



# A Networked, Experiential, and Expanded Model of Learning Exhibition Design

by Tricia Austin and Tim McNeil

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Exhibition design is often relegated to the fringes of current design education because it defies discipline-based singularity, cutting an anarchic swath through multiple design specialties—from visual communication to architecture, industrial design to theater design—it doesn't fit the traditional model of a disciplinary focused academic design curriculum. Ask any cohort of exhibition designers how many of them have a degree in exhibition design. The answer will likely be less than 10%. Exhibition design is actually a highly democratic, multidimensional and trans-disciplinary design field, and it represents a methodology for 21<sup>st</sup> century design thinking and practice.

The principles of exhibition design have undergone significant transformation in the last 20 years. The work of the exhibition designer has expanded from shaping space, displaying artifacts, and communicating stories to include exploring and experimenting with active audience participation through novel, experiential, non-museum-like environments.

Recognizing that very few design-centric international forums exist to inform this evolving discipline, the University for the Arts London (UAL) and the University of California Davis (UC Davis) have established a semi-annual summit called Re-envisioning Exhibition Design. The goals are simple:

- Bring together thought leaders, strategists, and practitioners to inform this evolving design discipline, creating an open dialogue between high-level research,

professional practice, and education.

- Examine the term “exhibition design” and evolve a new definition that advances academic understanding and elevates current professional practice.
- Convene participants with divergent views from all sides of the exhibition sphere to create a dynamic forum and future international collaborations and exchanges.
- Assemble an awesome group of people who are doing the most compelling work, in what is the most trans-disciplinary of the design fields.

Loving #Rexd Chaos at the Museum —so many #museumheroes in one room. Twitter (personal communication, April 25, 2015)

The inaugural summit took place in London, April 25-27, 2014 ([www.re-XD.org](http://www.re-XD.org)). The first theme, *Chaos at the Museum: Designing for Audience Participation*, examined what's working and what's not in the realm of designing for audience interaction and participation. The event established a networked experiential and expanded model of learning. Invited speakers comprised of influential design practitioners, academics and curators attracted a professional audience of exhibition development teams, academics, PhD and Masters students. Participants converged from Europe, the United States, Asia, South America, and Australia, building a new network across disciplines, countries, and levels of experience. The event took an “expanded” outward facing stance bringing practice,



The PhD Colloquium was the first global forum for exhibition design researchers. All photographs courtesy of Yan Wang.



Elaine Heumann Gurian's keynote summarized the shift in museums from object-centered to public-orientated education spaces.

theory, and education together in a live and sometimes risky mix. The multi-faceted, cross-disciplinary, and participatory format, which progressed from listening and debating, to seeing and experiencing, to hands-on making, concluding in reflection, modeled the process for creative design and “lived” the theme of the summit. It embraced chaos and established the approach for the next summits in the series.

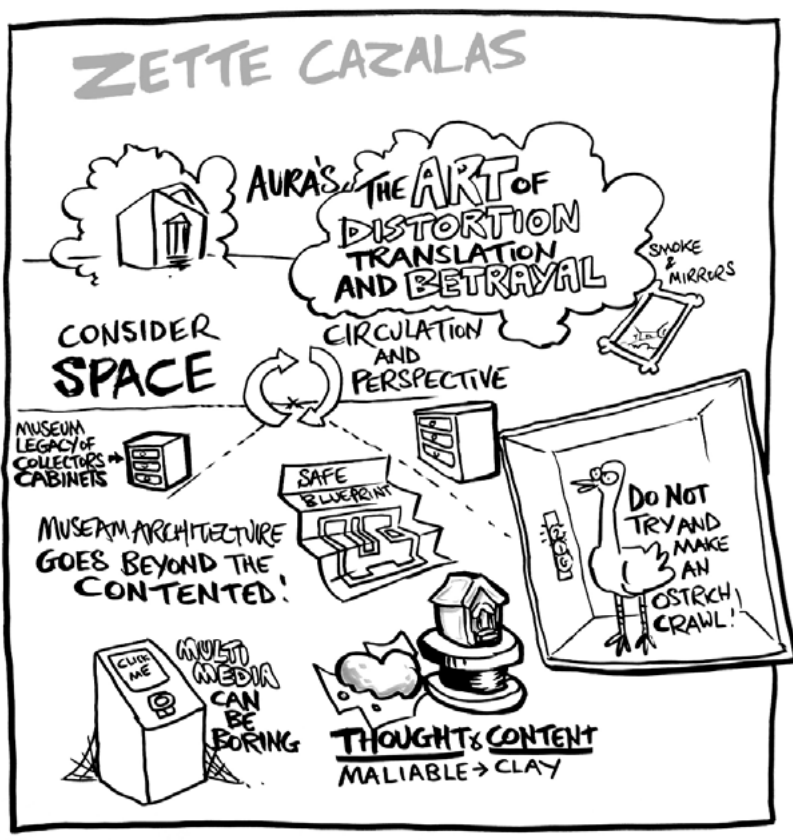
### **Chaos at the Museum “burned bright”**

