

The Dignity Museum

College Park, Georgia
An ongoing traveling exhibition

Addae Moon

A critique is a writer's professional and personal assessment of an exhibition, formed without consulting its creators, and shaped by his or her expertise and experience. Its audience is the profession. Each issue of the journal features a critique of a current or recent exhibition.

The Dignity Museum is an excellent example of an exhibition as immersive experience. Currently housed in a remodeled shipping container (fig. 1) parked in the driveway next to the nonprofit Love Beyond Walls in College Park, Georgia, the museum is an extension of the organization's stated mission: "To raise awareness of societal needs through technology and storytelling, and mobilize people to take part in it."

As a self-described "traveling museum," its current location is of particular importance when it comes to the exploration of narratives about homelessness, poverty, and disenfranchisement that are at the core of the organization's mission. The city of College Park is in the southern portion of the metro-Atlanta area and is about 10 miles from the Beltline, a former railroad corridor that surrounds Atlanta's core. The Beltline is one of Atlanta's development hotspots, and the former working-class communities that surround it have become ripe with gentrification and the displacement that comes with it. It is the ideal location for an exhibition that centers the personal narratives and perspectives that make up the growing, disenfranchised population of those who have found themselves pushed out and poverty stricken.

College Park itself is in transition. There is a small, old-fashioned repair shop to the right of the museum and warehouses up and down the street that surely have developers salivating to exploit the small-town charm of the area. Its main street, across the tracks from the museum, has a growing number of cafés and trendy restaurants, and it won't be long before those markers of transition infest both sides of the street. What might happen to the low-income residents who have lived in this neighborhood for generations during this moment of drastic change? That's one of the questions that the Dignity Museum attempts to address.

Access to the museum is currently by timed tours of no more than 12 visitors, one day per week. We were asked to arrive early, 15 minutes before our scheduled 10 a.m. time. According to the website, the average experience for a visitor is around one hour and 15 minutes. While I was initially concerned with the limited time allotted to explore the exhibition, it later becomes clear that everything about the exhibition's design – even the limited time frame – was intentional.

"Welcome to the Dignity Museum. Before we begin I want to know how everyone is feeling. How does your body feel?" Beth, one of the three volunteers asked us.



Fig. 1. The exterior of the movable shipping container which houses the Dignity Museum.

