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design

**The Role of the Professional Designer in the
Creation of Museum Exhibitions (and getting funding)**

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There are four elements I wish to address in this paper

What a designer does

How to select and brief a designer

How the designer works in creating an exhibition.

What a designer does.

I was told once by a non- designer that “anyone can design” and yes that is true- just as anyone can put documents in an acid free box put a label on it and call it archiving.

Here we are only concerned with good professional design.

Everyone requires “good design”.

It is reasonable to believe that you will get good design from a person who has studied and qualified in design. Courses in design are usually 4 years and qualifications are usually degree level.

Professional bodies exist of which many designers are members.

There are different fields of design - graphic or 2-D is primarily concerned with branding, identity and all flat printed material. 3-D design includes interiors, furniture, structures, cars, boats and buildings. There is textile, lighting, sound, theatre and film design. I am being very explicit in these descriptions because somehow confusion seems to arise when we start talking about museum design. This essentially is 3-D design combining interior, furniture and structural skills with awareness on conservation, environmental control, education, communication and market trends. It is possible but not usual to find all of this in one person.

Other design fields that may be required in the museum design process are lighting, sound film and graphic design. I do not know of one individual that is qualified in all of these media. Companies do provide some or all of these skills depending on if the project requires them and to what extent.

Most museum designers come from the industrial design, architecture or interior design backgrounds and through continuing professional study they specialise in museum work.

Another title used for this work is “temporary architecture.”

Good Design, defined in its widest sense as the process by which all artificially manufactured artefacts are conceived and brought into being – can be a means to improve the quality of life. It is a process that results in a product, space or form. The quality of the result depends on the quality of the process

Design is a process that involves asking questions in order to discover insights and then being able to act on these insights. It is a service_of communication based upon creativity, innovation and competence. These three elements are common to all design fields.

These elements are served by :

Market trend awareness, (audience/ consumer/ visitor)

Technical know how (material and manufacturing technologies)

Project management skills (budget control, implementation programming, communication mechanisms and contractual issues)

Design can be market driven, culturally driven or human needs driven. Within the museum field design appears to be driven by both cultural and educational objectives.

The design process is dependent on a range of variables that are constantly interacting with each other. These variables are:

Attitudes:

Policy makers at all levels, the government and state, institutions such as NMI, the development or client team which can be committees from any and every background.

Policies

effect everyone- the planning team, the designers, builders, implementation team, the operational managers and end users/ audience.

Policies identify and state the aims and objectives of a development- cultural/ educational etc.

A policy should identify measurable targets for a development such as revenue and visitor numbers and identify the criteria for measuring success.

Policy determines the level at which the exhibition function sits within the other museums functions and what presentation of the collection – “in context” or “primacy of the object”.

The questions that need to be addressed by everyone involved in policymaking are:

Are the terms of reference for the decision making process clearly identified and available to all concerned- particularly for those people who contribute to the exhibition development process.

What factors will determine the extent of an exhibition development –audience needs, trends or money?

Audience needs

Will this policy enable active and effective collaboration with the wide community such as the aged, youth, tourists and special- needs so that the individual needs of those who will actually be visiting the museum be clearly understood. Are these needs being investigated, are communication channels to your audience open? Is this data being collected- how is it researched and stored.

In general we agree that museums should focus more on the needs and expectations of the audience visitor than on any other criteria. A design brief usually identifies an existing or target audience description. However stereotypes of age, gender and social class are becoming increasingly blurred. Socio-economic changes have altered the fabric of society and lifestyle of citizens and we are all effected by these changes.

This means we have to look at the museum audience much more closely than we have been doing in the past. Too many assumptions have been made. It is not sufficient to say this exhibition must attract school groups for education and entertainment. It is necessary to describe the specific needs and expectations of these school groups. It is not sufficient to state that a development is for tourists We need to know who these tourists are, where are they coming from, what age group, what are their expectations? Some of the most embarrassing assumptions about audience or market needs are made with regard to people with disabilities.

Even if you have unlimited funding, unlimited space, and a fantastic compliment of staff it is next to impossible to be all things to all people. It is essential to know your audience (existing or target) very well – and to clearly profile them clearly.

This exercise is not a daunting one as Ireland does not have a complex market. The Heritage Council in association with other agencies like Bord Failte could and should fund such a resource.

Financial Planning

Capital investment determines the design time, the level and extent of the consultation process, the material extent of the exhibition and the standard of execution.

Operational Planning

affects the design in terms of the kind of exhibition it shall be. For example the use of digital technologies will require staff training or putting maintenance contracts in place. Staff levels determine the inclusion of guided tours, first hand interpretation and the physical location of security points.

Programme Planning

How long do you expect a design solution to be effective?

Is it seasonal, temporary or permanent and how long is permanent?

A detailed survey carried out in January this year in Germany offered the following: If the idea is that the exhibition is based on “state of the art technology” it will last 1-2 years, if it is for the youth market it may be 3-4 years depending on the specific age group targeted, if the presentation while being thematic is primarily the artefact collection, permanent can be described as being between 5-10 years. We know an exhibition can be left untouched for up to 15 years. The problem is that it is untouched- no one is going to it.

Temporary is usually means a number of days to no more than 6 months. In terms of the material creation of the exhibition, this is determined by financial investment and by factors of wear and tear. If the exhibition period is very short digital technologies can be hired rather than purchased

Experience and Editorial Planning

What will the museum experience be- passive, interactive, minds, hearts, hands on?

