

Exhibition design: hybrid space of advanced design innovation

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Abstract

The exhibition design has always been – among other design disciplines – one of the most innovative field of experimentation both for languages and projects improvement. Moreover in the recent years the use of digital technologies, on one hand, and the further more active participation of the public – or, better to say, of the user – on the other hand, are making exhibition design a promising and rising laboratory of advanced innovation. This evolution is shaping itself around the co-participation and the increasing value of trivial things as fundamental presence of experience and proof deep-rooted both in the artistic experimentation and in the daily life. The public assumes consequently a dual role: viewer and witness of the revealed memory – the exhibition subjects – and subject himself of the show – due to the belonging to/of the objects and the story told in the scenical space. The paper presents a critical point of view on the mapped scenario of approaches and case studies in an increasing scale of design actions, starting from the more traditional projects to the most advanced in innovation and people involvement.

Keywords

Exhibition design, user experience design, social innovation, hybrid design methods, participatory exhibitions and museums.

1. Introduction

Exhibition is one of the most experimental design fields: theoretical, methodological and participatory and fits in law, the list of design disciplines more strongly linked to advanced forms of research: the *needs* which it tries to give answers, in fact, can be identified with the top of Maslow's pyramid (1954), where *intangible needs* are placed –values, representation and communication– pertaining to creativity and problem-solving, that means *design*. Experiments are linguistic, cultural and material technologies, experience models and forms and at the same time the *interacted* spaces, objects and people: objects and subjects that refer to themselves and others in mirroring dynamics.

The discipline is an open workshop where processes involve multi-disciplinary teams of professionals and designers and compare from issues rooted in theoretical reflections to give them practical solutions often unpredictable at the beginning which generate innovative cultural products, also in terms of progressive enhancement opening up to new groups of users who propose compelling visions of a culture that moves beyond its boundaries.

The exhibition has thus gradually become a borderline place, a contamination boundary with other cultures, such as ITC, which in a game of osmosis and suggestions, alternatives have shaped spatial forms –real and intangible physical and interactive– designed and reformulated thanks to the

connection with users. That's why the field of cultural/digital heritage has experienced the impact and the potentiality opened up by the web.

This mutual cooperation was deeper where the technology was intended both as an extension of expo tool and an integral part of the exhibit space, object, subject and participatory instrument enabling the experience of the users.

It is this latter aspect that perhaps the most peculiar of the two areas convergence: exhibition design needs to focus on what we can define –translating disciplinary terminology– *user needs*, related to the sphere of experience, learning, emotion and memorability and immediately embedded on the scenical space of the *stage*. On the other hand, technology becomes an active stimulation apparatus proxemics –immaterial and cognitive– between people and the enjoyment of the exhibition.

A place of contact and ownership, through the performance and interaction of content, experiences, meanings and values given by the user that intersect the proposed narrative levels of the project, such as new levels of interpretation and reading paths. The user-centered logic become, in the space-provided experience, user generated, reversing the traditional existing relationship and opening new perspectives.

2. Exhibition design as a tool for social innovation

Therefore existis new ways of defining the whole cultural event process that materialize in testing alternative principles aimed to its repositioning to reactivate or strengthen their strongly bounded and well connected with the social relation. It's a deep revision and conceptual act usually grounding the relational values of the exhibition design as well as the cultural opportunities museums offer.

An act that increasingly pursues an audience active participation as part of an integrated planning and the involvement of the museum in more open dialogic forms, capable to understand and *display* intuitions and need traced in the territory.

The planning challenges are based on radical changes to methods conception systems and to communication content, whose ripening times requires temporal progressions enlarged, consciously *slowed* (Kahneman, 2012).

These challenges give priority to the project capability to work in progress mold itself and are based on educational processes development strongly bottom-up which actively involve the audience.

Grows, then the commitment to the strengthening of cultural values related to the everyday life events record which are able to substantiate with intensity meanings immediately related to a more stratified and understandable society vision.

The paper is aimed to verify the potential of the exhibition design –as design of integrated systems of interaction between narratives and narrators – to act as an active instrument of social innovation phenomena¹ with the adoption of methods that have all the characteristics of ADD .

“The museum becomes more a place in which to experience and share a story through a variety of stimuli, in which to experience its content not only perceptively, but also physically and to share those physical emotions with others. It becomes a dynamic, organic environment and not just a place for collecting and exhibiting; this is a distinguishing feature in the passage from an idea of a *museum as a collection* to that of a *museum as narration*.” (Cirifino, Giardina & Rosa, 2011, p. 13)

Transferring the values of everyday life into reasoned scenarios systems of social and cultural narrative means to realize strong condition of empathy between personal experiences and the sum of relations that these experiences can establish: the two connected poles tracing unexpected affinity give an *universal* meaning to the values expressed.