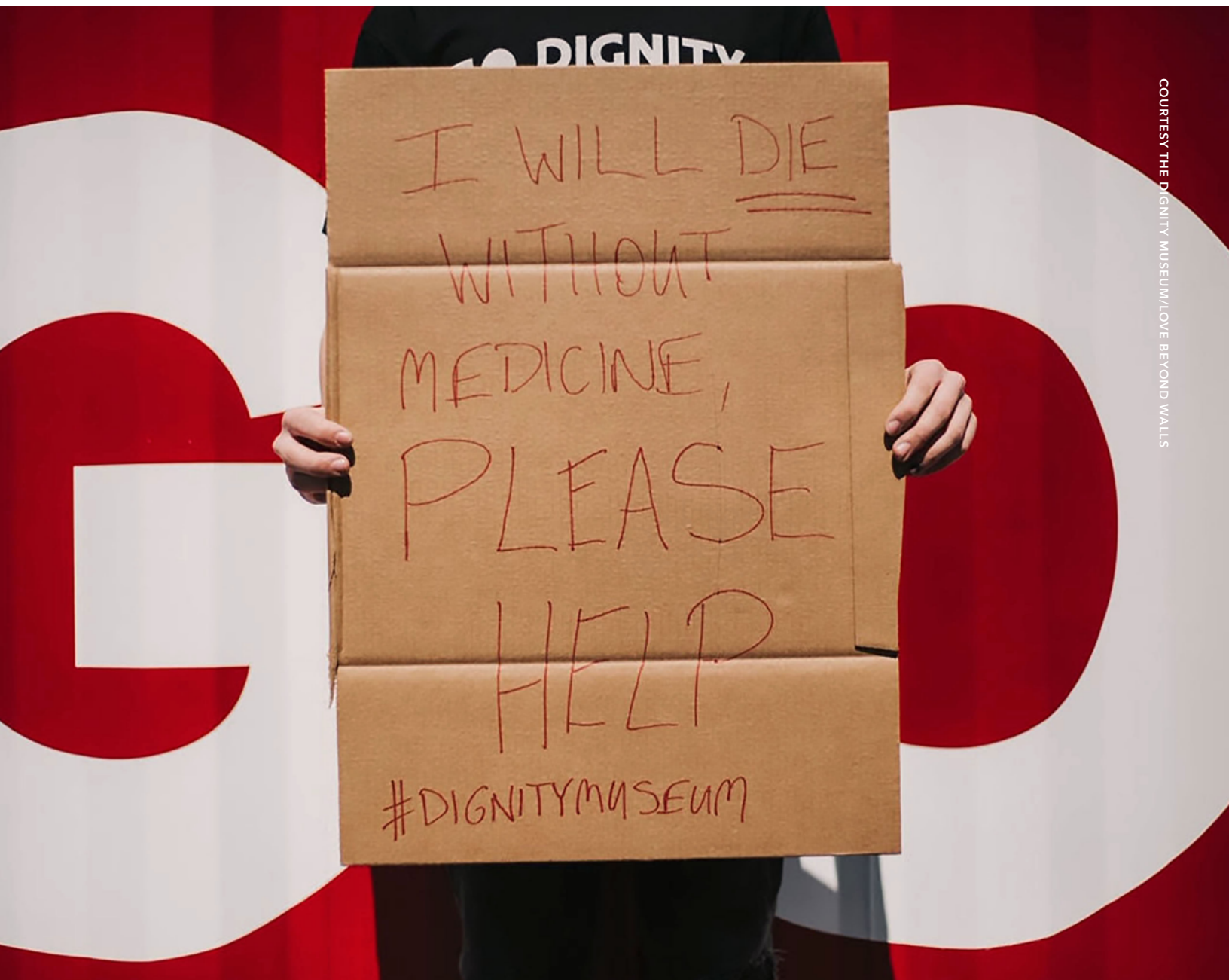


Fig. 2. A visitor shares the sign that was created during one of the immersive exercises.

Fig. 3. A visitor captures the intimate interior of the shipping container that houses the Dignity Museum.

We were standing under a tent, outside of the shipping container that houses the museum, on a humid Wednesday morning. On the surface the question seemed to be innocuous, a typical Southern nicety, but it soon became clear that one of the objectives of this experience was to make visitors more aware of their personal physical and spatial orientation, and how these might differ from those whose daily lives are focused on survival and shelter. On the surface the other visitors, like me, didn't appear to be struggling with the concerns of the people the museum focuses on. "Are we voyeurs? Are we about to engage in an act of poverty porn?" I asked myself. I must admit I was initially uncomfortable with the potential framing of the experience.

Then the volunteers gave each of us a large piece of cardboard and a marker. Our assignment was to create a sign using one of three scenarios:

1. You are a single parent and you need food for your young child.
2. It's a freezing winter day and you need money to make it to a shelter on time.
3. You have a chronic illness and you need money for your medication.

The signs that we were to create, we were told, needed to be precise enough to communicate our desire and fit on the cardboard. They also needed to be phrased in a way to elicit empathy from the person reading it. After we received the instructions,



COURTESY THE DIGNITY MUSEUM/LOVE BEYOND WALLS

all of the visitors looked at each other and exhaled a collective sigh. Furrowed brows. Slouched bodies.

As a person who incorporates the performance-based interpretive practices of museum and immersive theater in my work, the immediate power of this exercise struck at my core. It became visibly obvious that no one in our group had ever created a sign in which our immediate survival depended on how our message was received by a stranger. We spent 15 minutes creating, sharing, and discussing these signs, but we could have spent hours unpacking this extremely simple yet powerful empathy-building exercise. It was the perfect way to prepare us for the narratives we would encounter in the exhibition itself (fig. 2).

The entrance to the windowless shipping container was covered in a collage of images that depicted a diverse group of people, many of whose narratives made up the bulk of the exhibition. As we entered, I became immediately aware of how small the space was (fig. 3). There were four stations with small, notepad-style computers; two large



Fig. 4. One of the museum's volunteers explains the mission of the Dignity Museum and its parent organization, Love Beyond Walls.

monitors; and an air-conditioning unit that managed not to be too distracting. All four walls of the interior were covered in images, data, statistics, and outreach-related information. The design elements were dense, but organized in a way that didn't feel too busy or overly didactic.

A volunteer inside the container told us about the origins of the Dignity Museum and its parent organization, Love Beyond Walls (fig. 4). In 2004, Terence Lester and his wife Celia were distributing clothes to homeless communities on the streets of downtown Atlanta. As they began to encounter people, talk to them, and hear their stories, they realized that having an impact on people's lives wasn't simply about providing them with goods and services. It was also about establishing relationships: it becomes impossible to see human beings as simply a statistic or a demographic when you get to know them and their personal stories. This was the spark that spurred them to create Love Beyond Walls, dedicated to assisting homeless communities with food, housing, counseling and an assortment of other services. In 2013, Terence incorporated the organization as a nonprofit, and, with his family's permission, decided to spend time on the streets as a homeless person. He believed that this would be the best way for him to understand the challenges that homeless people encountered, and through understanding, be able to provide the best possible support for them. Terence's vision for the Dignity Museum was to provide law makers, politicians, educational institutions, and the general public with access to the stories of the human beings that he

encountered while living on the streets of Atlanta.

As the volunteer spoke, my eyes began to wander across the tight, intimate space. I noticed the beautifully detailed photography on the interior walls. There was a black-and-white image of a cherubic white baby in a white bib looking directly at the camera with a slight grin on his face. Above him was a full-color image of a middle-aged Black man in a lavender T-shirt. He had grey stubble beard and a black patch over his right eye. His hand extended towards an out-of-focus five-dollar bill in the foreground of the frame. The images throughout the container's interior were diverse and evocative, showing us the many faces of homeless individuals without succumbing to depictions of romanticism or the coldly journalistic.

