

Should Exhibit Designers Professionalize?

by David James Whitemyer

Tucked away in the poorly lit back closet of our office, near a box of spray adhesives and adjacent to the decommissioned Waxmaster, is a dusty file drawer labeled "Resumés." I recently took the opportunity to shuffle through the folder of old job applicants, curious about the varying experience and skill levels of my colleagues and competitors—the ones who never made it into this small exhibit design firm.

Where did these job seekers come from? What did they have to offer? And what similarities did I have with them? In all honesty, I was just looking for an ego boost. What was it in my resumé that made me a better candidate?

Paging through the pile of resumés—altering in shades of off-white and stock weights, all with matching envelopes—I was humbly reminded of the impressive diversity of backgrounds from which we, as exhibit professionals, come from.

The question surfaces often in many fields, including exhibit design: Should there be a professional criterion to which all exhibit designers should adhere before they be allowed to publicly practice in the exhibition business? In the introduction for her book *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*, Kathleen McLean states, "The field lacks clear professional standards and offers few comprehensive training programs."

The argument on behalf of professional standards usually arises from one of two scenarios. It comes up when we witness an exhibition that is unsuccessful, unattractive, or unsafe. How easy it is for us to raise our noses and scoff at the museum display created by an untrained "designer." Or worse, the standard is taken up when we see beautiful and successful exhibitions built from the minds of architects, interior designers, or industrial designers, and we feel justifiably threatened.

In the United States it is against the law to advertise yourself as a medical doctor or lawyer without the appropriate registration. It is improper to place the word *Architect* after your name without a state license.

Yet, looking through our stack of resumés, I frequently spotted *Exhibit Designer* written as a title, regardless of the person's schooling or past experience. In one case, the applicant was still in college. And in another, a museum employee had helped to develop a small exhibition and had done some writing for a related publication. Both called themselves Exhibit Designers.

A Matter of Degree?

There are presently only a scattering of universities that offer any type of museum exhibit design or planning program. An increasing number of design schools are beginning to offer one or two exhibition planning courses. As more and more colleges begin to add exhibit-related courses to their curriculum, such courses may become expected precursors to entering the field.

This may be a disappointment to, for instance, the young man currently enrolled in a political science

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program who finds, after graduating, that he has a knack for capturing the minds of young children with his visual displays of scientific principles. Or to the talented woman who after graduating high school went to work building cabinets for a fabricator but discovers an ability to envision inviting and educational three-dimensional spaces. Should these people be excluded in practicing exhibit design simply because they lack the educational requirements of our related associations and organizations?

I enjoy the wide assortment of personalities and experiences of my co-workers. In the exhibit design field, where you are always learning something new, be it about the history of prairie dogs, the art of Gauguin, the workings of fiberoptics, or whatever the topic of the day, it helps to have the support and input of so many different minds.

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The Argument for Multidisciplinarity

One of our copywriters was educated in forestry. One of our exhibit developers has a degree in landscape architecture. It is the variety of personal contexts that adds so much to the success of each project. A person with a degree in forestry has a very different thought process from one who was educated in exhibit design or museum studies and took forestry courses as a side interest. When an exhibition is required to communicate something as specific as, say, the evolution of Euclidean geometry or the 19th-century slaughter of bison, it is vital to have many types of thinkers readily available in the office. And it is a closed mind that believes only an appropriately trained exhibit designer can, in a three-dimensional fashion, present this information successfully.

My educational background is in architecture. In school, I was somewhat turned off by the rigid professionalism and exclusion that the field of building design offered. It created a large clique of automatons that were only able to think, write, and converse in terms of architecture. In exhibit design, I find just the opposite. Every day is a gathering basket of new information from differently trained minds. And that is what is so appealing.

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Multidisciplinarity is an essential aspect of successful exhibit design offices. A group of workers with identical training and similar educational backgrounds will create stale, unimaginative spaces. An ideal preparation for future designers cannot be defined by a grouping of college courses. The cultivation of well-learned exhibit specialists cannot be achieved by the requisites drawn out in a syllabus. Many voices sharing different opinions is what creates successful design.

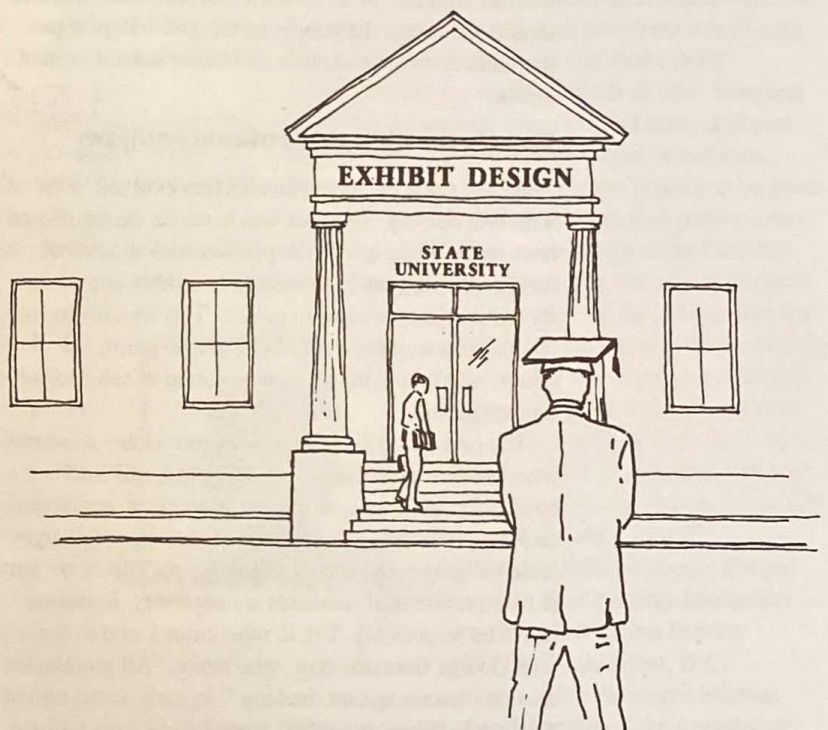
Learning the Ropes

In architecture, as in medicine and some other occupations, a certain type of apprenticeship is required before practice is allowed. The concept of apprenticeship was born from the medieval crafts guild, where vocational training was the only formal education a young person ever received.

