

Seven Commandments

A short story about our do's and don'ts in exhibition scenography

Love and passion

In museums and science centres, visitors minds are taken very seriously. But what about the heart and soul? How many interactive exhibitions touched visitors in a way movies or literature can? Of course, exhibitions are a different medium from literature or movies, but we can learn many things from these crafts. Designing an exhibition is not about filling rooms with artifacts and exhibits. It is about creating stories, about sparking inspiration. This story will be about these considerations. It will be a short story about love and passion.

Learning from experience

At NorthernLight we have ten years of experience in developing and designing exhibitions. Slowly but surely, through trial and error, through spectacular failures, through late night discussions, through watching visitors intensively, we have come to some important insights about exhibition scenography. What makes a good exhibition? What to do, what not to do?

Seven Commandments

Creative work like exhibition scenography in many ways does not lend itself for imposing a defined work method or a fixed number of guidelines. Our seven commandments should not be seen as the one and only method for creating a great exhibition. They are meant to inspire, to spark discussion.

An exhibition is about telling *stories*.

An exhibition is about *real stuff*, about authenticity.

An exhibition is about creating *action*, about mental and physical.

An exhibition is about *focus*, about making clear choices.

An exhibition is not about *me*, but about *we*...

An exhibition is about sparking *inspiration*.

An exhibition is about *love and passion*.



Story telling

“Our capacity for making meaning through narrative is what underlies the great myths, fairy tales and detective stories that often embody human fears, aspirations and psychological truths.” (Mark O’Neill, Head of arts and museums, Glasgow City Council)

“I envisage a new age of museums, the ‘poetic’. They will draw out the profounder, more elusive meanings inherent in so many artefacts from our past. There are countless ways in which this can be done, but museums have barely begun to realise their potential as storytellers and communicators.” (Julian Spalding, *The Poetic Museum*, 2002)

Collections, historic objects, scientific phenomena. There are always stories behind them. These stories can – and should – form the soul on which every exhibition is based. These stories are the main tools to make the exhibition content come alive.

When we develop an exhibition, one starts by listening. By digging in. By trying to find one or more fascinating stories. This might be a story that is right on the surface. But it can also be the story that is behind the obvious story. The fascination can come from the story itself. But also from the way the story is told, or because the storyteller is an interesting, colourful person.

When the right stories are found, the biggest hurdle in the creation of an exhibition is taken. Developing the exhibition scenography now merely becomes a question of finding ways to bring these stories to the visitors. In word, sound, vision, material, space, colour.

In telling these stories it is not necessary to tell all. It is even better not to tell all. It should also be left to the visitor’s imagination to complete the story. All good stories leave something to be imagined! (Abb. 1 und Abb. 1a)

Real stuff; authenticity

In times of discontinuous and disconcerting change, the people who give comfort are those with a keen sense of the past. They’ve seen it all before – the good, the bad, the ugly – and they know that we’ll see it all again. Stephen E. Ambrose, 65, thinks that history is the way to navigate the future. “The past,” he says, “is a source of knowledge, and the future is a source of hope. Love of the past implies faith in the future.”

Today, information is available all the time in enormous amounts. Directly accessible, in all kinds of digital forms. Why then would one still visit an exhibition? A place with a very limited amount of

1 Interior of one of the “storyboxes” that was developed for the Heritage Discovery Centre in Hong Kong. This particular storybox is dedicated to the life of a trader during the Ming Dynasty, through original artifacts and illustrations.



1a In the exhibition 'You, Me, Electricity', the fascinating story is told of the 19th century scientific quest into using electricity for communication purposes.

information, compared to the limitless information supply of the internet. A place that does not have the option to personally browse from topic to topic, where one cannot directly view all associated photos and videos, a place that is not accessible 24 hours a day.