There was a tangible air of excitement throughout the summit that surprised even the conveners. Chaos at the Museum “burned bright” according to Nick Bell in the *Eye* magazine blog (May 23, 2014). A collision of factors seems to have ignited this energy. Of the 185 people who attended about 60% were practicing exhibition designers and museum professionals who normally encounter each other at project pitches. The current commercial system isolates our most visionary and creative minds, and there are few opportunities for collective exchange. Indeed in Europe, there is no professional body that represents the exhibition design sector. The closest in the U.S. are the Society for Experiential Design (SEGD), and the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME).

So, firstly, the summit enabled speakers and delegates to step out of the competitive frame and share an open discursive arena. Secondly, the summit gave Master’s and PhD students, about 30% of the attendees, firsthand experience of the internal dynamics of the sector. Students were brought “into the family,” immersed in the debates, and given a voice and an active part to play, enabling them to identify with and internalize the topics and dilemmas. Thirdly, academics and educators, about 10% of the attendees, were able to bridge what can be a gulf between teaching, reflection or research on practice, and practice itself.

The learning was not the dissemination of wise words and formulas drip fed from experts to novices. It was not a top down didactic model. Instead, it was a live, sometimes messy, exchange as constituencies expressed their own perspectives and shared debates. The learners were not only students but also practitioners and the educators. The university setting allowed a frank exchange of views outside the commercial sphere and provided opportunities to form new principles, new alliances, and new collaborations in and across educational and commercial spheres.

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Sketch notes captured the provocative points made by the professional exhibition designers' presentations.

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### Blending Research with Practice

Gurian astutely observed that the “visualisers” need to tell the wordsmiths what they needed in order to have a voice in the industry. (Magidson, April 2014)

The summit took place over a 3-day period and integrated professional exhibition design practice with research and scholarship.

#### Day 1: PhD Colloquium and Keynote Address

The expanded, networked model of learning was supported by the structure of the summit Day 1, a PhD Colloquium. Initiated by UAL PhD candidate Jona Piehl, the colloquium became what may be the first ever global PhD forum for exhibition design researchers. Papers addressed topics from authorship and co-design to models of spatial narrative, the roles of objects and materiality in exhibitions, and exhibition as speculative

design. Two discussions on audience participation emerged, one questioning how we can “unlearn” our “how to visit” behavior if museums are changing and are about to transform into cultural hubs shaped as much by visitors needs and interests as those of the museum establishment. A second discussion developed from this question: Are we, as educators, funneling our students into designing somewhat formulaic, didactic exhibition experiences? Should we be teaching more critical and experimental forms of practice?

Elaine Heumann Gurian’s keynote summarized the shift of museum culture in the last 60 years from object-centered curated galleries to public-orientated education spaces enabled by digital technologies. She made very eloquent arguments for including the visitor as an active content developer saying, “knowledge sharing is the next big activity of the future.” Heumann Gurian’s discussion of the change from in-house to external design teams revealed the tensions and resentments brought about by the system. Her use of the term “design mercenaries” (to refer to the increased use of design consultants rather than in-house designers) stirred feelings and became a subject of debate throughout the event. Her reflection at the end of the workshops was that design thinking and practice need to be better integrated into the exhibition development process. The question for educators and practitioners is how is this achieved?

#### Day 2: Professional Presentations and Workshops

The sheer sensory delight of the professional presentations on Day 2

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demonstrated the power of interpretation design to captivate. The enactment of engagement through design kept a sustained focus on design that often gets overlooked at paper driven conferences. The combination of the visual impact and the verbal accounts of interpretive design logic, poetics, and processes revealed a vast palette of design knowledge developed in and through practice. Speakers showed how they use form, scale, materiality, spatial frame, graphics, interactive, and structured events to achieve intellectual, bodily, and emotional engagement. While theoreticians circle round creative interpretation, this area of artistic practice remains elusive yet core to our teaching. We seem to lack the words to describe it, and yet this is the very center of our educational goals.

Following the presentations, a series of creative workshops provided an opportunity for the delegates to participate directly in the analysis and development of the summit theme. Groups of up to 12 people discussed, sketched, mapped, constructed models, and made short films. The workshop themes each addressed a different issue, from the sequencing of the space to the use of unusual spaces outside the museum; the importance of the real; the union of physical and digital design; designing for niche audiences; ethics and strategies for displaying disturbing content; and the politics of the design development process. It was interesting that among our delegates emotional spatial planning was the most popular.

