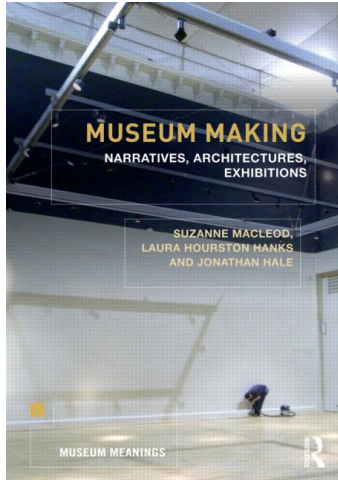


The Museum as *Discursive Space*

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The problem of how cultural institutions can reconnect with the public and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life has been at the forefront of discussions between scholars, designers and professionals working in the area of museum studies. In recent years museums have attempted to reinvent and reinvigorate themselves in order to attract visitors and survive economic turmoil. Alongside an emphasis on the creation of large-scale *spectacles*, there has also been a need to reconnect with the visitor on a more intimate level and to design more personally meaningful exhibitions. This refocusing – partly achieved by the production of exhibitions addressing key social, cultural and historical themes -- allows for the elaboration of the museum as a social instrument, as a participant in a dialogue with the visitor and hence as a *discursive space*.

While current visitors to cultural institutions seem to demand a more sense-rich, emotionally engaging and personally relevant experience, the rise of social media has also altered people's expectations of what makes experiences meaningful and memorable. People expect to be allowed the privilege of actively identifying and redistributing cultural content for themselves, not just passively consuming it within the framework set out by the institution. Through self-direction and in response to the increasingly interactive media that they are familiar with, museum visitors seek opportunities for creative expression and engagement. They want their own unique identities and interests to be acknowledged, while they recognize and connect to likeminded communities around the world. These shifts are changing the way that cultural institutions of all types, public or private, from museums to libraries to experiential environments, express themselves to - and communicate with - their ever more demanding audiences.

The challenge for the studio is to identify a museum or gallery space in the Ottawa area that offers the potential to become a 'discursive museum space', and to redesign it to address some of the key issues highlighted above. The research and design phases of the project should be carried out in groups of two. The design proposal could potentially consist of either or both an interior and exterior space; a combination of spatial, graphic or multimedia elements; or an entirely virtual reconfiguration of an existing space using mobile digital or analogue technologies. The goal is to create a space of cultural discourse where multiple dialogues can begin to take place - between the institution, the spaces and the people within.

A selection of the work produced in the studio will be presented at the conference *Discursive Space: Breaking Barriers to Effective Communication in the Museum*, to take place at Ryerson University, Toronto, June 21st-23rd 2013. The call for papers (from which much of the wording above is taken) can be found at www.discursivepace.com. This event is the result of a collaboration with conference organiser Dr Jana Macalik and follows on from two previous conferences in related areas, *Creative Space* (2005) and *Narrative Space* (2010), both co-hosted by the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, and the Department of Architecture and Built Environment, University of Nottingham.

STRUCTURE AND SCHEDULE (6-Week Studio):

Due to the limited time available and the intensity of research and design work required, the studio will be structured around weekly tasks and targets – new tasks will be set each Monday and reviewed the following Monday. The final review will take place on Friday 15th February.

Week 1: Museum visits: In groups of two, you should visit at least one museum in the Ottawa area - choose one that deals with a theme that you know will interest you. Select two specific galleries or themed exhibitions within the museum and make notes, sketches and diagrams to explain how they 'tell their stories'. You should be looking particularly for interesting examples of problems with their narratives, such as inconsistency, contradiction, uncertainty, neglect, bias, etc. Also, look for clues ('between the lines') suggesting stories that have been left untold or even suppressed. Compare and contrast the approaches taken in the design, layout and curator's interpretation of the material presented in the two spaces, and select one of these exhibitions as the theme for your design project to be developed in the remaining weeks.

REVIEW: Monday 14th January 1.30pm.

Week 2: Theme Research: Continuing in groups of two (either the same groups, or switch partners if you prefer), and having decided on the theme of your exhibition, conduct a process of research into the stories, narratives, and voices you wish to include in your exhibition – this may be a combination of historic narratives to be presented and contemporary (i.e. visitors') narratives to be engaged. Remember, you are aiming to create a new kind of exhibition experience – a space of discourse, dialogue, debate and difference. Record and present these narratives in notes, sketches, diagrams, sound/video clips etc., ready to begin design work on your exhibition space. **REVIEW: Monday 21st January 1.30pm.**

Week 3: Exhibition Script or Storyboard: Using a combination of diagrams, visualisations, text captions, sound recordings etc., develop a concept and vision for your exhibition experience as both a 'narrative environment' and a 'discursive environment' – a place of multiple, overlaid and sometimes conflicting voices – a place where historic dialogues can be rehearsed and reconfigured and where contemporary voices can be engaged and incorporated. **REVIEW: Monday 28th January 1.30pm.**

Week 4: 'Design Week 1': In developing a detailed design for your exhibition space remember to think 'outside the box', i.e. your experience may not necessarily be contained within the architectural frame of a single gallery space - it could be fragmented into a series of smaller interventions distributed around the museum, engaging and disrupting the existing 'readings' of other exhibits or spaces. It could even extend beyond the boundaries of the museum building itself, perhaps interfering in or 'irritating' the life of the surrounding city. **REVIEW: Monday 4th February 1.30pm.**

Week 5: 'Design Week 2: The design work should now be developed to include any relevant 'ephemeral' material, such as museum/galleries maps or guides; interpretive text, graphics and other supporting media; mobile digital/audio devices; websites, apps or other online resources etc., that could be important elements of a 'discursive' and interactive visitor experience.

Week 6: Final Presentation Week: Tutorials for presentation work will take place on Monday and Wednesday. You will need to produce enough material to outline a clear vision for your exhibition space(s), including both a convincing architectural strategy plus a range of supporting material to be included in the museum visitors' experience. **Final Review: Friday 15th February at 1.30pm.**