

# Nuts and Bolts

## ***Our Collections in Your Space: Creating Exhibitions for Non-Museum Environments***

by Barbara Cohen-Stratyner

**Barbara Cohen-Stratyner** is the  
Judy R. and Alfred A. Rosenberg  
Curator of Exhibitions,  
The New York Public Library  
for the Performing Arts.  
She may be contacted at  
[bcohenstratyner@nypl.org](mailto:bcohenstratyner@nypl.org).

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Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc. serves as a model for many mixed-use urban arts complexes with multiple performance spaces and amenities clustered around public space. As early as 1957, as the first arguments were being formulated for establishment of the Center, the planners specified that it should include "an expository function." Currently, there is one free museum-within-public library (us), archival and/or reproduction exhibitions in nine concert halls, two art galleries, a community gallery (currently under construction), and an extensive public art and sculpture collection. They have different collection and staffing policies, with responsibility assigned to constituents' archivists, visitor services, and "special projects' units. As a museum in The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, a consistent member of Lincoln Center, we have become experts at developing reproduction, off-site lobby exhibitions based on our vast non-book archival holdings: manuscripts, scores and correspondence, original set, costume, lighting and sound designs and technical drawings, photographs, commercial and non-commercial recordings, oral histories, film, and videography. These off-site exhibitions are an integral part of our museum mission to "communicate tangible and intangible heritage for the purpose of education, study, and enjoyment" (ICOM, 2007).

The off-site projects include:

- All-reproduction exhibitions in lobbies of commercial facilities to link to a concurrent on-site exhibition, such as a Mozart Bi-Centennial display in a Wall Street office tower (1991).

- Reproduction exhibitions that motivate community-based research in an exhibitions' theme. *Classic Black* traveled to cultural heritage centers, performing arts spaces and small culturally specific museums which were guided to do oral histories and artifact searches on their communities' own dance teachers in the era of segregation (1996–2001).
- Reproduction exhibitions that travel with the performing arts companies for which they were developed.

These reproduction, off-site exhibitions, generally called "lobby" exhibitions, are required when the site cannot guarantee the environmental conditions required by most museums. A site will qualify as a "non-museum environment" if it lacks security and control of temperature and humidity to accepted standards, but can otherwise be an ideal place for exhibitions, with great visibility, flow patterns, and a positive connection to the general community. Exhibition development involves knowledgeable decisions about subject, audience, and space. Creating a lobby exhibition for a performance space frequently requires us to suspend our usual need for solid formative information.

### **Planning a Lobby Exhibition**

There are basically four forms of lobby exhibition:

- The wholly commercial wall display (usually for corporate facilities).
- Long-term site interpretations for performing arts, municipal, cultural

or historical organizations.

- Temporary installations that change focus to match the season's repertory.
- Traveling temporary exhibitions that result from and/or motivate educational projects.



Shaw in America 2008. Exhibition by The Al Hirschfeld Foundation for the Shaw Festival, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada. Title banner sharing space with the "cast board" of actors' head shots. Banners by Graphic Imaging. Courtesy Graphic Imaging.

### **The Site**

Public spaces, such as outer lobbies, can be:

- Open to the public for primary use only (shortly before, during and after the performance).
- Open to the public for secondary use (during the day for food service, box office, tours, etc., and at performance time).
- Open to the public at all times (concourses and conduits to mass transit and/or garages).
- Semi-public spaces such as patron/donor lounges, usually separated from lobbies by adjustable doors, so they can be adapted as needed.
- Ticketed spaces: any area that can be accessed only after acquiring a ticket. They include inner theater lobbies and, these days, most airport lounges and conduits.

These distinctions can often be fluid and change with the time of day. Exhibition areas are often accessible by day, but limited to ticket holders at performance time.

### **Subject/Themes and Narrative Structures**

Conceptualizing a theme and narrative structure for a lobby exhibition can be challenging. Frequently, these displays must be developed for spaces that cannot provide visual cohesion and may prevent audiences from viewing the exhibition in the intended sequence.

