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IN PRACTICE EXHIBITIONS

# Focus | Innovations in exhibition design

Designers share how exhibition design is changing – and what trends and emerging practice museums need to be aware of

22 January 2024

EXHIBITIONS



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The design of the Hunterian Museum by Casson Mann looked to offer context to the collections

Hufton and Crow

It's not easy to put your finger on what makes an exhibition move you to tears or laughter, provoke a memory or ignite your curiosity. The objects and the stories they tell can have a powerful and emotive impact on visitors, but it's the way in which they are displayed that can create a visceral reaction.

The art of exhibition design and its ability to break down barriers and empower audiences will be explored at the one-day conference **Show Time: Designing Great Exhibitions**, which the Museums Association is running at the Wellcome Collection on 7 February.

Ahead of the event, Museums Journal spoke to some leading figures to find out how exhibition design is changing – and what trends and emerging practice museums need to be aware of.

## What exciting developments are you seeing in museum exhibition design?

**Charlie Barr, founding director, Studio MB:**

“Technology is playing a central role in exciting developments, but more important is the change of emphasis in how and why stories are being told, and how and why the collections are being used to tell these stories. The shift in narratives to focus on human stories and narratives with empathy, changing context and fresh eyes is also something that has created a need for new approaches to storytelling.”



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**Kyriakos Katsaros, principal, Studio C102:**

“The move away from the didactic museum experience towards more-inclusive, pluralistic experiences. Our work on the South Asia Gallery at Manchester Museum was a truly collaborative project at the intersection of design and engagement.

“We worked collaboratively with all stakeholder groups to develop the design, and to establish a new form of co-curation, where the plurality and diversity of what it means to be south Asian could be celebrated. Audiences are increasingly keen to see themselves, their values and their beliefs reflected within spaces of culture – and museums are thinking about how to remove physical and social barriers, as well as how to widen access for people who don't usually engage with cultural institutions.”

**Kirsty Kelso, director of content and communication, Casson Mann:**

“There is an accelerating trend to embed ‘big wows’ and playful moments in museum design. Museums seem to be more relaxed about their role as places for shared inspirational experiences, as much as learning zones. We want to see immersion that is more than a backdrop; we want it to communicate and tell stories, and to maximise the dynamic possibilities of the media.

"The desire to overturn existing orthodoxies is affecting museum design and there are practical concerns to respond to and philosophical conversations to have. We worked on the Hunterian Museum in London, which opened last May, which has many specimens that raise questions about consent and displays of colonial subjects. In our design, we tried to offer context and space for reflection."



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**Pippa Nissen, Director, Nissen Richards Studio:**

“I feel that exhibition design is in a really creative era – as a new artform. There are two opposing and exciting trends right now. One is about going simpler but designing with more materials and cool details. Budgets are pinched, but designers are capitalising on being more creative with less. The second is that digital is becoming both better and more affordable, making the possibilities seem endless for creating new kinds of exhibitions.”

**Barry Yearsley, senior designer and head of concept, Creative Core:**

“We’re seeing more museum spaces designed with a game plan for what they want visitors to think, feel and experience in the moment and beyond the gallery.

"At Ripon Workhouse Museum, we’re looking at how an incohesive visitor route of more than 40 rooms can be tuned to evoke feelings of dislocation, segregation and stigma, redolent of the human processing that once took place in these spaces. Interpretation will be carefully paced and restrained, allowing visitors to respond to this environment on their own terms.

"It will also lower their guard for moments of emotional power where the building and its stories align, eliciting empathy and compassion for people living in poverty then and now – for example, a view from the women’s sewing room where mothers were able to see their children in the next wing but were unable to hold them.”



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**Ed Cookson, director, Sarner International:**

“Many museum and heritage operators are recognising the need to keep attracting new audiences, meaning that they are open and willing to take risks and explore new technologies and approaches in appealing to these audiences which, of course, include younger generations of potential museum-goers.”

**Phillip Tefft, director, Ralph Appelbaum Associates:**

“What’s really exciting right now isn’t actually a new idea: bringing multiple diverse voices into the museum space. Previously, we thought about it in terms of how visitors experienced exhibitions as a finished product. But now, our process includes multiple diverse voices right from the very first design stages.

"At the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, we are pushing the boundaries of co-production in the design process and, importantly, long after opening. Together with the museum, we’re taking an activist approach to design that constantly enables new voices and ideas to animate the experience. And in Northern Ireland, at the Ulster Folk Museum, we’re telling stories about different communities that move beyond stereotypes to build mutual understanding and respect across historically divided communities.”

## What role is technology playing in shaping design innovation?

**Rhiannon Goddard, head of public engagement projects and business management, Historic Royal Palaces:**

“Some museums have used technology to become more inclusive, using accessible design to offer multi-sensory experiences that can cater to diverse audiences. Used in the right way, technology can enhance the visitor experience, conveying complex narratives and fostering a deeper appreciation of our shared heritage.

