



Measuring the Rule of Thumb: How Much Do Exhibitions Cost?

by Sarah Bartlett and Christopher Lee

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How much do museum exhibitions cost? Working for an exhibit design/build firm, we hear that question regularly.

Unfortunately, there is no easy answer.

A great exhibition can increase visitation, engage community support, and bring in much-needed capital—even in a down economy. A 2011 “State of the Art Museum” survey by the Association of Art Museum Directors showed that 85% of respondents had maintained or increased their exhibition programming in 2010 (AAMD, 2011). But all exhibitions—permanent or temporary, blockbuster or homegrown—involve major commitments of time and money.

Ten years ago, *Exhibitionist* printed an article that attempted to answer that question (Rounds and Cheney, 2002). The article has been referenced and passed among museum professionals countless times since its publication. A decade later, much has shifted in exhibit trends and techniques, but museums still look to the past and “rule of thumb” guidelines to assess exhibition costs.

Thumbing It

When we first began this article, we intended to update and make a comparison to the exhibition costs from the 2002 article. In the process of doing this, what we found was that much of our industry’s information on exhibition costs has been based on informal studies and surveys.

The original *Exhibitionist* article was an important starting point for the discussion of exhibition costs. The authors

focused on larger museums producing “sophisticated” exhibitions (Rounds and Cheney, 2002). They found that costs ranged from \$120 to over \$700 per square foot. The article, and its cost results, became canon—even though the authors characterized their study as informal, not scientific, and with information from a limited number of museums.

That same year, the Smithsonian’s Office of Policy and Analysis released a report detailing several years of exhibition costs at Smithsonian institutions (209 exhibitions total) and at 38 non-Smithsonian institutions (OP&A, 2002). The survey again found great variety: art museums averaged just \$20 per square foot and non-art museums averaged around \$90, with several exhibitions exceeding \$1,000 per square foot.

More recently, Mark Walhimer ran a survey on his Museum Planner blog. He received responses from 59 museums, mostly history museums, science centers, and children’s museums. The survey found a tremendous variety of costs across museums, with exhibitions ranging from under \$25 to over \$600 per square foot (Walhimer, 2011).

Finding a lack of clarity in all these various numbers, we conducted our own informal survey. We kept our questions similar to the ones from past surveys to aid in comparisons but modified them where needed to align with standard definitions or make participant choices mutually exclusive.

Some Key Results of Our Survey

We received over 130 responses but limited the analysis only to those

answering all ten questions completely, a total of 71 respondents (Lee, 2012). Figures 1 through 4 illustrate some of our key findings.

While the results are interesting at first glance, a deeper look quickly brings into question their value as a planning tool for a typical new exhibition. For example, of those respondents in the 0–\$100 per square foot group, half spent less than \$17 per square foot (Lee, 2012). This low number may be representative of the costs incurred by some museums, but there’s also likely to be some variation in what these respondents included in the cost of an exhibition. And if this was true, we wondered, how did that affect all the other surveys to date? We realized that to get better pricing data we first had to get a better understanding of how museums see a square foot.

Standing on Square Feet

Available survey data generally focus on pricing per square foot (the length of a space multiplied by its width and assigned an average cost). Square foot pricing can cover many details of an exhibition, from initial planning through final installation.

But what variables roll into average square foot costs? Some museums determine the cost of an exhibition by including only the direct costs: the real dollars spent on design and fabrication. Other museums also factor in indirect costs, which can cover everything from educational programs to publications and marketing to maintenance and even personnel.

The Need for Comparable Categories

A comprehensive comparison would need to agree on how to classify exhibition



Falling on the medium-high end of the exhibition cost spectrum, this history exhibition in Washington, DC, features original sculpture, audiovisuals and high-tech interactives, immersive environments, and high-security, high-conservation artifact cases. Courtesy of Split Rock Studios.

costs—direct and indirect; one-time or recurring; fixed or variable—and which to include when calculating square foot costs. Since so many departments within a museum contribute knowledge and time to an exhibition, each institution would need to create and maintain a central database to share information across departments.

Even given these categories, it is often unclear what museums consider part of their base exhibition costs:

- Is the exhibition in a new or existing building?
- Does the cost include lighting, flooring, and paint?
- Does it cover changes to the building infrastructure (new walls, electrical wiring)?
- Are research, planning, design, and management included?
- Does the cost include audiovisual and electronic interactives?
- Does it include personnel costs, especially any contractors hired for the project?
- Is exhibition maintenance included?