Questions to ask while, or even before, conceptualizing include:

***Is this a permanent exhibition for the site (e.g. the history of the sponsoring institution) or part of a short-term project (e.g. the focus of that season)?***

If your client has requested a permanent exhibition for an institution's space, the intended theme often relates to the history of that institution. Consequently the staff/board has already defined the major points and narrative. Long-term site interpretations are most often collaborations with the memory-keeping unit of that organization—its archivist (if you are fortunate), public relations or governance staff. If the institution is in a space that has its own history, it may choose that as the narrative focus.

***Is the exhibition designed to entertain the audience/visitor while waiting for the space's primary function or does it provide information to the audience that will enhance***

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**The Fifth Province: County Societies in Irish America** (November 2010 – January 2011). Exhibition by NYU's Glucksman Ireland House and Archives of Irish America at the Consulate General of Ireland, New York. Photograph enlarged onto Window Cling applied to moveable wall dividers. Photo reproduction by Graphic Energiez. Courtesy of Graphic Energiez.

(continued from page 77)

Your exhibition is not the primary factor in the [lobby] space design. More than in a museum, you have to adapt to being a secondary activity in a space designed for other purposes.

### ***its appreciation of the performance?***

In the 1970s through the 1990s, the National Endowment for the Humanities endorsed multi-institutional and multi-discipline efforts as Public Humanities Projects, collaborations among universities, performing arts, and cultural arts programs that shared a focus—often an anniversary of a historical figure or event. Museums that favored collaborations were often included as full partners and venues, but could also be asked to develop exhibitions for performance sites. Multi-institution celebrations involving museums now also often include off-site exhibitions in the lobbies of corporate sponsors.

### ***Is this exhibition planned as an educational project in a much-visited public space, but unrelated to its primary function?***

Most typically provided by libraries and historical societies, these traveling exhibitions are designed to connect to curriculum standards and/or adult book groups. They are often developed and distributed by state humanities councils, museums, or educational institutions, such as the National Library of Science, Smithsonian units, the American Libraries Association, and various research centers of The New York Public Library.

### **Design and Installation Issues**

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to adapt to being a secondary activity in a space designed for other purposes.

### **Basic architectural concerns:**

#### ***How much space?***

You may be provided with a floor plan and elevations, but be sure to determine how much of that space is required for the primary function of the institution and space. For most practical purposes, a floor plan providing just square footage will be meaningless. Ask for wall elevations and linear footage.

#### ***How much of that space can actually be used for exhibitions?***

There will be fire safety signage—even more than in museum galleries. There may also be cast lists (required for any Actors' Equity productions) or cast boards (montages of 8in. x 10in. glossy headshots), which can range from manageable (for a small play or modern dance company) to vast (for a symphony or ballet company). There may also be posters or window cards for upcoming productions and blow-ups of reviews. Most lobbies now also have a large flat screen airing video clips of all presentations for the season, while inner lobbies have screens showing stage activity to late-comers.

- What is the surface and structure? Performance spaces can be 19th century wood panels covered with decorative molding, plush or marble (opera houses and most Broadway theaters), or minimalist steel or travertine (for International style arts complexes). They are almost never walls over ¾ inch birch plywood unless you are in on the planning of a new space. Even if you are lucky enough to have a hanging lip or molding that can



Shaw in America 2008. Exhibition by The Al Hirschfeld Foundation for the Shaw Festival, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada. Banners by Graphic Imagery seen from outside the building. Courtesy of Graphic Imagery.

be jerry-rigged into a lip, you may not be able to affix security plates.

- You should also determine orientation patterns for the space—are the walls contiguous or interrupted? Is there a flow pattern? Does the functional flow bring visitors to the exhibition? There are many examples of exhibitions completely bypassed by the audience moving directly from outer doors or other entrances to the ticket takers and their seats. You are not able to control (or even estimate) the usage patterns or amount of time that any visitor will spend in the space.
- In a lobby, six to eight feet on either side of box offices and doors will probably also be blocked by price lists, and signage for cast replacements or performance timings, as well as ticket takers and crowds of entering audience members.
- You can also expect tables or booths for the distribution of assisted listening

devices and/or large-print and Braille program texts.

- Please note that anything that shares space with the public or is adjacent to a door or staircase must be fire-proof or -resistant. In most municipalities, theater fire marshals have the power to close down a production unless you have proof that your material has been treated or certified inherent.