The answer to this is: authenticity. People need real stuff. Need to be physically close to an important part of history. Close to the real paint that was applied by the actual artist. Close to the object that was held by a great man, or great crook for that matter. Be able to touch a archaeological piece that is 6000 years old. Digital information, photo, video, never will these media be able to replace the feeling of being in direct contact with the real thing. That is why exhibitions will not loose their significance. That is why digital media, or commercial visitor attractions for that matter, are no competition for exhibitions. As long as, in designing exhibitions, we always keep in mind that one of the main 'unique selling points' is – and will be – authenticity. Real stuff! (Abb. 2)

Action

"Tell me and I will forget
show me and I may remember
involve me and I will understand." (Old Chinese saying)

Research shows that information is transmitted and received up to 80% more efficiently when action is involved. When people do not just listen – are not just recipients – but when they are involved and invited to act, they will absorb information better and have a more deeper understanding of the subject matter. By the way, I purposely use the word "action", and not "interaction" since the word interaction is too closely linked to the world of digital media and computergames. Action refers to everything we do to physically and mentally involve our visitors. To create hands-on and minds-on experiences.

Sometimes exhibitions with a lot of action are referred to as "playgrounds" or perceived as locations that are just "ice for the kids". This is a serious misunderstanding. Active exhibitions are all about "inspiring curiosity and supporting lifelong learning" (as stated by ASTC, the Association of Science-Technology Centers). Inspiring curiosity can and should be a main goal of any exhibition, no matter at what age group it is aimed. And the term lifelong learning in itself implies that learning does not stop at age 18 or 21!



Studies show that in hands-on, or activity-based, exhibitions visitors show increases in creativity, positive attitudes toward the topic, perception, logic development, communication skills, and reading readiness.

Exhibits that are beautiful or surprising – or even funny – can encourage visitors to approach new phenomena and ideas. In the words of Frank Oppenheimer, founder of San Francisco's Exploratorium, "No one ever failed a museum." (Abb. 3)

Focus

Museums today need to find ways to encourage visitors who come through their doors to look with a fresh, curious and questioning attitude. One way museums can do this is by bringing what they have to show and tell sharply into focus.

To write a novel is to dare to delete. To find the essence. To tell the story in a focused way. The same is true for designing an exhibition. It is easy to tell all, to have many graphic panels with many words, to have display cases full of artifacts, to have long audiovisual presentations. It is difficult to dare to focus on one aspect of the story, to possibly put just one artifact in the spotlight. To make a mosquito into an elephant!

A fascinating example in this respect is the 'Sound and Vision' in Hilversum, The Netherlands, an interactive museum about the history of radio and television. This museum contains an overload of information, with hundred of hours of audiovisual material on display, and multimedia search engines that allow visitors to browse almost ten thousand hours of radio and television programs. A place where it is hard to focus, indeed! There was a long and thorough search for a way to give visitors focus in this audiovisual fairground. The solution that was found was the Magic Ring. This personal RFID device allows each visitor to have a personalized and focused experience. They choose a virtual guide to help them along, they bookmark what they like for extended viewing later on, they get information tailored to their age and visitor profile. They even get a personal webpage that contains a personal and focused recollection of their visit. (Abb. 4)

Not me, but we

Many exhibition treatments talk about "the visitor". As if a single person will visit the exhibition, as if an exhibition is simply about the interaction between one person and the exhibition elements. But

2 At the insect house in the Amsterdam Zoo Artis, it is all about real stuff. Yet the real stuff here – insects – is often small and hard to find. Special display cases, cameras and videos help visitors to come closer to these magical creatures.



3 Interior of the 'Sound and Vision' museum in Hilversum, The Netherlands. Although this fascinating new visitor experience is full of (inter)active exhibits, it is not specifically aimed at children.

that disregards one of the most important aspects of exhibitions: the social interaction. In many instances in modern life, people are on their own. When they travel to work, alone in their car, when they are behind their computer, when they study or read a book. Museums are social spaces where contact between people and social togetherness are just as important as the primary functions of guarding cultural heritage and transferring information.

Exhibition design can and should encourage social interaction. First of all within the visitor groups themselves. Most museum visitors come in families, pairs or school groups. Exhibitions should encourage them to interact, to play together, to discuss, to do role play and discover personal strengths, to have time and space to reflect on what they just saw or did, in a group.

