



# Exhibition Carts: Intentionally Designed Spaces on the Move

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The intentionality behind all design work is problem-solving. While many forms of design process exist, history and tradition reveal that until recently, the typical exhibit developer engaged in efforts defined by hours of talking, researching, coffee clutching, sketching, pencil sharpening, mouse pushing, ceiling staring, and wishful thinking—hoping for that “a-ha!” moment. Recently, though (and especially over the last 10 years) conscious advancements have been made to sharpen the lens of the overall design process by refocusing attention on meeting audience needs and expectations with conscious intent.

The biggest changes have come about in the area of upfront investigation: the collecting and collating of data regarding the end user.

- Who is the visitor?
- What are visitor interests?
- What do they care about?
- What are their needs?
- What is the spatial context?

This surge in audience research has transformed the once opaque process of exhibit design into something much more transparent, allowing designers to organize the entire process into four distinct steps: 1) *Investigate & Analyze*; 2) *Concept & Test*; 3) *Revise & Design*; and 4), *Build & Implement*. In order to differentiate this approach from more traditional forms of design problem-solving, we now refer to the entire process

as experience design. And note that the word ‘experience’ replaces ‘exhibit’ here—not merely for buzz benefit, but because *experience design* indicates a greater possibility to approach design with some form of intent. Today, a more discriminating public is looking for both excitement and educational enrichment. The stakes are higher than ever for modern museums, zoos, and aquariums because every destination must be visitor-centered. The goal: be prepared to capture and hold the imagination of an always-evolving audience free to make choices: free to go elsewhere and free to do something different.

## Carts as Intentionally Designed Spaces

Program carts are wonderful tools for responding to this increasing pressure facing exhibitors. As a method of flexible program delivery, these carts provide activities that fulfill a variety of purposes, from conveying mission content, to serving as a changing marquee, to supporting local school curricula. Because carts bring staff, objects, and an exhibit-like experience into direct contact with visitors, they provide an intimate and simple means for establishing and building a dialogue with the public. As self-contained platforms, carts are spaces that are able to move throughout a facility in order to find people, deliver an experience, and start an open-ended face-to-face exchange. Simply put, this new approach allows public programmers to intentionally develop, design, and deliver customized experiences that are all at once interactive, compact, and mobile.

To realize intent, a simple set of three standard reference points or new tools has been developed that help keep the designer



Built-in banner graphics help guests spot carts; accessible table tops extend the surface display area allowing for all visitors to participate equally. Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum. Photograph by Ashley McKibbin.



A fleet of five custom-crafted Art à la CARTs move facilitators, program activities, and hands-on materials directly to the art museum's galleries. Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum. Photograph by Ashley McKibbin.

on track, offering a universal method for tinkering throughout the process no matter the museum, mission, or message. Our designers at *Museum Explorer* keep the following principles close at hand throughout the process of creating exhibition carts:

- **HEAD** Target visitor interest. Give the audience something to wonder about. Develop and design a content highlight, some nugget of information that ignites interest and invites direct exploration and inquiry. (Give people something to THINK about).
- **HEART** Appeal to visitor awareness. Define an intimate environment. Design clear conduits that allow the audience to make a personal connection with the program narrative. Discover a way to

incorporate a center of awareness in every cart design. (Help people find something to CARE about).

- **HANDS** Engage visitor curiosity. Welcome the audience to put their hands on things. Merge visitor interactivity with the overall flow and story arch of the program. Create simple and comfortable physical connections that stimulate natural human curiosity and encourage discovery through sharing and conversation. (Give people something to DO).

As varied examples of how intentionally designed program carts are created for various settings (an art museum, a history museum, and zoo), this article will discuss the following carts: *Art à la Cart*, *History à la Cart*, and *Animals Like Us*.

As self-contained platforms, carts are 'spaces' that are able to move throughout a facility in order to find people, deliver an experience, and start an open-ended face-to-face exchange.