### **Signage**

Always assume that the exhibition will be self-touring and experienced without a docent or tour guide. Not having an established flow pattern (or having one that bypasses the exhibition) may also mean that the audience will not have seen introductory or title panels. To avoid confusing the visitors, try as much as possible to avoid signage on walls or interactive kiosks that are similar to structures, fonts or color schemes already used in the facility, e.g. if red is the color for public information in the facility, do not use it as a design element.

### **Design and Production**

Without museum-quality environmental



Coward: Men About Town 2009. Exhibition by The Al Hirschfeld Foundation for the Shaw Festival, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada. Banners by Graphic Imaging installed over lobby staircase. Courtesy of Graphic Imaging.

(continued from page 79)

conditions, lobby exhibitions almost always contain reproductions. Before determining the proportion of artifacts to reproductions, you should determine who will install and maintain the exhibition. Is it the stage crew? In that case, plan the show to be a fast installing as possible, since the crew has other responsibilities. Is it house staff or general management? In these cases, make the exhibition self-contained since, although experts in their own fields, they may lack training in dealing with artifacts.

#### **Materials and processes for reproductions**

In recent years, digital technology has made reproductions inexpensive and easy to accomplish. Most scanners can adjust dpi and output size so that originals can be copied with minimal handling. The reproductions can then be printed on the selected material and structure unit—generally known as hang up, pop up, and hang down.

- Hang up solutions include matting, framing and glazing (in Plexiglas®) reproductions and hanging them on the walls. Depending on the available frames, this is a good solution for

spaces with large amounts of hangable wall space, such as promenades and concourses. It also has advantages if untrained staff will be installing the show, since almost everyone has experience hanging a frame on a wall. The disadvantage is that frames are heavier and therefore more expensive to transport. An alternative to matting and framing is the production of solid reproductions on a substrate such as Sintra®, heavy Gator-Foam®, heavy board, or directly onto Lucite/Plexiglas. For one-time exhibitions, Window Cling can be installed directly onto architectural surfaces. Frames and solid reproductions are easy to fit into any design since they can come in any size and can be vertical or horizontal. The problem with all of these solutions is weight and bulk in shipping.

- Pop-up or hop-up solutions are self-contained displays such as retractable banner stands that sit on the floor. The frame and art are pulled up and locked into place. They are generally 2ft x 7ft

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to 3ft x 10ft and either vertical or horizontal. Two-sided stands can be used if the flow patterns allow elements that are free-standing or perpendicular to the walls. The periodical, *Exhibit Builder*, list many producers of this kind of equipment since they were developed for commercial exposition use. The advantages of pop-ups are that they are easy to install, especially if the space needs to be rearranged during the run (for special events). Another advantage is that text and signage can be integrated into the art, so no separate captions are used. The disadvantage is initial cost and weight of units.

- Hang down solutions are banners. They are similar to hop-ups, with art and texts printed directly onto a cloth, but are much lighter to hang or ship. They can be any size and do not have to be rectangles. Many firms select a heavy weight vinyl for density of surface and weight for stability. We use a light weight polyester fabric (Fab6) which can be seen clearly from both sides and filters natural light. Most vendors will produce an at-scale sample from your digital scan so that you can select the right material for your needs.
- You cannot control light in a shared use space. Since you are using reproduction

material, you do not have to worry about conservation, but you will not be able to guarantee dramatic lighting effects. Be prepared that public spaces frequently use fluorescents, which will affect color selection.

- You cannot control noise levels in a shared use space. We have used media in lobby shows, but focus on visual content. We have also developed silent presentations (basically, Power Points adapted to run on DVD player of mini-Mac) that can be played on the screens provided in the lobbies for promotion and late seating (see above).

Developing exhibitions for public spaces can be an integral part of a museum's responsibility of collecting, researching, communicating, and exhibiting in the service of society. When we send collections outside our physical space, we can expand the public's knowledge of our collection, as well as promote the potential role of museums in their communities. My institution's motto is "Where the arts live." Our off-site projects help the visual representations and artifacts of the arts to live in performing arts venues. Expansion into other performing arts venues involves many new challenges, but serves our mission and the needs of the host venues and their audiences. ✨

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International Committee on Museums. (2007). Museum definition. Retrieved November 2010 from [http://icom.museum.who-we-are/the\\_vision/museum-definition.html](http://icom.museum.who-we-are/the_vision/museum-definition.html)