

Creating Exhibitions: Collaboration in the Planning, Development, and Design of Innovative Experiences

C*reating Exhibitions: Collaboration in the Planning, Development, and Design of Innovative Experiences* is an eagerly-awaited volume co-written by Polly McKenna-Cress, Program Director of Museum Exhibition Planning & Design at the University of the Arts and principal of Alusiv, Inc., a Philadelphia design firm, and the late Janet A. Kamien, a renowned and beloved planning consultant and museum professional for over 40 years before her passing in early 2013.

Creating Exhibitions is a book in three parts. Its first two chapters provide a cogent rationale supporting a team framework based on advocacy roles as a productive model for developing exhibitions. The middle chapters explore each role in detail, and the final chapters lay this approach into a linear project phasing and methods outline.

Chapter 1 introduces the idea that collaboration is a powerful tool, even a cornerstone skill (along with critical thinking, communication, and creative problem solving) for 21st century organizations. The authors suggest the “intrinsic imperative” of collaboration as the primary mechanism by which humans have survived and thrived, through sharing knowledge, creating communities, and facilitating decision-making. The authors briefly articulate several collaborative models, list the characteristics of functioning collaborations, and highlight real-world examples of the benefits of cooperative efforts.

McKenna-Cress and Kamien draw upon several sources in support of

this idea, which is weakened only a bit by the caution that all team-based initiatives must recognize when “shared commitment must shift over to trust in leadership” (p. 5). While clearly championing an inclusive, collaborative, democratized approach where creativity and high impact solutions can flourish, the authors also spend substantial energy describing the potential pitfalls of collaborative endeavors, especially when badly managed, unstructured, or lacking strategic foundations. The authors cite Patrick Lencioni’s familiar *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, and warn team leaders that “*complaining, criticizing, conflict and compromise*” are natural components of any team’s dynamic. Some of these tensions are expected, even desirable under certain conditions, but too much of any one of these activities can be a “collaboration killer” that destroys team trust and weakens outcomes.

Chapter 2 proposes that a collaborative team’s structure and project objectives are best served if the team’s member roles represent critical advocacy positions for a museum and its audience. The authors posit five “advocacies” that every team must represent: Institution, Subject Matter, Visitor Experience, Design, and Project and Team. The authors define these roles and suggest that this “advocacy strategy” is also a “way to think about allocating power within a team”(p.35). The chapter concludes with a succinct summary of these centers of power:

- The institutional advocate holds ultimate power over the whole project. As a client, he or she has approval or veto power over every

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aspect and ultimately holds the purse strings.

- The subject matter advocate has the power of content and object knowledge and speaks from a passion for the importance and accuracy of these basic building blocks of exhibitions.
- The visitor experience advocate's power is based on skilled and passionate leadership for the development of an exhibition that is engaging, serves visitors and the community, and meets its user goals.
- The design advocate's power is based on the skills that make an exhibition a living, breathing, three-dimensional experience, not just a series of objects strung together by a series of ideas.
- The project and team advocate's power is based on control over the budget and schedule and on his or her ability to cross over all other lines of responsibility within a team in order to serve as an overall manager. (p.36)

The opening chapters establish a tone and structure that is followed, more or less, for the rest of the book: a brief introduction to the topic provides context; three "Questions the Team Should Ask" have particular meaning for the advocacy role explained in the chapter; a paragraph on the role's function and its philosophical underpinnings; and then a ramble through the ins-and-outs of the project activities most significantly guided by the role in question. The next five chapters further enunciate these points of advocacy and unpack them, one by one.

Supporting the authors' arguments and practical considerations are well-chosen essays by dozens of practitioners

from the field who dive deeply into topics, providing targeted examples and reflections on collaborative process and results. The book's margins feature pithy quotes from notable social observers, historical figures, popular culture heroes, academics and business thought-leaders from Andrew Carnegie to Woody Allen.