¹ In their article for the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Phills, Deiglmeier and Miller define social innovation as: *a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals. A social innovation can be a product, production process, or technology [...], but it can also be a principle, an idea, a piece of legislation, a social movement, an intervention, or some combination of them.* (Murray, Caulier & Mulgan, 2010)

3. Exhibition design as an active social tool

This new perspective puts the project outside the boundaries of criticism that interpret it only as an instrumental system devoted to choices dictated by scientific curation and places it rather in a dimension of cultural exchange to make it the active tool for an emerging economy at a *social* scale. “Specifically, we define social innovations as new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. [...] Much of this innovation is pointing towards a new kind of economy. It combines some old elements and many new ones. We describe it as a *social economy* because it melds features which are very different from economies based on the production and consumption of commodities. [...] Two themes – sometimes clashing, sometimes coinciding – give it its distinctive character. One comes from technology: the spread of networks [...] The other comes from culture and values: the growing emphasis on the human dimension; on putting people first; giving democratic voice; and starting with the individual and relationships rather than systems and structures.” (Murray, Caulier Grice & Mulgan, 2010, p. 2-5)

Relating the project to human dimension is often changed chasing and forcing the potential of a pervasive technology in the contemporary world, as well as from new methods and the culture of space exhibition itself. If in a first phase –the early-adoption– museums and artistic experiments have moved on the rails of mimetic reproduction of reality simulating spatial and material object and as elitist circles of hybrid, multi-disciplinary and multimodal² professionals then these experiences have allowed especially in the 2nd web generation to radically change the methods of access to cultural heritage in the strict sense and generate consequently, increasingly user-generated, a kind of collective intelligence or rather a *crowd-cultures*.

If, according to the user-centered design theories of the late ‘90s, users have been the subject of design is the web 2.0 that reverses the paradigm, finding *in* people, in their individual experience and interconnections in the social hub, the epicenter of content and experiences production.

Thus the utopian vocation of the web is to be collaborative, participatory and a democratizing supports and an operational reality which rewrites many of the practices of cultural production, both from the point of view of institutional and professional traders. The user is then protagonist productive and proactive in interacting and engaging in the spaces dialogue with other: users, designers and institutions.

The creative role of culture is a fertile ground for the construction of paths and experiential design innovative, in particular the relationship between the digital world and museums has been variously declined, ushering even more users engaging practices.

While often the avant-garde, have undermined the conventional relations among the institution, the work and the author forcefully introducing the figure of the spectator, the technology, building relationships and expanded in wider relationship typical of Web 2.0. has further enabled him as a co-author, or, at least, a *prosumer* (Toffler, 1980).

Finally, in Web 3.0 the social logic has become one of the significant drivers along with geolocation brought by the mobile revolution with its reinterpretation of bottom-up according to an innovative approach to the logic of the concept of the semantic web, no longer top-down or thought aprioristic structures such as ontologies and glossaries or translational pre-established paths and experiential structures at the design stage but also grassroots through the direct participation of users. I.e. tag-cloud, *wolksonomy*, catalogs shared by people who would make use of their own language and meanings within social groups, community interest or niches.

4. The depth of the memory of things.

From the interweaving of history and everyday life come for exhibition and museum institution concrete opportunities of social innovation, which radically altered the usual practices destabilizing

² See Todd Purgason: *Just interactive*; John Maeda: *Design by Numbers*; Joshua Davis: *Pray Station e. Once upon a forest* and Jugo Nakamura

the typical relationship among museum as institution, scientific and cultural referent as curator, designer as interpretative performer and audience as final user. The change in process is related to evocative power of common objects able to build relational values and narrative track that acquire meaning from the experience in a collective and shared dimension.

Due to the insights born mainly in intersections between literature and art the story-telling triggered by the attribution of value in relation to *choses* demand to curators and designers a conscious opening towards the audience co-participation.

“The object put on display proposes itself to the attention of the visitor by its multiple layers of meaning, with a strong semantic and symbolic as well as historical and functional power. The narrative potential and [...] the relational power of the object and, symmetrically, the experiential nature of the cultural fruition, more and more open to relational dynamics with the visitor determines the conditions *in which the object on display can express itself, can be discover and, sometimes, manipulate*”. (Trocchianesi, 2013)

The word *choses* refers to the first Perec’s novel (1965), where the story make sense due to the relation with the common objects. Perec constantly wondered about the emotional and evocative power of the objects. *Les choses* discloses the intensity of the objects *sense of presence* revealed able to represent connotations depth plenty of meaning just as theorized by Barthes (1957). The detailed descriptions of things highlights the value of objects as social evidence, their capacity to link together people and world both in terms of personal projection, and choral portrait, serving as social reading between anthropological vision and artistic ecstasy.