The Great Chicago Fire cart design was intentionally customized to brand and complement the program theme. Courtesy Chicago History Museum.

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“...carts [can be] an appealing, active launch pad for visitor team-building, collaboration and a deeper engagement with exhibitions.”  
Jennifer Brundage

### **Carts Build Visitor Collaboration and Engagement: Smithsonian American Art Museum**

The design process for program carts at the Smithsonian American Art Museum was primarily a matter of shifting a perception about the nature of these carts. Jennifer Brundage, National Outreach Manager at the Smithsonian Institution, spoke to the concept of mobile learning centers in 2011. In an entry for the Smithsonian’s *Affiliate* blog, Brundage confessed that she had “come to think of educational carts in the galleries as the Clydesdales of the field—the workhorses that are low-tech, straightforward” (2011). Fortunately though, Brundage went on to admit that she was “wrong” about her initial notion of program carts. She changed her mind after a 2011 brown bag lunch session where educators at the Smithsonian gathered for a presentation by guest speakers Rich Faron of Museum Explorer and Heidi Moisan from the Chicago History Museum. The presentation, on program carts, had been requested by Susan Nichols, at the time head of Education at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Brundage reflected afterward that, “through a slideshow of case studies and prototypes it became clear that their examples did

not reflect the cart [she] had come to stereotype.” Rather, “they presented carts as an appealing, active launch pad for visitor team-building, collaboration and a deeper engagement with exhibitions” (personal communication, March 22, 2011).

As visitor collaboration is not something that often occurs in quiet art museums, bringing this object into the Smithsonian American Art Museum of all places was something of a novel idea. The simple intent of moving a program cart (a box) into a gallery (four walls covered in expensive art), can be a challenge in such a conservative setting. But the SAAM wanted direct and active visitor engagement, so Museum Explorer created *Art à la Cart*: five mobile carts for use throughout the Museum that further engage visitors with artwork by providing interactive hands-on activities for them. Though all white in design with simple stark flags, these *Art à la Carts* are still a colorful idea in such a prestigious setting.

### **Carts Empower Visitors to Interact with History: Chicago History Museum**

At the Chicago History Museum, program carts address a need for a very specific audience. Here, history is not



locked away in vaults or even behind glass (with some exceptions), but rather is made accessible to visitors—especially young local students—through inviting dialogue, opportunities to touch, and descriptive but relatable museum labels to provide a full historical *experience*. Exhibition carts naturally fit into an environment like this, providing a different platform for making history accessible through direct visitor engagement.

As part of the *History à la Cart* program, we designed multiple mobile learning carts for the museum, including “Prairie Landscape” and “The Great Chicago Fire.” When Chicago public school children come to learn about these locally-important moments in history, they actively implement their learning. For

example, they can physically measure how tall prairie grass was in order to visualize early Chicago, and they can map the path of the Great Chicago fire to assess the vast scope of the damage.

According to Lynn McRaney, Director of Education at the Chicago History Museum, carts such as these “define a place where collaboration, conversations and children’s curiosity are a priority” (personal communication, December 2013). In an environment where so many young students come to enhance their learning at school, the *History à la Cart* program at CHM provides spaces (six exhibition carts, to be precise) complementing school curriculum. Here, carts “empower children to move out of their passive roles of being told history

A big idea in a small package? That is exactly what an exhibit cart is. Load it up and cruise the halls and galleries of your museum until you find an audience.



The “Great Chicago Fire” cart design welcomes student visitors. It invites dialogue and provides opportunities to touch real objects for a full historical experience. Courtesy Chicago History Museum.



*Animals Like Us pushes the zoo experience beyond traditional “show and tell” program delivery. Guests are able to explore on their own terms and walk away with more than just information. Courtesy Lincoln Park Zoo/Todd Rosenberg Photography.*

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“...guests should be able to explore the animal kingdom on their own terms,” and should “walk away not just with information, but with provocation.”  
The Lincoln Park Zoo

into active participants in the discovery process” (personal communication, December 19, 2013).

