

Gretchen Jennings
Editor

Dear Readers,

In this issue we are exploring the concept of exhibitions as “intentionally designed spaces.” We are using the term “exhibitions” as widely as possible—representing all content areas and all types of museums, as well as institutions that display living collections. My “aha” moment with the term “intentionally designed spaces” came a few years ago when I was reading the excellent report on science learning by Philip Bell et al., Learning Science in Informal Spaces (National Academies Press, 2009). Chapter 5, “Science Learning in Designed Spaces” distinguishes between learning science in everyday settings like your back yard or a nearby woods or pond and learning science in spaces that are intentionally designed for this purpose. Years of devising interpretive plans, learning goals, accessible label text, of observing visitors, of tinkering with prototypes—all of this fell into place in light of this simple phrase: intentionally designed spaces. So that’s what we’ve been doing all this time.

The beauty of this phrase is that it can be used to describe a variety of exhibition development processes, not just those in science museums. The Bell report (available for free download or to view online at the National Academies website) has been used as the basis for discussions of intentionally designed spaces in art and history museums as well (See the July 2010 issue of Curator, for example). For me it communicates the essence of the work we do in museums—shaping and molding physical space; selecting and organizing three dimensional objects; developing text, light, color, and sound; incorporating visitor voices and contributions—into experiences where people can engage and change (learn).

One of the best (as well as best documented) examples of intentional design in my experience is the development of the British Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. When I visited the exhibition in 2005 I was impressed by the wide range of innovative design techniques employed to stimulate visitor curiosity, close looking, and engagement with the vast array of decorative arts material on display. It was only later that I found the detailed interpretive plan that undergirded its development. The plan confirmed the care and intentionality that I had intuited in my own experience as a visitor enticed by design into looking, touching, and doing as I made my way through the galleries. You can find this amazingly detailed plan by searching online for the 2002 presentation “Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design” by Gail Durbin, at the time Deputy Director of Learning and Interpretation at the V&A. The plan is also included in the 2004 book Creating the British Galleries at the V&A. After almost 15 years this exhibition, which opened in 2001, still has power to attract and engage, as our critics in this issue attest. That’s the best endorsement I can think of for the concept of “intentionally designed spaces.” We hope to read and discuss your responses to this issue @NAMExhibitions on Twitter or on the NAME Facebook page.

Sincerely,

Gretchen Jennings

from the editor



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