

Happy spring! I hope everyone survived the crazy storms that this winter brought upon us all. And now, hopefully the birds are once again singing in your yards, and the bulbs and buds are beginning to peek out from their winter slumber. Matt Kirchman, President and Creative Director, ObjectIDEA Planning and Design, got out and about this winter and sent this for our readers.

As part of a research trip with a current museum client and their architectural team, I recently had the pleasure of exploring a few of the newest natural history and nature and science museums. Our entourage of about 10 museum professionals acted as both visitors and guests; we explored the museums from the public side and received organized, generous, and informative back-of-house tours.

Exhibits at the Natural History Museum of Utah are housed in elegant and evocative “canyon-esque” architecture, built into a hillside such that each of the museum’s floors engages the landscape outside. Exhibits are able to refer directly to views of the bench-like mountains that step up to the east of downtown Salt Lake City and fall away to the Great Salt Lake Basin to the west. Numerous portals invite visitors to step outside the galleries and appreciate fresh air, indigenous plantings, and the sounds and smells of nature. Rarely have I experienced a museum that acknowledges and incorporates its ecological, geological, and cultural context like this one does.

The museum is on the campus of the University of Utah, and it showcases the strengths of this partnership in amazing ways: stunning collections, scientists in residence and in the field, and real research in action on the exhibit floor.

The permanent exhibits are punctuated by highly flexible venues: a weather terrace; a drop-in naturalist’s nook;

and lab spaces that reference a cave and a geologist’s workroom. My initial criticism of the apparent expense and permanency of the highly integrated, architectural exhibits was quickly quelled when I discovered how these and other venues accommodate staffed programs like floor talks, theater, nature walks, and impromptu demonstrations. Natural History Museum of Utah has made a commitment to provide dynamism and flexibility through real people versus installations.

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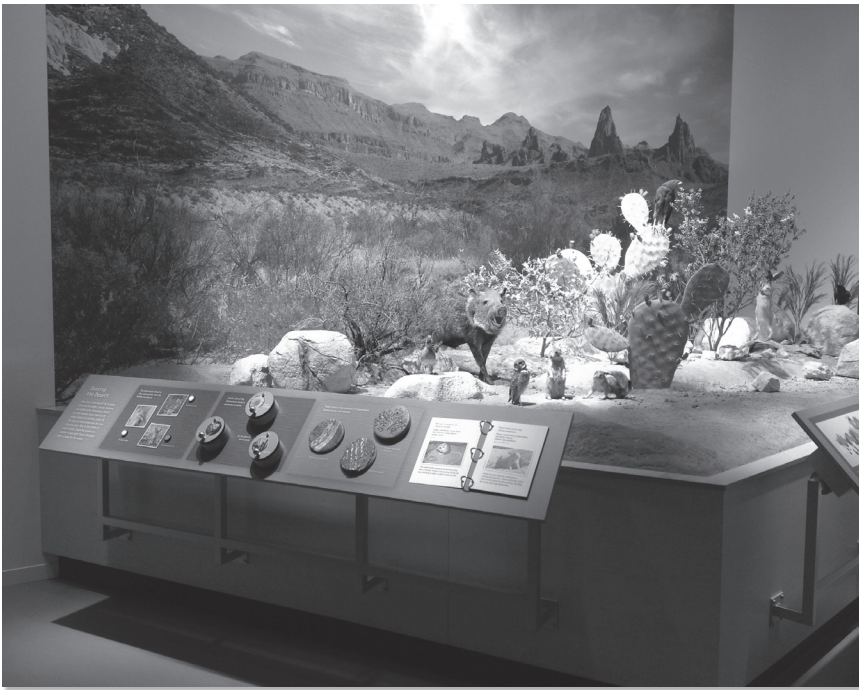
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In the Natural History Museum of Utah, the exhibitions are mostly collections-based, augmented with interactivity, and supported by AV media. Courtesy of Matt Kirchman.