A very clear decision on the nature of the exhibition needs to be agreed between the curators and designers. The nature of the exhibition should take account of all the factors given above. This is probably the most critical stage in the planning process

when a designer should be involved but it does not always happen. The physical allocation of space for an exhibition is either identified in advance of the designer being appointed or the designer determines the space required based on the functional requirements and facilities outlined in the brief. The size of the space and the ambient conditions affects the design layout, design detailing, the nature of the experience and cost of construction of an exhibition.

The design process involves investigation and evaluation of these variables - not only of rational problems and opportunities but emotional ones, individual and social needs and individual and social attitudes. This means asking a lot of questions all the time. It requires the selection and prioritising of issues, organisation and presentation of decisions. The process demands responsibility (ability to respond) It is both creative and analytical: it combines adaptation and innovation; it is sensitive and intuitive.

Many designers in the course of their work regularly face multidisciplinary settings. They often have to extract and illustrate key issues from a myriad of agendas. They sketch and explore possible solutions and facilitate communication between all stakeholders.

These abilities have dramatic potential for enhancing the quality of the initial decision making process, the planning and allocation of resources.

This requires involvement at the early research and development stage – asking questions like “what should be done and for whom”.

Although this exercise costs money- an expenditure that is independent of the traditional costs associated with a development it did not add to the overall financial expenditure on the project.

It will in fact save the client money.

How to select and brief a designer.

Public procurement procedures look for the lowest price on all aspects of developments- from professional fees to implementation costs to operational costs. We know it is not the highest quality of service but the lowest price that is the primary criteria for selection. This puts the responsibility back on the client to create an excellent brief for the designers at tender stage so that the tenders returned are measurable and comparable. The purpose of a tender is to get comparative costs.

However design is not a commodity unlike goods off the shelf whereby you can compare costs between shops.

Therefore, before selecting the designer it must be clear what the criteria for selection shall be. Will the criteria for selection require a design proposal or will it require evidence of the team's ability to reach a successful solution- evidence of awareness of needs, of ability to analyse, responsibility and creativity.

If a concept design is requested as part of the tender process I can assure you such a concept will be a fanciful notion. The only value it will have is the paper it is on. It will not and cannot be based on a rational analysis of all the parameters applying to the project.

At the end of the tender process the information received should give a good indication of the level of service, fee structure, design style, ability and reputation of the different designers submitting.

If a designer chooses to submit a design concept as part of this process it is against all procurement guidelines for the client to take the concept into consideration when making a selection.

An interview gives the opportunity for open discussion and asking questions. It allows one other important factor to be established- how a client and designer might get along.

If it is difficult to apply a budget or programme to a development pre the tender stage there are two options available; commission a designer to assist with the master-planning of a development or ask others who have created exhibitions similar in scope and size what their experience was. Ensure to adjust figures to allow for inflation.

How the designer works within the overall scheme of creating an exhibition.

Design and Build as a Service

Designers are not contractors. Designers provide a set of drawings, specifications and instructions to a contractor. The designer inspects works as they are being carried out and ensures the client is getting the works as specified. Contractors take specific instructions on building details, do not challenge these instructions and in turn provide the structures or material goods as directed by the designer.

Designers are legally responsible to design to health and safety standards. Contractors are legally obliged to build to health and safety standards.

A designer usually has professional indemnity insurance against giving incorrect specifications and a contractor has insurance against anyone getting hurt on a site.

There is a significant difference between the cost of these insurance policies.

When working for the state or a semi-state organisation, a professional is subject to 21% withholding tax. A contractor is a goods provider and is not subject to withholding tax.

Some design companies provide design and build and some do not. This service does not reflect on the company's ability to design but it does impact on other aspects of service to the client.

If a design company provides the structures/ exhibits it is liable for all the elements that would apply to a contractor- guarantees, maintenance, defects, and health and safety construction stage. The designer is entitled to charge as much as 25% of the value of the construction for taking on this responsibility.

By keeping the two elements separate the designer remains independent of the contractor ensuring the client gets best value for money.

At the end of the concept stage the full scope of work should be known and agreed with the client. At this point the extent of other design skills required are identified - the graphic, audio-visual, lighting, sound etc. These elements are quantified and tendered to the appropriate consultant or contractor.

The museum designer generates this documentation, issues the tenders, analyses the returns and makes a recommendation to the client. It is important to note that the client is legally responsible for contracts and for payments to the various service/ material providers. The museum designer provides the specifications for contract and depending on the value of the works the contract itself may be drawn up by the client or be a standard contract of works as developed by the RIAI.

As a project progresses the next stages of the programme are expanded in great detail. Specific programmes are established for the specific services- for example the graphic design programme will show deadlines for acquisition of copyrights and reproduction rights, editorial content signoff, proof reading etc.

An audio- visual programme will include storyboarding sign off and prototyping of interactives amongst other tasks.

Lighting and sound are worked into the exhibition structure programme.

When all the works are declared practically complete the defects period commences.

This may be 6- 12 months depending on the size of the contract.

During this time maintenance manuals are issued and the designer inspects the works in operation. If problems exist due to faulty workmanship or goods the contractor is obliged to return to site and make good. At the end of the defects period the contractors are completely paid and all obligations to the project are concluded.

This is a very quick over view of the programme and management for the execution of an exhibition.

It is generic and does not account for the many individual and unique requirements of projects. This is also an area that the client should not get involved with. The construction stage of a project is the most vulnerable in terms of costs spiralling particularly if there are requests for alterations to any aspect of the design.

Being aware of the process is valuable and gives assurance that such a controlled process exists. After all creativity is meaningless without intelligent processes.

I hope this provides some insight into what good design is and what a museum designer does, and particularly that design is not a quick fix solution for acquiring funding.