

Exhibition Concept Models

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Smithsonian Institution

Office of Policy and Analysis
Washington DC, 20560-0405

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Table of Contents

Preface.....	iii
Background.....	1
Four Approaches or Models.....	1
Exhibition as Artifact Display	2
Exhibition as Communicator of Ideas.....	3
Exhibition as Visitor Activity	4
Exhibition as Environment	5
Hybrid Models	6
Implications for Serving Diverse Audiences	7
Using Exhibition Models as Assessment Tools.....	8

Preface

The Office of Policy Analysis (OP&A) intends that this white paper, *Exhibition Concept Models*, is used as a timely and useful tool to help conceive of and develop exhibitions. An important unstated aim is to develop exhibitions that improve communication with visitors. The paper was written by Andrew Pekarik. His professionalism and dedication to improving exhibitions is playing a major role in our work. The draft was reviewed by Zahava Doering, Whitney Watriss, and Kathleen Ernst. They provided insights, criticism, and suggestions at various stages. Although OP&A staff is extremely busy, staff are gracefully accepting my firmness in completing this series of white papers on schedule. I am grateful.

Carole M.P. Neves
Director, Policy and Analysis

Background

In the course of two years of research on exhibitions, the OP&A study team interviewed approximately two hundred museum professionals inside and outside the Smithsonian on the philosophy, processes and practices of exhibition-making. The views of these professionals differed in the way they described exhibitions and the dimensions that they emphasized, but their observations can be organized into four major approaches or concept models.

The purpose of this paper is to describe these concept models and to consider the implications of emphasizing these four approaches in exhibition-making. The selections of models presented below have implications not just for individual exhibitions, but also for the mix of exhibitions at museums. The underlying assumption is that the identification, discussion and adoption of models that are different from the usual practice at a museum would be valuable in shaping a diverse mix of exhibitions with appeal to a wider range of audiences.

Four Approaches or Models

In contemporary exhibition-making practice there are four different approaches with respect to the way exhibitions function with respect to their visitors:

- Exhibition as artifact display
- Exhibition as communicator of ideas
- Exhibition as visitor activity
- Exhibition as environment

Most exhibitions have artifacts, include ideas on texts and labels, presume the visitor will do something, and create an environment. But these four perspectives do not receive equal emphasis in particular exhibitions, and usually the exhibition-maker views only one or two of these dimensions as most critical to success. Even though the four approaches are not inherently contradictory, they pull the exhibition-maker in different directions. Emphasizing objects, for example, necessarily leads one to downplay whatever would interfere or unduly compete with that focus, such as abundant texts or prominent videos.

In general, museums tend to favor one concept model over the others. In other words, one of the models prevails. Art museums tend to produce exhibitions that favor the first model, since the art exhibition is generally seen as a public presentation of important art objects. History museums usually favor the idea of the exhibition as a communicator of ideas about the past. The exhibition as visitor activity is a standard of science centers, where interactivity is emphasized. The exhibition as environment is familiar in contemporary zoos and natural history museums where immersive environments imitate or recall natural habitats.

Exhibition as Artifact Display

When this approach is emphasized, the selection and arrangement of artifacts are the focus. The artifacts, preferably original and shown in the best possible viewing conditions, are expected to bear the primary responsibility for what happens to visitors in the exhibition. As a result, great care is devoted to seeking out and selecting the objects that will be most effective. Any devices or approaches that are meant to enhance other dimensions of the exhibition are usually treated as secondary and are carefully restricted so as not to interfere with the selection and arrangement. The exhibit team is often led by the curator or researcher who controls the selection of objects and thereby shapes the exhibition's core. An example of the typical artifact exhibition at the Smithsonian is the permanent collection display at the Hirshhorn Museum.

Depending on the tradition within which they are working, exhibition-makers have different expectations for how the artifact display will affect visitors. There is a tendency in art museums, for example, to believe that "art speaks for itself," i.e., that the individual object, by virtue of its power as art, will activate in the attentive visitor a unique, complex, intellectual and emotional response. Each object accordingly is given the space considered appropriate and necessary to its "speaking" role. In a natural history museum, by contrast, the effect of an individual object on a visitor arises in large part from its role as a compelling example of a much larger whole, some important aspect of the world. Although a single object can do the job, usually coordinated groups of objects are arranged to work collectively.