As much as the Utah Museum is about the “place,” Dallas’ newest museum, it seems, is about the “package.” The Perot Museum of Nature & Science takes a more universal look at natural science, although the building, with its interesting escalator and LEED-certified status is (according to the museum’s website and collateral material) its most important exhibit and its most advertised feature.

Housed within an intriguing architectural cube and set upon a site of nearly five



This exhibit at the Perot Museum of Nature and Science offers sounds, smells, and tactile encounters with Texas' natural history. Courtesy of Matt Kirchman.

(continued from page 5)

acres, the exhibitions are arranged on six levels. Each bears a distinct design look and feel. Unaffiliated with a university, the Perot is less focused on collections and less connected to its local natural history. It is therefore more free to expand its exhibition program to ideas as far away as the origins of the universe and outer space, as near as the inner workings of the human body, and nearly everything

in between. A self-proclaimed family attraction, the museum offers playful exhibits like a media-based “Soar Like a Bird” and “Race Against a Cheetah,” (my titles) and inventive tinkering spaces where groups and individuals can make remotely controlled vehicles and create digital art.

Visiting these museums—one after the other—made me very aware of the distinctions between a regional natural history museum and a general museum of nature and science. Where the Natural History Museum of Utah feels at home in its environmental context, the Perot feels like an invasive species. Where the Perot offers energetic play and creative simulation, Utah offers artful encounters with authenticity, and contemplative interactivity. One museum shouts a comprehensive story of the earth in loud colors; the other shares its special indigenous story in soft tones.

Neither is better than the other...They're just different.



The Main Gallery of Philadelphia's Mütter Museum is a beautiful space architecturally, but very difficult to navigate when crowded. Courtesy of George Widman, 2009, for the Mütter Museum of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

The Mütter Museum of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia (<http://www.collegeofphysicians.org/mutter-museum/>) has been on my list of museums to visit for decades, and after living in the Philadelphia area for over six years I finally got there! My daughters, Naomi (17 years) and Lena (9 years) accompanied me to check out this unusual collection.

For those of you who have never heard of the museum, it is described on its web site and press materials in the following way: “America’s finest museum of medical history, the Mütter displays its beautifully preserved collections of anatomical specimens, models, and medical instruments in a 19th century ‘cabinet museum’ setting.” Walking into the space is like being transported to a different century. Low lighting, lush carpets and fixtures, beautiful wood cabinets with large glass panes instantly transformed the space into one like no other museum I’ve ever visited. But then the experience of being in a narrowly designed space with lots of other people morphed into frustration in navigation and crowd bumping. Instead of being able to move around the gallery at our own pace, we either had to wait in line to see the next object in a case, or jump around, quickly squeezing through visitors to get to an open spot, which, with two kids who didn’t want to wait, is what we ended up doing.

But once we actually got to open cases to view the collection, it was amazing. The astounding number and diversity of specimens really allows visitors to understand the mystery and beauty of the human body, how much the medical profession has learned, and how much more they have to figure out. Nineteenth century instruments, skulls, organs in jars, and full skeletons fascinate many and clearly identify those that are squeamish. To my surprise, there were



I've seen human brains before, but seeing The Brain of Albert Einstein, was inspiring. Courtesy of Evi Numen, 2011, for the Mütter Museum of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

two objects that were on exhibit without any contextual reference—a book and a wallet, both made of human skin. The only description that accompanied them was on identification labels stating what they were and what they were made of. Naomi, Lena, and I spent time looking at and discussing specimens such as the *Hyrtl Skull Collection* and the exhibit of a range of skeleton sizes, comparing them to ourselves, and making personal connections. It was exciting and insightful to see what they observed about themselves and others.

We only ended up spending 40 minutes in the museum as the crowds continued to build, the galleries became claustrophobic, and Lena started getting a little freaked out by all the body parts. I highly recommend visiting the Mütter Museum if you are into unusual museums, but I suggest you go during a week day and right when they open to avoid the crowds.

If you are out and about and see something worth sharing with our readers in the Fall 2013 issue, please send me an email and we will get you in the next Exhibits NewsLine. Cheers! ☀