

At the beginning of the semester, I proposed this post-modern question: Can experiential exhibition design really be successful when the experience of each individual viewer differs so vastly from the next based on their personal views and past experiences? Through my studies I have found that, to understand exhibition design we must shift our focus from the museum's collections and intended outcomes to look through the lens of identity-related museum motivations. With this outlook, we can ensure not just the success of the design but the success of each individual's experience.

Learning is a lifelong measure. It is the natural human process of creating meaning from the world around us, happening consciously and subconsciously. Perhaps, some believe they've gone through life without learning much. However, the gathering of knowledge happens continuously even if it is incidental or ignored. Formal education models have structured the understanding of learning in the form of teacher-student exchange. For this reason, learning rarely accompanies an individual's interests.

However, it has become increasingly acknowledged that learning occurs through the process of comprehending experiences. Part of this concept is free-choice learning. Defined by Falk, Heimlich, and Foutz, free-choice learning is, "learning that occurs in environmental education settings when the learning is largely the choice and control of the learner."¹ They also argue that terms such as informal, non-formal, and formal learning are intensely problematic. "They assume that the critical variable in learning is the educational setting or instructional approach rather than the attributes of the learner; in particular these categorizations leave out the key variable of learning motivation and agency."²

¹ John Falk, Susan Foutz, Joe Heimlich. *Free-Choice Learning and the Environment*. 5.

² Ibid, 15.

Free-choice learning is, in fact, quite the opposite. Educational settings are largely varied, purely situated, and can take place in many locations. National parks, natural history museums, science museums, aquariums, zoos, fine art museums, conservation organizations, universities, and even the internet are optimal locales for these experiences. “Free-choice learning provides a means by which “learning” - the role of the learner - can be separated from the approach to teaching for learning.”³ This means that museums have the tremendous opportunity to use their physical settings to help visitors learn a desired outcome message. However, to take advantage of this opportunity institutions have to understand their visitors on an individual basis. What do they remember from their visits? What do they learn? What factors contribute to their long term memory?

Over a generation has been spent researching the museum visitor experience. “Research has been done on who visits museums and to a degree why. Research has been done on what visitors do in the museum. Research has been done on what visitors learn from the museum. However, only rarely has research been done in ways that allow understanding of the whole visitor and the whole visit experience - research on individuals whose life-course intersects with the museum experience prior to as well as after the visit.”⁴ Almost every museum has attempted to describe their visitors. However, these efforts resulted in the use of traditional demographics like age, education, gender, race and ethnicity, income and occupation. Museums have also sorted their audience members into other categories such as visit frequency and social arrangements.

Through these studies we have come to ‘know’ museum visitors as better educated, older, white females, who are more wealthy than the general public. “Although these statistics

³ Ibid, 15.

⁴ John Falk. *Understanding Museum Visitors’ Motivations and Learning*. 2.

are on average true, museum visitors are not averages, they are individuals.”⁵ This data is not sufficient enough to predict whether or not a person will visit a museum, what they will do in the museum and their outcome from the experience. These demographic variables do not give us any insight because they are essentially unrelated to museums and tell us nothing about how an individual might relate to them. “The fact is that the museum visitor experience is not readily captured with tangible, immutable categories. The museum visitor experience is much too ephemeral and dynamic; it is a uniquely constructed relationship that occurs each time a person visits a museum. And the same person can visit the same museum on two different days and be an entirely different visitor.”⁶ To get an outright answer as to why people do or do not visit museums, what they do during their visit, and their post-visit outcomes requires a deeper more holistic explanation.

Museum-going is just a small part of a person’s daily life. However, to understand it one must step outside the perspective of within the museum and instead view it as a much larger picture. If we are to answer our questions, “we must see the museum visitor experience as a series of nested, seemingly interrelated events. In reality the museum visitor experience is no more than a series of snapshots of life.”⁷

Falk and his colleagues took this new approach and interviewed visitors about their experiences weeks, months, and even years after they had been to the museum. What is striking about these interviews is that museum visits are deeply personal and tied to an individual’s sense of identity. A visitor’s post-visit outcomes correlate directly to their entering narrative. Most people engage in a degree of self-reflection during their museum visit. Therefore, their outcomes are associated with what they personally sought to accomplish

⁵ John Falk. *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*. 30.

⁶ John Falk. *Understanding Museum Visitors’ Motivations and Learning*. 3.

⁷ John Falk. *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*. 35.

during their visit. Through this, Falk gained the insight that personal identity is the primary motivation behind museum visits and that, “the museum visitor experience is neither about visitors nor about museums and exhibitions, but rather it is situated within that unique and ephemeral moment when both of these realities become one and the same - visitors are the museum and the museum is the visitor.”⁸

The museum visitors experience model was created by Falk. This model is framed around visitors identity related motivations and key realities as well as the realities of the museum itself. “The essence of the model is that each museum visit experience is the synthesis of the individual’s identity-related needs and interests and the views of the individual and society of how the museum can satisfy those needs and interests.”⁹

This model forces designers to think of exhibitions as learning resources that can be experienced in innumerable ways for innumerable purposes. Instead of a source designed around content with a singular outcome. We must not think of our audience as a whole. Rather, we should appreciate every unique individual who is capable of having a dramatically different experience from the next. Lastly, we must accept that no matter our intentions, visitors long-term meanings from museums will be based on their short-term identity related interests during that time.

We must shift our design thinking strategies to better attract and build audiences, make museums work towards visitors identity-related needs, and how we define our designs purpose and the measure of its success.

⁸ Ibid, 35.

⁹ Ibid, 36.

Marketing designs must be created with the intention to help potential visitors see that the museum can meet their individual identity-related needs. To do so we must understand identity-related motivations. These desires do not stand alone. Instead, they are, “a cluster of several closely-related types of visitor motivations, each with their own unique identity related needs.”¹⁰ We must escape the strategy of singular promotion. Creating a singular message or image or using only one media outlet is not sufficient enough.

Exhibition designs must be seen as a single unified and intricate system. Rather than individual parts within the museum as a whole. “Specifically we need to move away from thinking about types of visitors to types of visits.”¹¹ Exhibitions shouldn’t have the goal of a singular outcome. Instead, we must think of them as experiences that allow individuals to achieve their many personal missions.

Looking at exhibition design through the lens of identity-related museum motivations makes us redefine our initial purpose and idea of success. With this outlook we can insure not just the success of the design itself, but the success of each individual’s experience.

¹⁰ Ibid, 206.

¹¹ Ibid, 215.

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