes will be attracted by a contrasting hue (color) or value (area of light or dark). They will connect repeated contrasting elements across space—for example, three paintings separated on a wall, each having red shapes. These centers of visual interest will tend to be the color or value that is present in the smallest quantity in the visual field. (Interior designers call these accent colors, and repeat them here and there in a room to link pillows with draperies or a figure in an oriental carpet.) Example: two small shapes of deep blue on a yellow field; three words in light yellow separated from each other on a dark gray background.

Determine major visitor viewpoints. Where will a moving visitor encounter static objects and other visual components? At entry (and where the title panel is located), at each point where a major sectional text panel is viewed, and at long-distance points where major anchoring objects are first seen.

An "anchor object" is an object that "takes possession" and activates part of a wall (or even a whole wall) or area of floor space, dominating everything around it. It can be perceived from a relatively long distance. Visitors gravitate toward these objects. In exhibits without anchor objects large, colorful graphics or photo murals can do the job of anchoring and activating a wall or floor space.

Match the placement of objects in the traffic flow with key concepts in the script.

Curators seek out anchor objects (or anchor components) for each major section of an exhibit. This should correspond to each or major space division in the layout sequence. Each small room, gallery subdivision (corner, end) or wall needs one to three anchor objects or anchoring components (photo mural, reproduction).

Viewer perception depends on contrasts—forms set in relationship to each other and against a background. Contrasts can be created through color (contrasts of hue, especially complementary colors) and value (light and dark).

As visitors scan their visual field, they first perceive major forms. As they are drawn toward an anchor object or major graphic component (sign, text panel, photo mural), they will scan and re-scan their field of vision for a second layer of detail, and refine their sense of visual hierarchy. They will make decisions on which major text panels to read, look at headline words, and scan cases for interesting objects.

Figure-ground relationships are hindered by busy backgrounds and lack of visual contrast (gray against gray), too many forms of similar size and shape.

Compose objects and labels in a case, or a series of text panels on a wall, to help the viewer make selections.

Maintain appropriate contextual relationships of objects as according to your script.

Make viewers select objects according to the hierarchy you determined in advance in your script. Selecting objects by putting them in a prominently placed display case or on a pedestal implies that the object is important. Putting a lot of small, hard-to-perceive objects in a prominent case disappoints and confuses visitors.

Selection devices:

Floor risers with/without plexiglass enclosures

Pedestals in various shapes and sizes

Risers inside pedestals or display cases?

Solo objects or groupings?

Implied relationships between objects?

Frames for art works or reproductions

Groupings of framed works?

Architectural frameworks: niches, enclosures
For graphics and labels: slant boards, kiosks

Graphics

All the same design principles that apply to design in two-dimensional space, apply to three dimensional design. Balance (Symmetrical/Asymmetrical), Rhythm (intervals between repeated elements), Unity and Emphasis.

However, three dimensional design is dynamic, because the relationship of the visitors or viewers to the exhibition components changes as they move through the exhibit space.

Always think about leading the viewer's eye. What elements are "read" first? What elements are read second? And so on.

Have a plan for two, three, or 4 priority levels of graphics.

- Title panel and main label
- Text panel for each main exhibit section
- Case or subsection labels for object groupings
- Object labels

Compose a color palette and use it to reinforce visual relationships. Some palettes utilize two tones of a single color, plus black or white as the third "color." Another possibility is to build a palette around a pre-determined relationship on the color wheel (such as *analogous colors*—those next to each other on the color wheel). Choose colors of signs and graphics as part of a whole palette for the 3-dimensional space.

A color palette can be built around a known relationship on the color wheel, such as *split complementary colors*: a color and the two colors adjacent to its complement on the color wheel. For example, two *complementary colors* are red and green; so a set of *split complements* would be red, blue-green and yellow-green. Blue-green and yellow-green are adjacent to green on the color wheel. In order for this scheme to work, two of the three colors have to be varied in tone (one a dark shade and the other a light tint). One of the colors should dominate, and the other two used more sparingly. And one of those two should be used only as an accent. (Black or white may be used in addition—especially for typography.) Look at some advertisements or pictures in home decorating magazines, and analyze the color relationships involved.

Have a plan for using typography consistently. Typography has been called a "hidden art," because we usually notice it only when it doesn't work or is difficult to read.

Take into account AAM standards for signs and labels—needs of handicapped, elderly, and children.

Title panels can utilize a display type or can be a member of the same font family that you use for other headlines.

Headlines: Determine the relationships of sizes of main headlines to sub-heads and body copy. Then apply these consistently in your signs and text panels. Avoid the “clown pants” appearance of a mix of a variety of fonts on a sign, text panel or label. There are plenty of examples of poor use of typography in amateur web sites. Legibility in headlines depends on the tops of words. In general, it is best to use caps and lower case, rather than all upper-case, in headlines.

Using a formal layout system such as a grid allows a designer to structure relationships between elements, creating rhythm, balance, etc.