Our modern-day equivalent of medieval apprenticeship is internship, a rite of passage for many professionals that usually begins immediately following school. Our interns are usually energetic young graduates doing lots of work in various areas and, like their medieval predecessors, receiving little or no pay.

The architecture profession has created the IDP (Intern-Architect Development Program), which specifies 14 different training areas that the entry-level architect must be exposed to before becoming eligible to take the registration exam.

There is no comparable process to the IDP for exhibit development and museum space-planning. When applying for a job, an entry-level exhibit designer is usually expected to have certain skills that can, and will, be developed further, such as drawing, writing, three-dimensional thinking, and a basic knowledge of production. It is management's responsibility to determine—most often with only trust and assumption to go on—that the person being hired is somewhat familiar with the tasks required of them. This doesn't always work out. I have seen a few graphic designers become frustrated or even leave the job because their experience in print work left them unprepared for exhibition



work. I have often found myself a bit frightened and embarrassed because of my unfamiliarity with certain building materials.

Illustration by David James Whitemyer.

The Importance of Dirt under the Fingernails

The Bauhaus school of thought stressed the importance of getting dirt under your fingernails as key to learning about design. Students were encouraged to take up a trade, such as metal-working or plaster-forming, and learn how objects are constructed. Only then, it was believed, would they excel as designers.

My experience suggests that students who spend their summers on construction sites seem to become

better designers than the ones who spend it with pencil in hand. Perhaps a year or two spent in a fabrication house, mixing paints and cutting acrylic, should be suggested to young designers looking to enter the exhibition field.

Which Course to Follow?

So, what should be considered proper training for an exhibit professional?

In an *Exhibitionist* interview ["On Being an Exhibit Designer," spring 1996], Ralph Appelbaum answered a similar question by saying, "Read, travel—literature, human experiences. Really engage yourself in what the world is like."

Much more is needed in displaying ideas than just technical expertise and good design skills. In a well-managed office, apprenticeship will occur naturally. It is a good idea for a young designer to have a mentor, whether formally or informally. Managers and mentors should encourage the people under their wings to pursue other interests and other outlets for exhibit-related topics.

The Tyrannies of Professionalism

The concept of professionalization evolved in the mid-19th century. The idea was to create career-related laws meant to designate the persons who should be considered adequately trained and credibly competent for the jobs they wished to pursue. This idea excluded others from working in the field. It also permitted groups of workers in the same vocation to achieve public recognition.

The first occupations to define professional standards were lawyers, physicians, and the clergy, followed quickly by architects, nurses, social workers, engineers, dentists, and more. In cases such as medicine and large-scale building construction, where people's lives are put at risk, professional standards are necessary. Someone has to be responsible. Yet, in most cases I tend to agree with George Bernard Shaw, who wrote, "All professions are conspiracies against the laity." As early as the turn of the century, Shaw and others were doubting the fairness and necessity of professionalism.

It might be too early in the evolution of our chosen profession to worry about such "conspiracies," but one can anticipate dangers. In *Rethinking the Museum*, Stephen Weil wrote, "the practitioners of the professions may themselves actually prescribe and monitor the preparatory training for the field, control the entry of new practitioners, and not only promulgate standards of achievement and conduct, but also enforce these standards by imposing sanctions upon those who violate them."

The question keeps entering my mind: who will watch the watchman?

Even ignoring the threat and unfairness of reduced competition, enforceable standards for exhibit design do not seem possible. Ours is a business that requires many

schools of thought and types of minds. Again, as in internship, the desired "standards" must rest with those doing the hiring and firing.

Tyranny vs. Anarchy?

Without professionalization and without a well-defined criterion to which we should aspire, how do we control the field and separate the exhibit designers from the Exhibit Designers?" Or is a separation even necessary? Are the untrained designers making us look bad? And are the other non-exhibit-related designers stealing our projects?

Such questions pop up at work and at gatherings. In the constant bettering of ourselves in our careers, we sometimes feel incomplete and inadequate because we lack the certification so many other vocations require. We yell "no fair" when we think respect is due and none is given.

Kathleen McLean warns against taking such concerns too far, saying, "The level of exhibit professionalism must be raised, but we must also take care not 'professionalize' ourselves into a specialized corner."

Taking Ownership

At this stage in our field's development, perhaps the most useful way to keep ourselves out of a specialized corner is to claim more personal responsibility in our careers, and to not sit back, waiting for rules to be implanted by our various associations. This requires us to expend energy educating ourselves, our prospective clients, and students interested in the business, about what an exhibit designer *is* and what "standards" we demand from our colleagues.

It is the outstanding diversity of our backgrounds, specialties, and interests that will restrain us from ever achieving any type of "professionalization." But that is also the treasure that makes exhibition design so intriguing and so fun.

The control of our field and the respect we so much desire will be achieved not by good rules but, rather, by good work.

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