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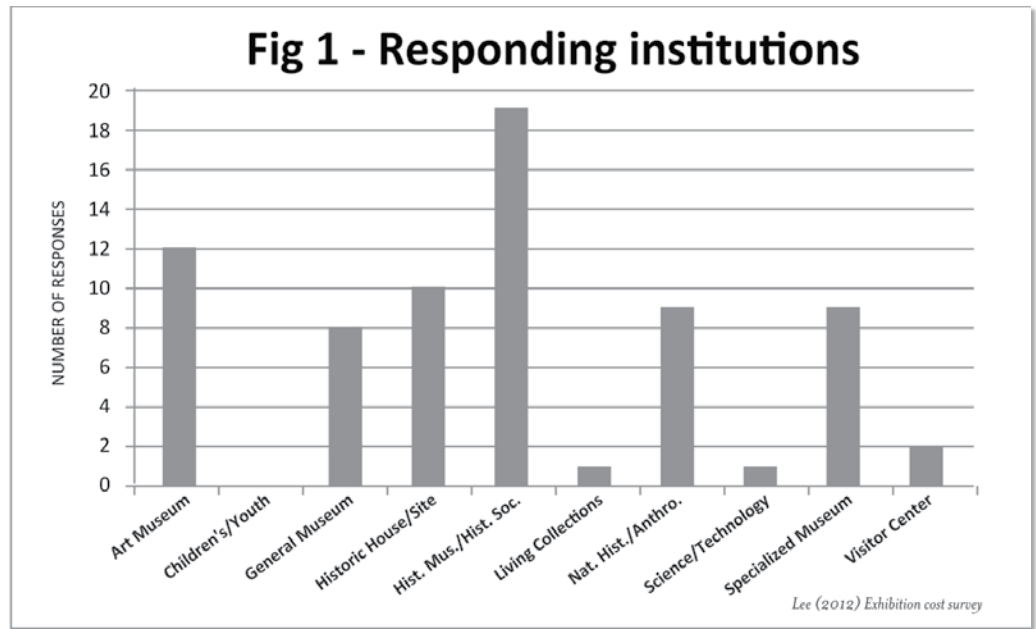


Figure 1. The results of an informal 2012 survey of museums show 71 respondents across a variety of museum types (Lee, 2012).

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The Impact of Exhibition Format

There is an order of magnitude difference between a \$10 per square foot exhibition and a \$1,000 per square foot exhibition. The lowest cost exhibitions reported to each survey likely required no changes to the gallery space, such as lighting, paint, or carpeting. The in-house skills that go toward making an exhibition may have been covered under other day-to-day staffing budgets, rather than being factored into exhibition costs. With this in mind, the Office of Policy and Analysis estimated that direct exhibition costs represent only about half to two-thirds of the actual costs of an exhibition (OP&A, 2002).

Moreover, all museum exhibitions are not created equal. Prices vary wildly across museum discipline and exhibition type. Art exhibitions frequently have the least expensive direct costs because they often have simpler designs, less technology, and fewer physical furnishings. However, they may have higher indirect costs when factoring in conservation, packing, and artifact loans. Permanent exhibitions generally require more durable (read: expensive) materials and methods than similar temporary displays.

Exhibitions that include mechanical and electronic interactives, videos, or other

complex, custom-made components have significantly higher costs. Are the square foot costs for a temporary art museum exhibition with mostly flat graphic panels comparable to the square foot costs for a permanent natural history museum exhibition that features audiovisuals, immersive environments, and hands-on interactives?

Location, Location, Location

Location is important too. Let's say two different museums are each planning a 1,000sf exhibition: one, a modest start-up children's museum in the middle of the country; the other, a huge national science center in a major east-coast city. Using a straight average square foot cost could result in similar, but misleading, prices for both. According to one estimating publication, building in a city like Durham, North Carolina, would cost you 33% less than in the rest of the country, while New York City would cost 33% more (RSMeans, 2011). That's a huge spread for an average to cover.

What's Next?

Perhaps the single biggest weakness in compiling typical exhibition costs lies in the word "typical." As we all know, museums come in a dizzying variety of sizes, missions, subject matters, and budgets. No simple model can flatten

out all those peaks and valleys and capture that variety effectively. Adjusting prices for variables like content, location, regional standards and practices improves the value of that number.

Informal surveys, though helpful, are not scientifically generalizable. What the museum field needs is a well-crafted, comprehensive, and replicable study of exhibition costs. This would need to be updated regularly to account for inflation and trends in design and materials.

So, what would come closer to a scientific study? Data from all the museums with exhibitions opened in the last 1 to 3 years would be ideal. Without any way to easily determine how many that is, however, a random sampling from within the museum population is probably the next best bet. There are at least 17,500 museums in the United States (AAM, 2012). If we want to get results with at least 90% accuracy (and an error rate of less than 5%), we would need data from just over 400 museums.

At the time of writing of this article, the research department at AAM was working with institutional members and advisors—including NAME—to develop a survey about common exhibition cost practices (Katz, 2012). This sort of information will help museums measure their experiences against that of their peers.

Until that time, individual institutions can look at their own unique situations and variables to assess how they are spending money on exhibitions. Determine what costs you include when evaluating square foot costs to see if there are hidden pitfalls for which you have not planned. Talk with similar institutions to evaluate future and past projects.