***Les Archives du Cœur* of Christian Boltanski, Teshima**

Boltanski has devoted his artistic research to identify the detection of human memory signs forms, represented into shifted depictions, characterized by the presence of telltale signs taken from daily life to which these objects belong (clothes, telephone books, photographs etc.).

The humanity that he’s interested in is made of a normality dense stories. “My installations are monuments to those to whom no one ever dedicated a monument to the common people. I try to keep the small daily memory of these people, made up of photographs, objects, such as cookies boxes. Everyone has the right to be remembered.” (Gambero, 2009)

At Teshima, Japanese island of the Inland Sea, within the *Benesse Art Site Naoshima*, a territorial museum-system it’s possible to visit, such as a sort of voluntary pilgrimage looking for a personal and collective memory, a small building nearby the sea *Les archives du cœur* which houses thousands of recordings of ordinary people heartbeats world-wide recorded since 2008 and carefully classified.

Hence the idea of art installation evolves into the configuration of an innovative audio-sensory museum where the heart rhythm, a vital necessity, becomes a representation of the essence of our being human, through those tracks recorded becoming forever perpetuated testimonials.

“The beat of the heart is the ultimate symbol of human *life*. I had a desire to make an album, but instead of photographs, fill it with heartbeats. While indicating that everyone is part of the same family, this also expresses the intrinsic fact that no two people are the same. [...] What’s important is the spirit of transmission. People only come back to life in other people’s memories.” (Boltansky, 2013).

4.2 Confessions by Candy Chang, Las Vegas

One of the most interesting experiments that explores the individual and social dimensions of so-called *collective wisdom*, is the exhibition *Confessions*³ held at the P3 Studio Gallery in Las Vegas in 2012, designed by the urban activist and artist Candy Chang.

³ Candy Chang, *Confessions*. candychang.com/confessions/

A performative, participatory and intimate performance at the same time, in which the public, artist and script are intertwined, building the message of the exposition. The people writing their own secret thoughts –the confessions collected are more than 1,500– construct the narrative unsaid plot that becomes explicit and public in the exhibition.

The artist then interprets the confessions transcribing them, giving them, a form that increases visibility and a flow of thoughts annotated by visitors/authors on small rectangles of wood, which constitute the narrative exhibition structure.

Confessions selected by the artist undergoing manipulation of the typical ostensible exhibition design and create a sort of amplification, real and conceptual part of the intimate, deep, thoughtful, unspoken of life of the people participating in the project. They become so simultaneously authors and objects, representatives and representatives of the artistic voice that gives them personal and anonymous.

Confessions builds a dynamic balance that borrows the most innovative aspects of social media and web 2.0 community and re-mediated it in a designed gesture where the artist is *medium* and interpreter, not the author, of the co-creation made by users.

4.3 The Museum of Innocence by Orhan Pamuk, Istanbul

The literary passion for objects as emotional and historical evocator –that in Perec remained on paper– becomes for Pamuk a concrete experience: the *Museum of Innocence*, where writing and exhibition project are indissolubly interconnected.

Pamuk takes over the years in a long time and according to a clear abstract idea, but unaware of the outcome, with an original path that weaves to contract a museum made out by common objects of his city, Istanbul, the simultaneous writing of the museum catalog written as novel.

A sort of logical and timing *bump*, where containers and contents are meant thanks to the double ordering structure of writing and exposure. The *Museum of Innocence* is a real museum, universally known by its literary homologous: a place that tells a story, made understandable by the exposed objects that illustrate the real life making understandable the history of a city and its inhabitants.

“There is of course a strong relationship that holds together the novel and the museum: both are the result of my imagination, dreamed up word after word, object after object, photograph after photograph, for a long period of time. [...] The objects exhibited in the museum correspond to those described in the novel. However, there is a gulf between words and things, between the images that words can evoke in our minds and memories that an old object we were using a long time ago can bring us back to memory [...] The museum is not an illustration of the novel and the graphic novel is not an explanation of the museum.” (Pamuk, 2012, p. 18).

5. Co-participation as a review tool in exhibition design

The Pamuk’s project –intellectual work, act collecting and exhibition system permanently– fosters artistic creation over museum threshold, transforming it into a system of relationships between objects and people, where new narrative perspectives are welded to the layering of history, looking for a real audience emotional involvement.