The exhibit was divided into three sections, which were also representative of the steps needed to overcome one's personal biases as they relate to both poverty and homelessness: "Challenge Stereotypes," "Create Empathy," and "Inspire Action." The "Challenge Stereotypes" section was heavy in statistical data, but it was also the section that we discussed the most after the experience. For many of us, the realization that 40 percent of homeless people are actually employed – but are not earning a living wage, and therefore can't afford housing – was a light-bulb moment. Most Americans, we learned, are a paycheck or a medical tragedy away from homelessness. One visitor, recently recovering from an illness, was in tears as she talked about how precarious her life was when most of her



money had to be used for medicine and doctor visits.

“Create Empathy” focused on the many disturbing ways that homelessness in this country is criminalized. When we think of the homeless, our minds usually conjure images of people sleeping on park benches, holding signs at interstate exits, or creating communities in tent cities. This section revealed that the majority of homeless arrests are of people sleeping in their own parked cars. Sleeping in your car would seem to be a valid and safe option for a person dealing with shelter anxiety, so why is it against the law? More importantly, why are we not in an uproar that such an option is criminalized? The final section, “Inspire Action,” is where the social-justice focus of the Dignity Museum is on full display, providing the visitor with very specific actions to take (helping the homeless with job opportunities, ways to use technology to find resources) and making sure that as citizens, we hold policy makers accountable for inhumane laws and practices.

Next, we were each given a smartphone, which allowed us to access, and watch, narratives from three of the notebook stations using a QR-code scanner and the earbuds we were asked to bring with us. Even though the smartphones were average sized, the video and audio quality for the stories was excellent. Each of the videotaped interviews ran between seven and 10 minutes and they appeared to be shot on location. One story focused on a man named Ed, a recovering drug addict. While he made no

excuses for his illness, he discussed the challenges of trying to find employment when you do not have a mailing address and you lack consistent access to cellphone service. Another notebook station contained a 20-minute long documentary entitled *Voiceless*, which follows Terence Lester as he walks from Atlanta to Washington, DC to speak at the capital about poverty and homelessness, and the people he meets and stories he collects along the way. The one challenge with the exhibition is that most of the visitors I talked to wanted more time to experience more narratives, but during the two times I attended, there was always another group of people waiting outside for their turn inside the shipping container. As we left the museum, Beth gathered us together beneath the tent.

“So, before we unpack what you have experienced, I want to know, how do you feel physically?” Our responses ranged from drained, fatigued, to anxious. “That’s not surprising,” she said. “You have been on your feet for over an hour. There is no place to sit outside or in the container. Now can you imagine how a homeless person might feel, trying to find a moments rest?”

Intentionality. Even though my experience at the Dignity Museum felt somewhat brief and truncated, I found the intentionality of its experiential design to be extremely impactful. As a person who designs immersive experiences for museums, it has inspired me to think about the many ways that we might use space, physical proximity, and even physical discomfort in an effort



to initiate empathy within the visitor/ spectator while also centering the narrative of disenfranchised citizens. What could have potentially been a voyeuristic and exploitive experience ended up being powerful and transformative, thanks to a clear and well-thought-out immersive design.

As of July 31, 2019, the Dignity Museum is on the road for the first time. Check lovebeyonwalls.org for current and future locations.

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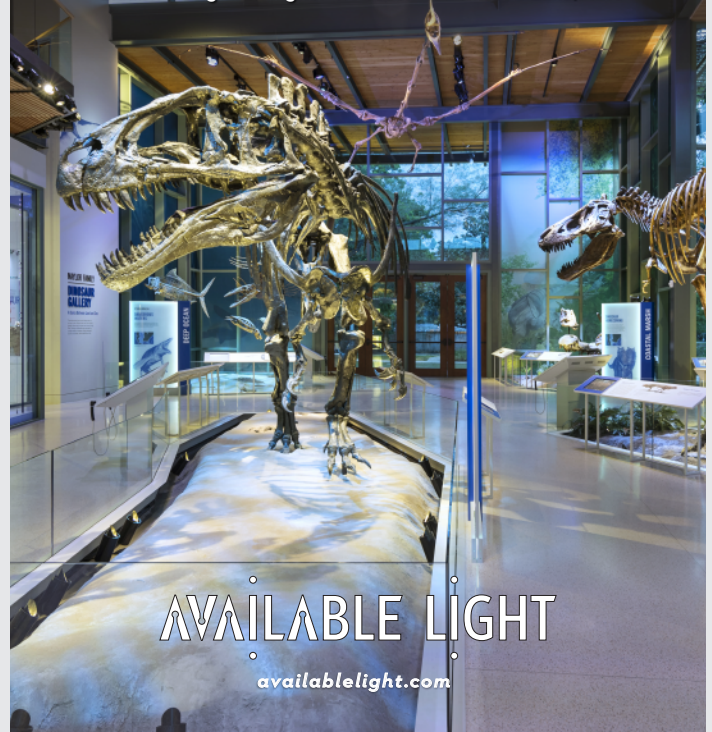
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