Secondly museums can stimulate social interaction between visitors, that maybe never met before. A very interesting example in this respect is one of the first exhibits that was ever developed for the Amsterdam science centre NEMO. In an exhibition about the financial world, visitors cooperated and competed in a group computer game. They competed for the lowest, yet winning bid in a flower auction and played the stock market. This game was very successful and won a Interactive design award at the famous Hannover design show. (Abb. 5)



4 The magic ring that all visitors of the 'Sound and Vision' museum receive.

Sparkling inspiration

Museums are mainly about learning through looking, listening and doing: they can provide vivid experiences that are unlike anything we get from a computer, a book or, for that matter, any item from everyday life. This means that museums have the power to spark inspiration. About any subject – also about subjects that might seem boring at first.

A large part of the pleasure of designing exhibitions, comes from the fact that there is this enormous diversity in subject matter. First of all the exhibition scenographer should find the inspiration in this subject matter. This might seem hard at first, when the subject is sewage systems or the national tax service. But finally, every subject has its angle, its hook. That is when sparking inspiration with visitors can begin. When that original angle is found and developed into a vivid visitor experience.



There is an enormous variety of exhibition media at hand to create vivid and meaningful visitor experiences. Although there are some technologies at hand, one should never let the technological possibilities guide the way the exhibition is developed. Instead, through trial and error, through research – through keeping an open eye to developments in other creative fields such as movies, theatre, music – one will always be able to find the best media, the best technologies, the best display methods for the particular topic at hand. The best way to spark inspiration. (Abb. 6)

5 Visitors of the 'Teen Facts' exhibition in NEMO. Social interaction was one of the key starting points of the design.

Love and passion

Many exhibition are made for curators, sponsors, directors, or to impress other designers. But actually, the love and passion that goes into developing exhibitions should be aimed fully at its potential visitors. That is where the designer's responsibility lies.

A fascinating moment is when a designer can – secretly – observe visitors, the first day an exhibition opens its doors. When a designer can observe if the love and passion that was put into the development, is "received" by the visitors.

The opening of an exhibition is not the end of its creation, it is the beginning.

