New Directions in Exhibition and Environment Design: Interactivity

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We come out of a profession that has historically been an apprentice model. So as chairperson of the graduate Exhibition Design program at FIT, I have to consider what students can get from a graduate program that employs the fundamental values of an apprentice-style model, while providing experiences that can’t be garnered from direct engagement in a museum or design firm.

Our students already have careers in design and are making major professional changes to be in this program. They want to become multi-faceted designers who work in many different disciplines to create an experience unique to exhibitions. As part of this multidisciplinary education, we also instill a sense of stewardship: if you’re going into exhibition design, you need to know that you’ll be responding to the visitor’s needs first and last. You’ll exit the program understanding that you’re part of a profession that is constantly evolving, but that at its core is about culture and communicating with the public. Exhibition design is not about making a lot of pretty shiny stuff!

Our students learn to achieve certain objectives:
- Embrace chaos; let go!
- Think with your hands, eyes, and ears
- Work with others and like it
- Don’t run away from your background, run toward your future
- Explode (EXPLODE!) what you already know
- Be humbled and see where you humble others

The program begins in the summer with two intensive courses and the completion of an entire exhibition including content research, narrative and story development, audience study, structural design, branding, environmental graphics, and lighting.

In the fall, we cover audience, narrative, planning, environmental experience, graphics, lighting, and exhibition types.

For fall semester projects, we have actual clients. Sponsored projects have included signage and wayfinding for the National Museum of the American Indian and the New York Botanical Garden, showrooms for Procedes Chenel, trade shows for Moen and Earthbound Farm, and permanent exhibitions for the National Museum of American History.

The program ends with a six-week internship. Students also complete a thesis project/capstone, with the final thesis adjudication done as a seminar. Their work is on exhibition and they defend it before more than 30 professional judges.