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metodický text | methodical text

Ulrich Schwarz

Three Principles of Exhibition Design

»Museums are among the most successful media in our “information-society” – even more successful than libraries, theaters and universities.«¹

At a museum, the interface between the visitor and the museum – is the exhibition. In this sense, the exhibition works as a medium

with an interface for the collections, depots and research.

The contemporary museum has transformed the classical conception of the museum of the 19th and 20th centuries, according to which museum directors and curators understood their task to be collecting and preserving objects of cultural history.

The museum nowadays tends to be a public forum that reaches a broad swathe of the population. A visit to an exhibition counts as a good use of leisure time, and some exhibitions are almost overrun with visitors.

As an exhibition designer for museums, I have to ask myself: what is it that visitors are so fascinated in?

First of all, they are fascinated in stories. The story itself is the fascination – but only if it is told well. The right question is: **how do you 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.

FIRST PRINCIPLE

Respect the Objects

As I already mentioned, the essence of the museum is to tell stories. And these stories have to attract the public: they have to be appealing, and to arouse our interest by creating thrilling moments. The first principle, then, is: **never show an object in an exhibition if it has nothing to tell.**

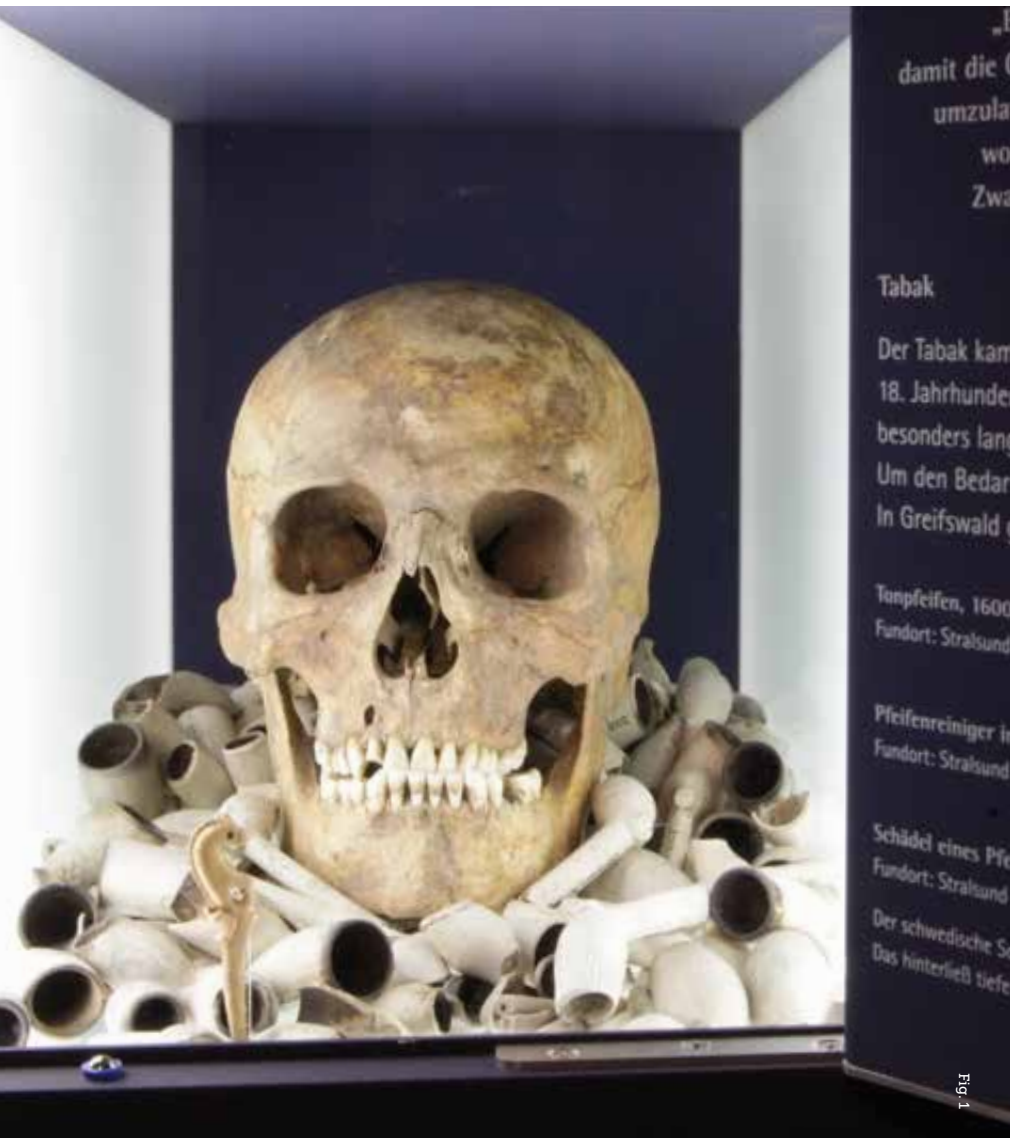


Fig. 1

¹ KORFF, Gottfried. Sechs Emdner Thesen zur Rolle des Museums in der Informationsgesellschaft. *Museumskunde*, 2008, vol. 73, iss. 2, p. 19. ISSN 0027-4178.



Fig. 2



Fig. 1 – *Skull of a soldier*,
Pomeranian Museum Greifswald²

The skull does not tell the story “smoking is dangerous; it can kill you,” but instead stands for the growing tobacco industry in 18th-century Pomerania. It says smoking became popular. And there is a little sub-story: they smoked tobacco with white clay pipes, and you can see where the pipe stuck in his face.

Fig. 2 – *Thirty Years’ War, 17th century*,
Pomeranian Museum Greifswald³

Because the objects are not delicate, I think it is acceptable to arrange them in a more scenographic way. The lighting and arrangement of the display reveal a story of power and pride, nemesis and death, military order and the chaos of the battlefield.

The lighting creates a spatial depth, like an abstract landscape before dawn. It is

somewhat reminiscent of the stage setting in the epilogue to a drama.

