

TIMOTHY J. MCNEIL – RESEARCH STATEMENT

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RESEARCH FOCUS

My creative practice and writing explores the exhibition space as a medium for the effective communication of objects, information and narratives. This research results in the design of engaging storytelling environments, participatory experiences, and accessible content that informs, educates and inspires people of all ages and backgrounds. I advance the exhibition field by investigating and documenting the philosophical approaches to design functionality and aesthetics, the multiple methods used to relay information and hold a viewer's/participant's attention, and its impact on communities and audience engagement. My creative research work seeks to define exhibition design in relation to the curatorial process, and to prove that the contribution design makes is equally a measure of a successful exhibition, and at the core of meaningful visitor interactions. Three avenues of inquiry run concurrently through my research and creative projects:

- Contribution design plays in the communication of objects, ideas and information in a museum or exhibition environment
- Strategies for meaningful audience engagement with an emphasis on the interpretative exhibition experience
- Environmental sustainability and its impact on the functionality and aesthetics of exhibition design

The majority of my projects are connected to the design of exhibition related environments, resulting from collaborative partnerships with specialists, curators and other designers. Each project has been peer reviewed or subjected to critique in accordance with the typical exhibition design and development process. I take great pride in knowing that my creative work has an impact on the experiences of countless individuals, the average attendance for exhibitions that I design can range from two to two hundred thousand visitors.

The exhibition design and development process is highly complex. I often equate it to staging a theatrical performance or creating a feature length film, except that the show goes on for several months or years rather than several hours. A large exhibition involves the skills of many experts, and the orchestration of elements that are unpredictable and costly. When an exhibition opens, the audience isn't captive, visitors don't sit quietly in rows, but meander in all directions touching, leaning and physically engaging with the built environment. If the exhibition is well planned they will stay for a while, and if they do, they will want to feel at ease. The space must be conducive to comfort, not too crowded, aesthetically pleasing and captivating. Objects should be visible and safe; information succinct, engaging, and easy to read; interactive elements and media functional. If you've got it right, a visitor will walk away from the exhibition having experienced an object or an idea that will stay with them forever.

Exhibition design continues to defy easy categorization and tends to be relegated to a subset of architecture or graphic design. I consider the field one of the most trans-disciplinary of the design disciplines, weaving together a blend of architectural, industrial, lighting, furniture, new media, and graphic design, with human centered design, storytelling techniques and curatorial rigor. The creative results are expressed in a variety of mediums and formats, from concept sketches and technical drawings, to scale models and construction details, and the end results can be fleeting or long term depending on the permanence of the exhibition or project. I seek projects that forge collaborative peer-to-peer partnerships with respected museum directors, curators, specialists, educators and designers. I immerse myself in the exhibition story, and then work with the curatorial team to facilitate a vision for the exhibition. The line between the curator and the designer is frequently blurred as the conceptual ideas take shape. The theoretical motives behind a project drive my creative direction, and I select exhibitions based on their intellectual merits and potential to further the exhibition design field. I strive to be both the content and visitor advocate, and to make the exhibition meaningful and accessible for people of all shapes, sizes and abilities. I make sure that interpretive experiences are seamlessly integrated into the exhibition environment, don't look like an afterthought, the objects and ideas retain their integrity, and that the design serves as either an appropriate backdrop to enhance, or come forward sufficiently to interpret the exhibition content.

UC DAVIS DESIGN MUSEUM

Since 2005, I have served as the Director of the UC Davis Design Museum. The Museum is uniquely positioned to investigate the term “design” within a research university setting. The Museum and Collection enhance and support the teaching and research activities of the UC Davis Department of Design, exploring how design shapes, improves and makes economically viable the objects, technology and environments we use, inhabit and experience every day. The museum exhibits national and international design-related materials including architecture, fashion, textiles, graphics, new media, product, furniture and lighting. The Design Museum contains a global collection of over 5,000 ethnographic textiles and fashion related objects, and constitutes one of the pre-eminent teaching collections on the west coast of America.

In contrast to other disciplines, there are few dedicated national venues for collecting and exhibiting design. The museum establishes standards for curating and exhibiting design related materials and objects, and is a laboratory for experimental exhibition design and interpretation. As the museum director, I foster a substantive exhibition program to feature the work of innovative designers, explore current design issues, showcase the design collection, and use the museum as a teaching resource; the programming complements the department of design curriculum, faculty curate exhibitions, student assignments are linked to the exhibition themes, and undergraduate and graduate students design and curate installations.

TEACHING FOCUS

The UC Davis Department of Design is one of few in the nation with both undergraduate (B.A.) and graduate (M.F.A.) tracks in Exhibition Design. I am the thesis advisor for graduate students researching exhibition related design theory, criticism and practice. The focus of this specialization is to advance the academic understanding of exhibition design and in turn elevate current professional practice. The undergraduate exhibitions concentration at UC Davis introduces students to a series of upper division courses in exhibition design and environmental graphic design. The curriculum explores the communication of objects, information and ideas across a variety of cultural, commercial and entertainment exhibition environments. I am the dedicated instructor for courses DES185 (Exhibition Design), DES186 (Environmental Graphics), DES187A (Narrative Environments), DES191 (Design Museum Practicum), and DES187B summer abroad program (Design in Europe: Inside and Outside the Museum Walls). Student projects are executed using a professional design studio model that includes written research and a rigorous process of creative ideation, critical thinking and technical design skills. Working collaboratively is strongly encouraged, and I actively seek service-learning opportunities to pair students with on-campus and off-campus community projects, these have included the Crocker Art Museum, UC Davis West Village, Sacramento Zoo, City of Davis, York Museums Trust, National Railway Museum U.K., National Museum of Scotland, and Central St. Martins School of Art and Design in London. Such invaluable experiences reinforce the highly collaborative nature of the design process and prepare students for their professional careers. Recent graduates are working for several leading national and Bay Area design firms or have been accepted at graduate schools for design and museum studies.