Chapter 19

On Exhibition Graphics Understood as a Space-Related Interface

Aurelia Bertron
Bertron Schwarz Frey Studios, Germany

ABSTRACT

Exhibition projects created by Bertron Schwarz Frey follow strong design principles built on the triad “content – form – meaning”. The exhibition as a medium works within two main disciplines, design and architecture, the former of which is the main focus here. A deeper understanding of exhibition-graphics methods and possibilities is provided by examining three specific questions and taking a closer look at some of the exhibition projects designed by the author’s studio, including the Mendelssohn House of Music in Leipzig, the ZEISS Museum of Optics in Oberkochen Germany and the Museum of Natural History Berlin.

INTRODUCTION

In general, exhibitions consist of object presentations and information about these objects, with the intention to enable understand the objects in a broader context. In designing an exhibition, one must work not only with three-dimensional elements, but also with two-dimensional ones, such as graphics, typography, moving images and nowadays often also interactive media. That is, designing an exhibition is about designing information in space. As a discipline, exhibition design is something between interior architecture, design and visual communication.

Within exhibition design, exhibition graphics is a highly specialized discipline with its own methods and possibilities. Designers who are trained to produce printed matter need to learn how to use their knowledge about typography, text-picture relations, information hierarchies, legibility and explanatory depictions such as diagrams, maps, illustrations and photographs for the purposes of exhibition-design work. Exhibition graphics are space-related and follow their own rules. Exhibitions have two fundamental goals: to display objects and to tell stories. (Bertron, Schwarz & Frey, 2012)

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Exhibitions need to provide information, meet didactic goals and please and entertain their visitors. In a perfect world, an exhibition satisfies all of these requirements and delivers a unique experience with rich insights and awareness that is only possible through the special relationship of information and space.

Exhibitions also need to be “graphic”. Exhibition graphics are visible – and sometimes invisible – layers of information within an exhibition. The information layer usually consists of a more or less visible tableau. Information can also appear as digital media and provoke playful interactivity, especially in contemporary exhibition design. The purpose of an information layer is to support the content, but exhibition graphics can themselves become the content; in that case there is nothing for them to be layered onto.

This chapter focuses on museum presentations that aspire to do more than just put their exhibits on display – which strive to recognize the exhibition as a medium to facilitate knowledge. Their subjects can be of a cultural, historical or scientific nature. Studying the background of exhibition design and especially exhibition graphics makes it possible to develop a comprehensive understanding of how to create exhibitions of all kinds – permanent or temporary, at museums or in public places and about different subjects.

This chapter reflects the understanding of exhibition graphics not from the perspective of a scholar, but from that of a practitioner.

BACKGROUND

Museums are among the most successful media in our “information-society” – even more successful than libraries, theaters and universities. (Korff, 2008)

At a museum, the exhibition is the interface between the visitor and the museum – its collections, depots and research. In the contemporary era, the classical nineteenth- and twentieth-century conception of the museum, according to which museum directors and curators understood their task to be to collect and preserve objects of cultural history, has been transformed. Today, the museum tends to be a public forum that reaches a broad swathe of the population. Visiting an exhibition is considered to be a good use of leisure time, and some exhibitions are almost overrun with visitors.

As an exhibition designer for museums, one has to ask oneself: what is it that visitors are so fascinated with? First of all, they are fascinated with stories. The story itself is the fascination – but only if it is told well. The right question might be: how does one tell a good story? There are several means:

- **Language:** talk, speech or theater
- **Writing:** narrative, poem, documentary or fiction
- **Sequel:** film, TV or computer

But the museum – and this makes it unique – tells its stories by means of its objects, mostly original objects from its own collection.

To delineate the context of the discussion, only a few stepping stones are necessary, and the 1980’s might be a good place to start. At that time, an interesting development emerged: the recognition of the museum as a place of education. The design attitude was consequently on the side of pedagogy. It was very important to be as explanatory as possible and to do, or show, nothing without having a good reason
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