**Day 3: Peer-to-Peer Student Presentations**  
Presentations by students from the

Corcoran College of Art + Design (Washington D.C.), under the leadership of Clare Brown, and UAL students showed how both groups are practicing content-led design and a broad approach to exhibition design education. The Corcoran student presentations demonstrated a range of well-researched topics that consisted mainly of refined propositions for established museum spaces. The UAL students showed projects that sought alternative spaces for



*A who's who of international professional design talent including Zette Cazalas (Zen+dCo), Nick Bell (Nick Bell Design), Damian Smith (ISO), Herman Kossmann (Kossmann.dejong), Britta Nagel and Kathrin Millic-Grunwald (Atelier Brückner).*

storytelling, physical prototyping, and testing in situ with their target audiences. They presented objects, documentary film, and performance. There was a positive exchange that enabled students and academics to reflect on their respective



Herman Kossmann (Kossmann.dejong) traces Christopher Muñiz (Studio MB) during the lively afternoon workshops.

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curricula and learning environments.

Very interesting looking round the room and observing group dynamics. Communication, power, leadership, teamwork, dysfunction, chaos. #ReXD Twitter (personal communication, April 26, 2014)

### Was There Enough Chaos? *Summit Theme*

Contrary to our expectations about active audience participation, the majority of the designers we featured were concerned more with audience engagement. In other words, designers were seeking to capture the audience's attention and imagination but not necessarily creating opportunities for audiences to actively contribute, curate, or comment on content. Interestingly, student work revealed a higher degree of aspiration for audience participation. This can be interpreted in two ways: either the emphasis on participation becomes muted once designers graduate, transition from education, and enter the work force, or, there is a generational shift that mirrors everyday social media and networking. Either way universities are clearly a breeding ground for new trends and critical debate rather than simply providers of technical skills. Questions remain about forms of participation,

scales of participation and viability of participation. The university design curriculum is a valid place to test and critique definitions, strategies, and assumptions and produce insights that can feed and stimulate the industry.

We heard a lot from designers but we should have had a session with museum curators/interpretation developers/audience advocates to respond to their comments and to get a two-way interaction going. (unpublished post-summit survey)

### **Design-Centric Forum**

The summit demonstrated there is a huge appetite both in academia and industry to share debate and reflection on interpretive design. However, despite a broad marketing effort to all museum professionals for this event there were no senior representatives from national museums, few policy makers, and indeed few impartial museum visitors or non-visitors. The questions about design need to be asked by a wider audience, and indeed students need to get a fuller first hand overview of all the roles and processes in the exhibitions field.

A more theoretical approach. That being said, the fact that practitioners were presenting was extremely interesting. (unpublished post-summit survey)

### **Expanded Approach**

The teaching and learning emphasis at the summit showed how practice and theory can inform each other through expanded experiential learning. Gurian's historical overview provided delegates with a vision of their lineage and confirmed

their group identity as professionals and students working within a specific, albeit contested context. This contributed to a positive atmosphere, and participants ‘learned through doing’ at the workshops—an embodiment of the participatory theme.

This year gave proof that the conference can definitely expand presentations to longer format, workshops to two sessions. So encouraging to see such a critical, enthusiastic mass of work and ideas. (unpublished post-summit survey)

### **Reflections on Summit Structure**

The peer-to-peer student presentations enabled Masters students to network with each other and would have been better scheduled at the beginning of the event. The PhD colloquium created a new constituency of researchers to share methodologies and theoretical frameworks, but attendees were limited to researchers only. At the next summit the colloquium will be open to all. The many presenters and open debate at the summit meant a myriad of themes arose, and the focus occasionally drifted. In future a more explicit frame will be established throughout by emphasizing the key aims, exploring definitions, and providing summaries. The delegates in the audience will be invited on stage to share longer panel discussions.

The summit also inspired a day-long sister event in San Francisco which brought together students and museum professionals in a similar pedagogical setting, and was hosted by John F. Kennedy University Museum Studies Program.



*The summit provided invaluable debate and networking opportunities for practitioners, scholars, and students.*

### **Re-XD 2.0 What’s Next?**

The next Re-envisioning Exhibition Design summits will be held on different continents, sustaining a design-centric approach and further evolving the networked, experiential, and expanded model of learning. The summits aim to be inclusive, attracting all levels of museum practitioner, PhD researchers, academics, students, and museum visitors.

Audiences, stories, and spaces are core to exhibition design practice, learning, and teaching. Having started with questions about audience participation, we will focus next on designing spatial experiences. The summit will review the transformation of museum spaces from largely ignored fusty collections to go-to city icons, the frictions and syntheses of virtual and physical spaces, and the implications for university design curricula. Stay tuned for future summits on Re-envisioning Exhibition Design: Argentina 2015 and California 2017. See <http://www.re-XD.org> for updates.

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