"The Intelligence Factory at Bletchley Park does this well by using technology integrated with real objects, testimonies and set dressing to create a relatable narrative. Creative interpretation that

doesn't rely on text panels or gimmicks works so well to draw in visitors. The use of technology to interrogate visitor behaviour and the choices people make can really influence how we design our exhibitions – ultimately creating a more-tailored experience that visitors, especially younger ones, are coming to expect.”

**Daniel Clark, director of creative programme, The Story Museum, Oxford:**

“One thing that's at the forefront of my mind is the representation and use of video games within museums. Our current family-friendly temporary exhibition *Brilli-ANT: How Someone Small Changed a Big Story* (until spring 2024), uses a video game mechanic but in the real – rather than the digital – world.

“Visitors ‘play’ the space, wearing interactive antennae that bring giant recycled cardboard insects to life, collecting letters as they go to unlock the ending. We also wove in a wide number of analogue games and puzzles, all of which help to create the sense of the visitors being the main characters in the story, with space for open-ended play, agency and choice. These are all things that we're finding young audiences are increasingly expecting of interactive experiences right now.”

## How is a rising awareness of sustainability affecting exhibition design?

**Matt Schwab, All Things Studio:**

“Sustainability is the most important influence in exhibition design at the moment and will only increase in importance in the years ahead. We've been working with the Design Museum in London to reuse structures across several exhibitions in the same gallery, making minimal colour or cladding changes to produce a new identity for each show. We have also used materials such as recycled cardboard to replace MDF in the exhibition *Turn it Up: The Power of Music* at the Science and Industry Museum in Manchester.”

**Pippa Nissen, Director, Nissen Richards Studio:**

“Sustainability is having a big effect on exhibition design. A big problem historically has been storage, so museums are looking at ways to be able to keep as much of the build as possible to recycle too. Walling storage systems are become the norm now, where structure and cladding are reused. “New types of cladding are being considered. We're working more and more with soft materials such as printed gauzes and types of paper, or Tyvek – where they are less ‘built’ and able to be recycled with smaller carbon footprints. There are also lots of products being developed from recycled materials at a higher quality level, giving a sense of exhibitions as living and breathing things, rather than static plastic creations.”

**Daniel Clark, director of creative programme, The Story Museum, Oxford:**

“Like many other small to medium-sized cultural organisations, the Story Museum has always reused and repurposed materials, technology and installations. But for our new positive-climate-action exhibition, we had to do more and think about the most sustainable choices in all aspects of exhibition design, from conception right through to the final print and materials. This has time and money implications, so you need to build the necessary budget contingency and design decisions into the plans at the initial concept and budgeting phase.”

# Give us one big prediction for the next 10 years?

**Rhiannon Goddard, head of public engagement projects and business management, Historic Royal Palaces:**

“I don’t think museums have fully cracked the art of co-creation yet, but I would like to think that in 10 years from now, we will all wonder how we created exhibitions without the involvement of our communities – and it is being done in an equitable way that provides long-term benefits for all involved.”

**Ed Cookson, director, Sarner International:**

“There is an understandable focus on the potential of innovations such as AI, but just as photography both influenced and complemented portrait painting rather than replacing it, so we will see traditional techniques coexisting alongside new immersive, high technology. Audiences of all ages still enjoy low-tech activities such as playing a Viking-age board game or pulling a physical polar sledge – perhaps even more so when adjacent interactive and immersive audiovisual techniques provide additional context. No matter how immersed they are in an experience, visitors will continue to want in-attraction opportunities to engage and discuss what it all means with other humans.”

**Barry Yearsley, senior designer and head of concept, Creative Core:**

“Design will increasingly respond to the changing role of museums in society – as spaces for personal development, health and wellbeing, and for sharing that sense with other people. We already see this in places like the Thackray Museum of Medicine in Leeds, where new galleries provide an infrastructure to support the museum’s social mission, empowering people to shape their own health and wellbeing.

“At the Museum of Making in Derby – co-produced with and in response to the needs of local residents – the galleries we designed promote skills and aspirations in people young and old through the act of making. These new museums will need new designers willing to go on that journey, work with communities, experiment, learn and reassess, keeping museums relevant to people’s lives.”

**Pippa Nissen, Director, Nissen Richards Studio:**

“I feel the future of exhibition design will move towards a much more sophisticated infrastructure invested in by museums, so that exhibition design is more about creative ideas than about build – a scenario more akin to theatre set design.

“This means re-using a kit of parts that can be adapted and changed through surface texture and lighting, as well as digital surfaces that can appear radically different. This will also create ways in which they can be rapidly changed, permitting a rapid response to the world around and allowing more up to date, trends and ideas to find their way into exhibitions in a contemporaneous timeframe.”

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