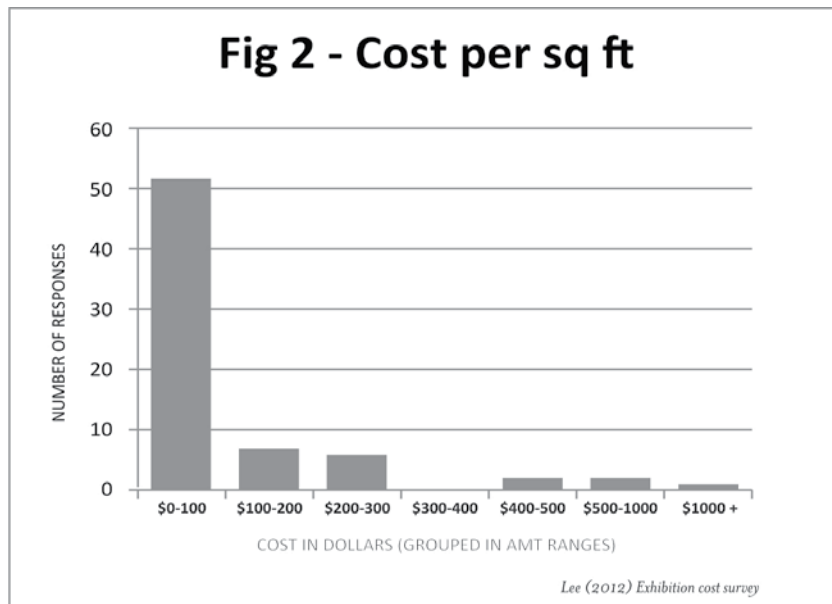


Figure 2. The 71 respondents to an informal 2012 survey report a wide range of costs per square foot. The results of this survey prompted us to look more closely at the breakdown on these numbers (Lee, 2012).

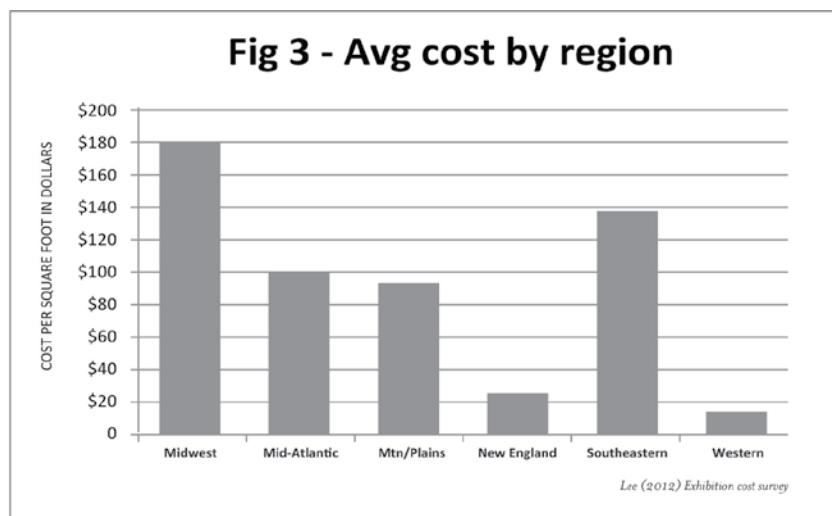


Figure 3. Does location matter? If you are making a museum exhibition, it does. These survey results illustrate average square foot costs across different regions of the country (Lee, 2012).

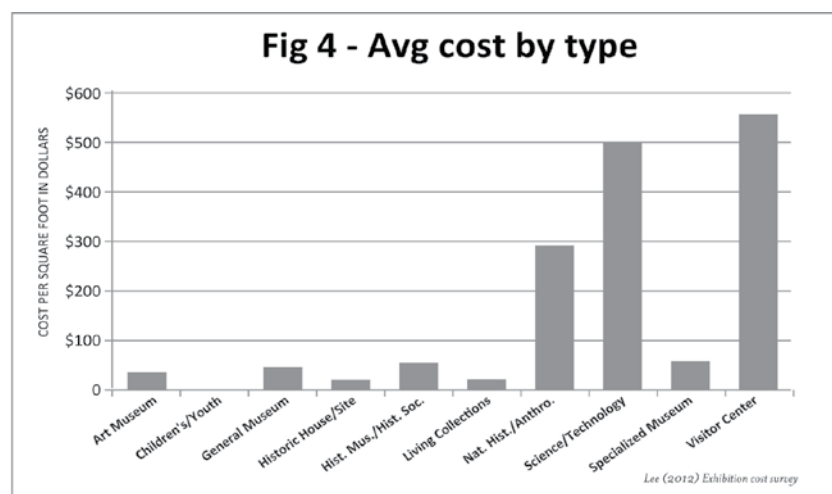


Figure 4. It is difficult to compare exhibition costs across different types of museums, making rule of thumb estimates problematic (Lee, 2012).

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And lastly, while budgeting is crucial to success, that shouldn't be the only factor in exhibition planning. Focus on the desired outcome of the visitor experience as you plan, and charge your curators, educators, designers, and other exhibition staff with finding the way there. The greater the flexibility your design team has—especially if budgets are tight—the more options you can explore and the farther you can stretch your dollar. ✨



A typical art museum exhibition uses few interactives and built environments. However, some modern art exhibitions are moving towards a more expensive model of exhibition. Courtesy of Flickr Creative Commons, John Picken.