Fig. 3 – *Croy Tapestry*,
Pomeranian Museum Greifswald⁴

This story is about the period of the Reformation in Northern Germany. The tapestry tells the story in picture form. It looks like a 16th-century comic strip. Today nobody understands the meaning of these pictures.

² *Projektfeld Ausstellung: eine Typologie für Ausstellungsgestalter, Architekten und Museologen/ Project scope: exhibition design: a typology for architects, designers and museum professionals.* Basel, Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2012. 480 p. ISBN 978-3-0346-0687-5.

³ *Projektfeld Ausstellung: eine Typologie für Ausstellungsgestalter, Architekten und Museologen/ Project scope: exhibition design: a typology for architects, designers and museum professionals.* Basel, Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2012. 480 p. ISBN 978-3-0346-0687-5.

⁴ *Projektfeld Ausstellung: eine Typologie für Ausstellungsgestalter, Architekten und Museologen/ Project scope: exhibition design: a typology for architects, designers and museum professionals.* Basel, Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2012. 480 p. ISBN 978-3-0346-0687-5.

You might recognize Martin Luther – but who the hell are the others around him?

The story needs an explanation, which can be provided by an audio guide in various languages.

Synchronized lighting moves over the tapestry and illuminates exactly the part of the tapestry being explained by the audio guide.

Waistcoat and dinnerware of King Wilhelm II, the last king of Württemberg, shown at the State Museum in Stuttgart.

The objects tell us something about history, royal clothing and accessories, and at the same time something about his physique and what caused it to get that way.

Sometimes it is nice to tell a story with a hint of humor.

SECOND PRINCIPLE

Respect the Building

Sometimes the building itself becomes an exhibition object if it is a historically important monument or building.

Usually these are protected heritage buildings, as with the Museum of Natural History in Berlin.

But contemporary architecture is also able to achieve the character or status of an exhibition-object.

Fig. 4 – Exhibition segment *The 19th Century, Jewish Museum Berlin*⁵

The building of the Jewish Museum in Berlin can be understood as a monument. The architecture of Daniel Libeskind can be recognized as an exhibition object.

I remember when the building was first opened to the public. Basic construction had just been completed, but the interior was still empty. Nothing but empty spaces. That was incredibly impressive and beautiful. But certainly it couldn't stay that way. The museum could not remain without an exhibition.

