

SIX COMMANDMENTS
OF EXHIBIT DESIGN

LOW FLOOR, HIGH CEILING

Exhibits and museums in general should provide visitors with an easy “in” for both education and participation. Visitors with limited experience with the content shown in a museum should not feel intimidated by their surroundings and should find it easy to engage with and learn about the material. At the same time, more experienced visitors should not feel tied down by the supports that are put in place for their less experienced counterparts and should leave the exhibit with new insights into the content. The key to achieving this delicate balance is to provide a range of experiences, both throughout the museum and within an exhibit. Allow visitors to use a variety of senses and modalities to engage with the material.

NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST

Museums should be immersive yet easily navigable. Visitors should have the feeling of being enveloped in a space and effortlessly make their way through the exhibits, without feeling the stress of frantically searching for a bathroom. Clear signage should be used in order to direct visitors to changing exhibits. Designing exhibit halls so they connect is also creates a continuous experience.

IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

One statement that is commonly overheard in museums, particularly of the modern art variety, is, "What's the big deal? I could make that." It's clear this visitor is missing out on the context of what they are seeing. In order to avoid this confusion and oversimplification, designers should provide visitors with the context of what is displayed in an exhibit. For example, why is that canvas painted a solid shade of blue important? How does it relate to other paintings made at the time? How did it influence the art that came after? In other words, visitors need to know what they're looking at. One way to do this is to provide a narrative to explain the context of an exhibit. Fleshing out the characters that make up this narrative encourages visitors to think about what they are seeing as it relates to their own personal experiences.

REAL THING-NESS

In these modern times when most things are accessible and searchable online, it is important for museums to emphasize experiences that can't happen at home or online. Whether it is emphasizing the scale of an artifact or providing a participatory experience, museums should do their best to differentiate the objects in their exhibit halls from the digital copies of those objects. Another important function of museums is to expose visitors to content they might not otherwise be aware of. As some say, you don't know what you don't know. And there is no way to Google what you don't know. In order to capitalize on this, museums should push to show exhibits on new content that has not been seen before or that features a new interpretation of a concept.

USE TECHNOLOGY STRATEGICALLY

Museums should not be seduced into using fancy new technologies just for their inherent sexiness. It's possible that these technologies may become out of date and thus embarrassing in a few short years. Even worse, this newfangled technology might be so cool that it distracts from the goals, educational or otherwise, of the exhibit. In order to avoid this pitfall, museums should think carefully about what the goals are for a given exhibit and use whatever means best support this goal, whether it's technology or something more old-fashioned.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN

It is good practice for museums to think about designing for their entire audience, including those with disabilities. Creating new ways for audiences with disabilities to experience content can also influence how those visitors without disabilities engage with an exhibit. For example, designing an exhibit that allows visitors with low vision to experience visual art through sound or even touch will also allow sighted visitors to experience this content in a new and memorable way.