The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology, a recent exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, adhered closely to the artifact-display model. Outstanding examples of recently excavated materials, selected for their uniqueness, beauty, and importance, were presented in a way that allowed them to command attention. Information and context were restrained, so that the visitor might leave the exhibition inspired by the creativity, imagination and sophistication of ancient Chinese artists.

Not all artifact displays are aesthetic. When the objects are historical photographs, for example, visitors can feel that the pictures transport them across time and space to events in the past. *Without Sanctuary*, an exhibition of postcards of lynchings, was a classic artifact-display of materials with no aesthetic value. Yet, because of the contents and historicity of these images, they left an indelible emotional impression.

Exhibition as Communicator of Ideas

All exhibitions have a central theme or topic that defines them. When an exhibition functions strongly as a communicator of ideas (including thoughts, theories, information, discoveries, etc.), it seeks to convey additional messages that elaborate on that theme and provide new information or perspectives. In an idea-exhibition, the heart of the exhibition is the set of messages, narratives, or facts that the exhibition-makers wish to deliver. Idea-exhibitions necessarily make extensive use of language, whether in texts, audio or video. Artifacts are typically surrounded by “contexts” provided by words and images. The artifacts are chosen for their ability to support and help carry the message. They need not be rare or unique; they can be familiar items, replicas, reproductions, or copies, because the key aim is to communicate ideas, not to display important artifacts.

Exhibitions that stress ideas tend to have educational goals and are common in history and natural history museums, which often seek to instruct and inspire visitors regarding history and science. The Smithsonian exhibition *A More Perfect Union*, which tells the story of the Japanese American internment during World War II, is a good example of an exhibition that functions primarily as a communicator of ideas.

A recent idea-exhibition is *The Endurance*, the current traveling exhibition (organized by the American Museum of Natural History) that tells the story of Sir Ernest Shackleton’s 1914 journey to the Antarctic. Although the exhibition contains a handful of original objects, the emphasis is on the linear narrative as conveyed through texts and maps.¹

Idea-exhibitions are relatively rare in art museums, but one example was *Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion*, an exhibition opened by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in 1996, which received an award in the American Association of Museums’ (AAM) Exhibition Competition. The exhibition’s statues, ritual objects and re-creations of shrines used in Hindu worship were heavily contextualized by videos displayed next to objects, altar arrangements, photographs, elaborate text panels, a reading area, and albums of household shrines in the community. The point of the exhibition was to inform visitors, and nearly half of visitors said that their most satisfying experience in the exhibition was learning something.

¹ At some of the venues of this traveling exhibition the exhibition included a separate room with a reproduction of the *Endurance*’s lifeboat surrounded by images of the sea and an opportunity to use an interactive navigational instrument.

Exhibition as Visitor Activity

It is also possible to see the exhibition principally in terms of the activities of visitors inside it. Rather than putting objects at the center (as in the artifact-display) or messages (as in the idea-exhibition) the activity-exhibition puts visitor behavior and interaction at the center. The starting point is what the visitor will do in the exhibition. The exhibition provides a medium that the visitor is encouraged to manipulate and use as he or she sees fit. What options will be provided? What will enhance those possibilities? How will those activities be coordinated or integrated? How will they support the mission and outcomes that the museum is aiming for? The range of visitor activities includes touching, manipulating, creating, exchanging, moving, and engaging in social interactions.

Typically the most activity-oriented exhibitions are found in children's museums and science centers. Activity-exhibitions are usually interactive, because an interactive exhibition is specifically designed to respond to what the visitor does. An example of an activity-exhibition at the Smithsonian is the *Hands-on History Room* in the National Museum of American History, where visitors can touch and use reproductions of historical objects.

A new exhibition that follows the activity-model is *Risk!*, developed by the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History. Visitors engage in a series of interactive, realistic experiences that awaken their perception or misperception of risk. They find, for example, what it feels like to cross a 7-inch-wide steel beam 17 stories above the ground amid wind, blaring construction noises, and a noisy flock of birds flying by, and they personally discover whether or not it hurts to lie on a bed of nails.