“Imagine looking at an object not for its artistic or historical significance but for its ability to spark conversation. Every museum has artifacts that lend themselves naturally to social experiences. It might be an old stove that triggers visitors to share memories of their grandmother’s kitchen [...] It could be an art piece with a subtle surprise that visitors point out to each other in delight, or an unsettling historical image people feel compelled to discuss. [...] These artifacts and experiences are all social objects. Social objects are the engines of socially networked experiences, the content around which conversation happens. Social objects allow people to focus their attention on a third thing rather than on each other, making interpersonal engagement more comfortable. [...] We connect with people through our interests and shared experiences of the objects around us.” (Simon, 2010)

As pointed out by Simon it's possible to achieve new levels of social experience planning the audience engagement since the conceptual act of a cultural event making innovation, at methodological approach system level and thematic development even in the absence of advanced technology use. That means redesign the social role of knowledge transmission models and information systems usually attributed to a cultural event, calling into question the ways of identifying meaning and identity patterns grounding cultural convergence collective actions.

5.1 Mobeum & Open Museum

Both in the most recent mobile version –*Mobeum* launched in 2010– and desktop the project *Open Museum*⁴ involving 42 museums for a total of 1698 objects and 1339 members, addresses in an innovative way the museum concept building it not a physical space but in a digital framework where according to an open-design approach users are expected to build the exhibition only indirectly related to the selection of 24 objects in the *Hood Museum of European Art Permanent Collection*.

This advanced design experience skips all the paradigms typical of exhibition project –space, collection, and location– subliming it all in the pure conceptual dimension.

An exhibition online space participatory and interactive which exists as built from users' experience and the social dynamics of participation, word of mouth and viral spread within social networks both virtual and real. The objects displayed belong different and world-wide museums and are reassembled at different times thanks to the story-telling that users build in a bottom-up approach based on personal associations and values in terms of shared meanings.

The visibility of individual collections themselves is guaranteed and promoted by the activity and social dynamics of *healers* or people who, through their participation, create and curate the museum exhibitions, gardening them in an evolutionary practice that is enriched by multimodal content both different and integrated contributions, ie images, text, audio, video etc. Both the creation and dissemination through web 2.0 platforms of *Mobeum & Open Museum* is grass-route, according to an innovative logic that sees curators, experts, designers and technologists as figures whose expertise is not so much operational rather to be *enabler*: a role that allows people to explore the most advanced frontiers of the experiences of co-design and the dynamics of self- production and open-design at the ground of the culture of ADD.

5.2 The museum of broken relationship of Olinka Vištica e Dražen Grubišić, Zagabria

The end of love is a traumatic moment but it's also a universal experience. From the awareness of this personal and collective situation comes the project of the artists Vištica and Grubišić, who decid to collect items survived to split-ups in a museum that “offers a chance to overcome an emotional collapse through creation: by contributing to the Museum's collection.”⁵

The museum therefore shows trivial objects which donations implements the collection even through the many traveling exhibitions held abroad. These objects find sense, despite their apparent randomness, in their common emotional origin creating an universal feelings portrait, unexpectedly logical and understandable. The audience assumes the role of virtual museum curator contributing to the creation of its contents in a collective participation that triggers the principle of belonging.

This destabilizing approach, where participation is the project reason, was awarded in 2011 with the *EMF Kenneth Hudson Award*, on the grounds that *the Museum of Broken Relationships encourages discussion and reflection not only on the fragility of human relationships but also on the political, social and cultural circumstances surrounding the stories being told. The museum respects the audience capacity for understanding wider historical, social issues inherent to different cultures and identities and provides a catharsis for donors on a more personal level.*

⁴ *Mobeum & Open Museum*: openmuseum.org

⁵ *Museum of Broken relationship*: brokenship.com/en/about

5.3 The Museum of East Anglian Life, Suffolk

Established in 1967 at the edge of Stowmarket in Suffolk, it's an interesting example of structural reorganization supported by wide participation and functional mix that transformed the museum into a social enterprise. Since 2004 it has been taken the road of social innovation redesigning museum services as a useful community resource with promotion of cultural and entertainment activities. The museum has thus consolidated its territorial presence as a place of leisure and education. This area has been enhanced by working with social enterprises to develop community programs for vocational assistance to young people, ex-offenders, unemployed, etc.

Today museum promotes training programs for its heritage management and involves staff and volunteers often coming from disadvantaged areas in decision-making and planning focused on socio-cultural ground where thanks to a local partnership can support special activities without having to acquire specific in-house skills.

6. Conclusions

Moreover museums and exhibitions are changing their social and cultural role, renewing themselves through the research and new design perspectives, overlapping traditional institutional tasks to new dynamics of conversation with a territory that question and investigate stimulating interaction.

In taking this road, it is growing up a conceptual and methodological renewal of the idea of exhibition project that fits into the broader landscape of the effective tools for a period of social innovation, now universally seen as necessary and no more overdueing.

An innovation for the exhibition design that requires an ever more active role, where are reinvented its profiles of utility and use of material goods and organizational infrastructure, to strengthen the fundamental role of the cultural offer in contemporary society.

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