While anyone interested in exhibition development might find worthwhile perspective on any of the book's pages, each chapter was written with a specific reader and advocacy position in mind. Chapter 3 addresses those who might be institutional advocates. Museum leaders will appreciate the emphasis the authors place on exhibitions as strategic outcomes grounded in larger organizational missions and planning processes. Leslie Swartz, Senior Vice-President for Research and Program Planning at Boston Children's Museum writes about how her organization is responding, through media and exhibitions, to their recent recognition of the importance of parents in the learning lives of their children.

In another essay, Charlie Walter, Executive Director the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science, recounts his experience leading a master exhibit planning process while at the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History. His takeaways demonstrate how a project's ultimate success is dependent on early, strategic interventions: choosing the right people for your team, thinking systematically about the organization, discovering its core values and driving ideology ("Learn: To Change the World") and the "the vehicle by which we pursue our aspiration"—in this case to "Provide: Extraordinary Learning Environments" (pp.50-53). Andy Goodman's *10 Immutable Laws of Storytelling* and Leslie Bedford's elegant essay on why narrative form works so well at engaging visitors will resonate with content developers

paging through Chapter 5: Advocacy for Visitor Experiences. Essays on Lighting, Graphic Design, Multimedia Integration, Magic and Illusion, Immersive Environments, Object Theater, Accessibility, and Sustainable practices color the design advocacy discussion in Chapter 6. These core chapters examine individual advocacy roles while interweaving a secondary thread that explains how these roles relate to one another in support of a comprehensive exhibition development process. Along the way, the authors insert frequent stories, studies, research findings, and illustrations that amplify or summarize key points. While each advocacy position contributes a unique perspective, the authors ensure that all advocates ultimately direct their work toward the visitor's successful experience of the exhibition. Advocacy for Project and Team is the subject for Chapter 7.

The final two chapters of the book stand a little apart, almost as a companion volume to the preceding chapters. They come closest to being a practical guide by providing systematic accounts of Methods and Techniques: Getting the Most Out of the Process (Chapter 8) and Process and Phases: How Do We Set Up Our Process (Chapter 9). Chapter 8 contains a terrific, extended article by Jeff Hayward that envisions the evaluation process through a set of questions, skills, and understandings teams will use to support meaningful evaluation activities. A cleverly designed and informative Process and Phases Diagram both introduces and summarizes Chapter 9. The color-coded graphic illustrates a prototypical exhibition development timeline while simultaneously showing the level of input and responsibility required by each of the advocacy positions during project phases from initial *Charrette* through post-opening *Summative Evaluation*.

The book's densely packed pages brim with visual information and content. As in some exhibitions, visual richness may at times work against ease of access. Some readers may be distracted or overwhelmed by the book's frequent use of shaded boxes, bullet points, margin photographs with long captions, sidebars, and complex type treatments. Its detailed table of contents is very helpful for targeted searches by stumped practitioners looking for insight; and most chapters conclude with a list of excellent sources for further reading.

Creating Exhibitions does not present a breakthrough theoretical framework that promises mind-blowing results if cleaved to as a process and philosophy. The team-focused, advocacy-based approach McKenna-Cress and Kamien articulate is less revolutionary than evolutionary—a trustworthy synthesis of a series of micro-revolutions of promising practices that have been tested and refined across the museum field over the last 40 or 50 years. *Creating Exhibition's* considerable wisdom is a product of hard-won practice and reflection on the extremely complex business of developing relevant and compelling experiences for ever-changing and diversifying museum audiences.

While filled with practical guidance, intelligent ideas, and fascinating case studies, it is too digressive and expansive to fit comfortably into a common notion of a “how to” manual. *Creating Exhibitions* will be a valuable companion reader to graduate courses on exhibition development and design, strategic planning, or project management in a museum setting. It is also easy to imagine this volume as a “go to” resource for any museum ready to invest in a true team concept that mobilizes staff talent and organizational assets toward fulfilling interpretive goals for its visitors. ✨

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