Würth and Winderoll Design created the interior, from the first sketch to the opening, in only a year. The exhibition design tried to match the

design language of Daniel Libeskind and please the curators at the same time. The curators wanted to show objects as much as possible. Therefore, the designers had to conceal the windows with light walls and dense plain curtains.

In 2001, the museum decided to have the exhibition evaluated. The result showed that one segment of the exhibition – *The 19th Century: Jewish and German at the Same Time* – was not at all understood by visitors.

Consequently, the museum tendered a competition to redesign this part of the exhibition.

The **BERTRON SCHWARZ FREY design concept** won by proposing the following elements:

- make the Libeskind architecture visible
- re-open the misaligned windows
- keep the exhibition elements away from the walls
- use only one object for every theme
- make use of new media

That is what I understood by “respect the building and its architecture.”

As a second example, I would like to show the Museum of Natural History in Berlin. This is a historic monument built in 1889.

⁵ BERTRON, Aurelia, Ulrich SCHWARZ and Claudia FREY. *Ausstellungen entwerfen/ Designing Exhibitions: Kompendium für Architekten, Gestalter und Museologen/ A Compendium for Architects, Designers and Museum Professionals*. Basel, Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2012. ISBN 978-3-0346-0717-9.



Wir sind ein Volk
We are a people, one people
EIN VOLK

baptized and it doesn't help me

GET



Textual information or labels associated with the exhibit, partially visible on the right wall.





Fig. 4

It was impossible to build immersive scenery à la Jurassic Park. The London Museum of Natural History could not serve as an example. A better model was the new Dinosaur Halls at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

But the exhibition should not be too serious. It shouldn't be boring. So a little bit of entertainment and excitement should be allowed. New media are better able to produce a reconstruction of Jurassic times than is a stage setting, which is more reminiscent of an amusement park. – We are still in a museum, not on a ghost train.

“Respect the building” means respect the historic interior as well. The historic display cabinets date to the 19th century. We decided to restore them and add a new climate technique and fiberglass lighting. The new glass made the display cabinets dustproof.

Some 2,500 objects deliver a vivid picture of biodiversity. There are no labels inside the display cabinets, which contain only the fascinating objects. Labels are positioned outside, on a gigantic slide readable with a magnifying glass.

THIRD PRINCIPLE

Respect the Visitor

There are real experts among them. Do not underestimate them.

Especially the young. They show real interest, and they are at home with the subject.

Especially when it comes to dinosaurs.

Fig. 5 – Exhibition segment *Jurassic period*, Museum of Natural History Berlin⁶

Thanks to boys like him (picture) the need to renovate the exhibition was discussed. Pupils often complained that the Brachiosaurus stood on his bowlegs in the old exhibition.

Exhibition designer, please put the human being, with its possibilities, needs, and wishes, in the middle of all your design considerations.

It is not about a nice design.

It is not about stuffing as many objects as possible into the exhibition.

It is not about winning the Golden Architecture or Design Award.

It is all about storytelling. It is about communication – communication with or through objects.

This is what is behind the new exhibition at Mendelssohn-House Leipzig, with its historical living rooms of the composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and his family; with its original objects, sheets of music, travel notes and pictures.

It is about the life and work of the famous composer.

It is about understanding music and feeling music through a fascinating contemporary media installation.

To finish my presentation, I would like to show you some pictures of the ZEISS Museum of Optics.

Fig. 6 – Exhibition *ZEISS Museum of Optics*, Oberkochen

The opening was in July this year – with Buzz Aldrin as the special guest of honor. He was, together with Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon. And a live twitter with Alexander Gerst from the ISS space station more than 400 km above the earth.

There are also **other not completely unessential principles:**

- **respect the subject**
- and ... **respect the commissioner** – last but not least, he or she contributes something really essential

The commissioner is the principal and makes the project possible. ■

⁶ *Projektfeld Ausstellung: eine Typologie für Ausstellungsgestalter, Architekten und Museologen/ Project scope: exhibition design: a typology for architects, designers and museum professionals.* Basel, Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2012. 480 p. ISBN 978-3-0346-0687-5.



Fig. 6