**Carts Encourage Exploration and Enable Visitors to Control their Experience: Lincoln Park Zoo**

Allison Price, Director of Education at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, at first questioned program carts’ abilities to hold on to visitors. The intentional design process “proved its mettle” on their program cart *Animals Like Us*, a collaborative effort with Museum Explorer Inc. Through a series of probing questions and trial and error, Price and her team discovered that their typical “show and tell” program delivery was not working with audiences. “[My team at Lincoln Park Zoo] kept coming back to our guest experience. What should a visit to a cart feel like? What should guests be able to do?” Price asked. The answer to these questions was simple. They deduced that “guests should be able to explore the animal kingdom on their own terms,” and should “walk away not just with information, but with provocation.” As a result, the designers decided *Animals Like*

*Us* and its program would be designed “so that the guests control the program flow, and so that exploration is valued equal to or more than information” (personal communication, December 3, 2013).

Designing a cart for a zoo setting proved to have its own challenges. In this space, there are many stimuli competing for attention—sights, sounds, smells, flavors. In order to become its own space in a place like this, a program cart has to be colorful and loud and inviting all on its own. *Animals Like Us* was created for the Lincoln Park Zoo with these qualities in mind, offering colorful and large signs, real animal skulls for visitor engagement, and a life-size human model standing adjacent to it. This cart has no problem maintaining its own space.

“What resulted from our probing questions [in the design process] is a cart that, since its unveiling, has captivated everyone from the 5-year-old to the 95-year-old, first-time visitors and long-time trustees,” Price says (personal communication). Indeed, data supported Price’s findings. A 2013 study conducted by the Garibay Group on program carts



at the Lincoln Park Zoo (including *Animals Like Us*), reported that, “on a scale from 1 to 4 (1 being ‘disagree strongly’ and 4 being ‘agree strongly’), 149 of 150 respondents rated their agreement with the statement ‘We really enjoyed our experience at the station’ as a 3 or 4” (2013). Research typically focuses on quantitative data about what visitors learned, but it is important to note that this particular study also takes enjoyment into account. Enjoyment is not often cited as a reason for what people get out of a visit to a museum or zoo, but this evaluation strongly emphasized that “visitors enjoyed their experiences at the stations,” primarily *because* there was learning involved. While visitors often cited “enjoying the hands-on or interactive nature of the stations,” the most common response “concerned enjoying information conveyed during the interaction” (Garibay Group, 2013).

A big idea in a small package? That is exactly what an exhibit cart is. Load it up and cruise the halls and galleries of your museum until you find an audience. It’s a possibility worth imagining because intentional design can work! It’s not only a fix—refocusing a message or reengineering interactivity—it’s about setting out and intending to capture that ‘instant’ of initial human interest and managing that moment as it unfolds and grows into a genuine experience. Further, that experience can generate a memory of a great museum visit.

The key to program carts’ success rests in remaining flexible, making a commitment to anticipate change through audience research, and then

adapting as needed to meet the visitor’s mind, senses, and spirit. One measure of success is reflected in the higher numbers of participation and stay-time by visitors. Whether adults, families, or children in school groups, all audiences are showing an increasing willingness to draw on their own sense of wonder and curiosity as they investigate, analyze, and interpret new museum content designed with them in mind. Carts are succeeding because they invite all visitors to participate equally in a process of direct exchange and discovery. The result: carts are effective because they engage people via the combination of live programmers and the common interactive space of the cart. Carts aren’t just visitor-centered, they are people powered. In a nutshell, carts WHEEL VISITORS IN. ✨

#### References:

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At the zoo there are many stimuli competing for attention—sights, sounds, smells, flavors. In a place like that a cart must become its ‘own space’ in order to command attention. Courtesy Lincoln Park Zoo/ Todd Rosenberg Photography.