The Indianapolis Children's Museum's exhibition *Drumbeats!* received an award from the AAM Exhibition Competition. The target audience was nine to twelve-year-old children, and the exhibition began with a three-sided percussion wall of materials that visitors were invited to use to make sounds. The core of the exhibition was the opportunities to listen to and play percussion instruments from all over the world.

Exhibition as Environment

Under this approach an exhibition is an environment that envelops the visitor. Through past experience and present experimentation the visitor gets a sense of the environment and explores the possibilities that the setting evokes and permits. Although all museum exhibitions are constructed environments, the emphasis in the environment-exhibition is to create an immersive space. Many environment-exhibitions reproduce the salient characteristics of some other place to which the visitor is transported. This type of exhibition is frequently found in botanical gardens and zoos, since it facilitates the care of living specimens and provides an evocative context at the same time. A good example at the Smithsonian is the indoor rainforest in *Amazonia* at the National Zoological Park.

One of the most talked-about environment-exhibitions in recent years is the Bronx Zoo's *Congo Gorilla Forest*, in which visitors move through a convincing six-and-a-half acre African rain forest and ultimately find themselves face to face with a group of lowland gorillas.

Art museums have long embraced the value of environment-exhibitions in their period rooms. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, in particular, has devoted a considerable amount of display area to authentic, large-scale structures that visitors can walk in and around, including a Chinese temple and a Japanese teahouse.

Hybrid Models

Many exhibitions involve more than one model at the same time. In cases where multiple perspectives are incorporated in a single exhibition, there are variations in how an exhibition incorporates more than one model. At the Smithsonian, for example, the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery presented an exhibition called *Music from the Age of Confucius*, whose theme was the musical instruments found in an ancient Chinese tomb. Much of the exhibition was traditional artifact display, but one room was set aside for a large-screen video program that fulfilled a communication role, and another was set aside for experiences, where visitors could play reproduction Chinese instruments and listen to daily concerts. In this case the different functions were spatially separated.

The Field Museum took a different approach in its music exhibition, *Sounds from the Vaults*. Musical instruments from many different cultures were displayed in a standard artifact-display manner, but in front of each case there was a touchpad or buttons that visitors could use to hear the sounds that the instrument makes and to play their own tunes on it. Artifact and experience were not separated, but united in a single presentation.

More recently, *Explore the Universe*, a new exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum is an example of a hybrid exhibition. In approximately equal measure it combines a focus on artifacts (including both original objects and reproductions), ideas (especially information about the universe and the history of astronomy), and visitor activity (in its many interactives).

Hybrid exhibitions run the risk of seriously displeasing those with strong preferences. In his review of *The Quest for Immortality: Treasures of Ancient Egypt*, for example, the Washington Post art critic, Blake Gopnik, expresses dismay that the exhibition “is entirely focused on explaining what the old Egyptians thought would happen after death, so that the objects in it become nothing more than handy illustrations for its rudimentary ethnography.”² He is categorically rejecting idea-exhibitions in an art museum, and is not at all mollified by the exhibition’s hybrid status as both artifact-display and idea-exhibition (with elements of an environment-exhibition added at the end).

² Blake Gopnik, “A Dark and Shining Past,” *Washington Post*, June 30, 2002.

Implications for Serving Diverse Audiences

When exhibition-makers consider which approach to follow in a particular case, they are likely to be influenced by the suitability of the content to a particular model. Some exhibition themes call for the use of one model over another. In contemporary art museums, for example, some installation art provides an immersive environment and some media art invites the participation of visitors. Exhibitions about specific historical events often work best as idea-exhibitions. A theme such as optical illusions, for example, would probably suggest an emphasis on visitor activity.

The target audience(s) for the exhibition can also be an important consideration. Different people have different perspectives on what they want in an exhibition. When the preferences of the visitor and the approach of the exhibition are not well matched, the visitor may respond unenthusiastically. At the same time, an exhibition that tries to be all things equally to all visitors risks losing character and can give the impression of being a bland, committee product that pleases everyone slightly and no one strongly.