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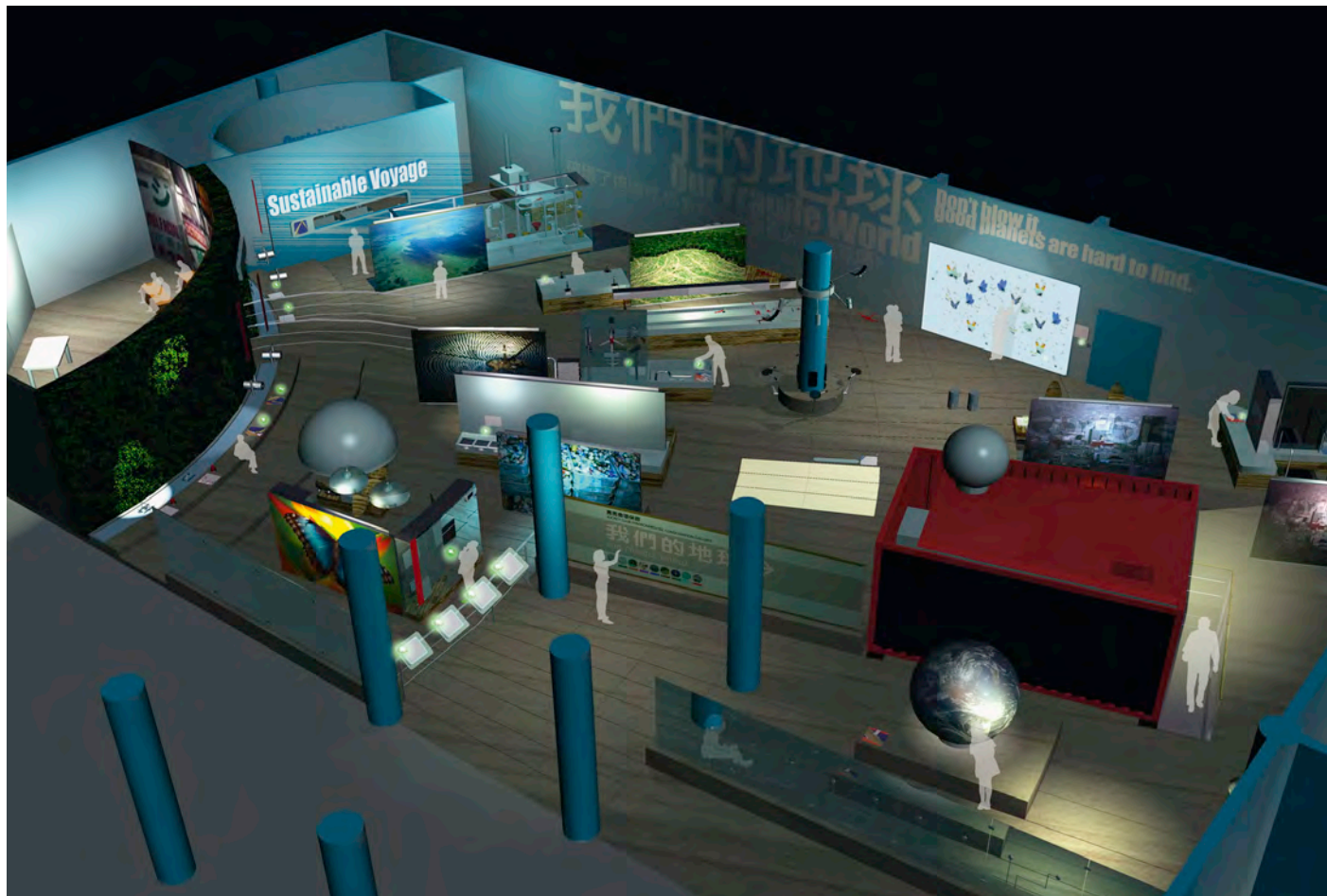
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6 Artist impression of the exhibition 'Our Fragile World' for the Hong Kong Science Museum. This exhibition will try to spark inspiration about the important yet difficult subject of ecological conservation. The exhibition will open at the end of 2007.

7 Interior of the Sound and Vision museum in Hilversum, The Netherlands. This fascinating new visitor experience just opened its doors.





Peter Slavenburg

Liebe und Passion

In Museen und in Science Centres wird der Verstand der Besucher ganz ernst genommen. Doch was ist mit dem Herzen, mit dem Gemüt? Wie viele interaktive Ausstellungen berührten die Besucher so wie das Kino oder die Literatur?

Lernen aus Erfahrung

Bei Northern Light haben wir eine zehnjährige Erfahrung in der Entwicklung und der Gestaltung von Ausstellungen. Langsam, aber sicher, durch Versuch und Irrtum, durch spektakuläre Reinfälle, in Diskussionen bis in die Nacht hinein und durch die intensive Beobachtung der Besucher sind wir zu einigen wichtigen Einsichten über die Szenografie von Ausstellungen gelangt. Was macht eine gute Ausstellung aus? Was ist zu tun, was ist zu vermeiden?

Sieben Gebote

Kreative Arbeit wie die Szenografie führt nicht von selbst zu einer bestimmten Arbeitsmethode oder zu einem festen Kanon von Leitsätzen. Unsere sieben Gebote sollen nicht als die einzigen Wege zu einer großen Ausstellung aufgefasst werden, sondern als Anregungen, als Anstöße zur Diskussion.

Eine Ausstellung erzählt Geschichten und muss authentisch sein, sie fordert zum geistigen und körperlichen Handeln auf und zu klaren Entscheidungen, sie handelt nicht von mir, sondern von uns, und sie weckt in uns Liebe und Leidenschaften.

7a Exterior of the 'Sound and Vision' museum in Hilversum. This fascinating new visitor experience just opened its doors.