If each visitor can find an exhibition that suits his or her preference, the museum will establish a much stronger relationship with that visitor. Since visitor preferences vary, exhibition approaches should vary as well. If the museum wishes to encourage repeat visits and to expand its audiences, it seems to be in the museum's interest to cater to the widest possible range of preferences by providing exhibitions based on all the conceptual models, rather than one or two dominant orientations.

Which approach works best depends on the individual visitor. Research on visitor experiences conducted recently at the Smithsonian demonstrated that people have preferences for different kinds of experiences in museums. Looking at visitor experiences across eight Smithsonian museums, for example, it was found that visitors under age 25 were more likely than other visitors to find introspective experiences most satisfying and less likely to find cognitive experiences most satisfying.³

Hybrid models are not likely to provide the best solution to achieving variety in a museum, because some experiences tend to conflict with one another. For example, the quiet contemplation of objects, which is privileged in a traditional artifact-display, becomes more difficult in a space that encourages interactive experiences and social behaviors. In addition, hybrid exhibitions, because they contain multiple approaches, run the risk of seeming superficial and unfocused. Within a particular hybrid model it may be impossible to maximize the effectiveness of all the different approaches that the model simultaneously embodies.

Learning about the relative effectiveness of these models, as this paper suggests, is in a preliminary stage.

³ Pekarik, A.J., Doering, Z. D., & Karns, D. A. (1999). Exploring satisfying experiences in museums. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 42(2), 152-173.

Using Exhibition Models as Assessment Tools

The four conceptual models can also be viewed as a kind of analytical “tool kit” which can be consciously applied to describe the range of a museum’s offerings and plan its exhibition programs. If, as a result of that description, it appears that some orientations are being neglected in the museum, future exhibitions could be shaped to address these needs. In this way, over time, the overall mix of exhibitions in the museum would be made attractive to more varied audiences.

An art museum whose exhibitions are primarily artifact-displays, for example, could expand the diversity and richness of their exhibitions by actively adopting another concept model as the starting point for some exhibitions. If an art museum project starts with the aim of producing an art exhibition which functions principally as an activity-exhibition, for example, it will require a different approach to selection, display, and process. That fresh viewpoint can enrich the diversity of exhibitions in the museum, and awaken fresh creative energies among the staff.

The deliberate choice of an alternative concept model in a history museum could also benefit the visitor. Activity-exhibitions, and environment-exhibitions would be welcomed by many visitors to history museums. Natural history museums would also serve their audiences better by replacing some idea-exhibitions with other types.

Currently the National Air and Space Museum uses a broad mix of exhibition types. Three of its most popular exhibitions are each dominated by one of the four models. *Space Race* is an artifact-display, *How Things Fly* is an activity-exhibition and *Air-Sea Operations* is an environment-exhibition. In addition, as mentioned earlier, *Explore the Universe* is an artifact-idea-activity hybrid.

If a museum decides that, in the interest of better serving its diverse audience, it should produce more exhibitions using different models, it needs to do two things. First, the museum should decide what mix it wants. Second, the museum should determine what mix it presently has, so that it can see in what directions it needs to change. The concept models described in this paper can be used to guide these decisions. However, it should be noted that the models are only one of many considerations that should be taken into account prior to determining an exhibition program.

In order to apply the four concept models as an analytical tool, separately consider each gallery in the museum and identify the dominant focus within that room or space, using a matrix of identifying characteristics, as in Figure 1. The features used to distinguish types represent typical current practices.⁴ If several orientations seem equally strong within a given space, then assign the gallery to both.

⁴ “Primary experience type” refers to the taxonomy presented in Pekarik et al., (1999).

Figure 1
Typical Characteristics of Different Exhibition Types

Characteristic	Type			
	Artifact-display	Idea	Activity	Environment
Central focus	Objects	Ideas/stories	Activities	Settings
Major activity	Looking	Reading/listening	Touching	Exploring
Major media	Artifacts	Panels/labels/video	Interactives	Spaces
Primary experience type	Object/Introspective	Cognitive	Social	Introspective

Using distinctions such as these, it is possible to assign all the exhibition galleries in the museum into the four types and calculate an approximate profile for the museum. This profile can then be used as one of the guides for establishing a future exhibition program that is likely to appeal to a broader range of visitors.