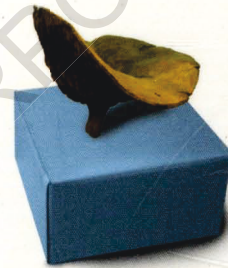




MASTERING A MUSEUM PLAN

STRATEGIES FOR
EXHIBIT DEVELOPMENT









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Mastering a Museum Plan



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Preface

MASTERING A MUSEUM PLAN: STRATEGIES FOR EXHIBIT

DEVELOPMENT looks at the process of developing a single museum display or, perhaps, the entire installation of a museum collection in new or renovated facilities. The book emphasizes the importance of establishing what a museum wants an exhibit to say and then considers how the institution might best organize or structure its overall knowledge, its resources, and several key aspects of the planning process in order to most effectively communicate its intended message and create a particular experience for its visitors.

In effect, this book is about making the most of exhibit planning by mastering essential parts of the process.

Mastering a Museum Plan results from the authors' many years of master planning for museum collection presentations and individual exhibitions. The methods highlighted in this publication have been arrived at with the help, collaboration, and team efforts of many colleagues at current and former institutions, whom the authors would like to acknowledge here.

The core of the methodology used at Naturalis, the National Museum of Natural History, Leiden, The Netherlands, was developed during the early 1990s, within the Naturalis team itself. This work built upon a methodology developed by Han Meeter and was enriched by contributions of many others, in particular Wim Gertenaar, Naturalis's design director at the time. In later years, others brought new contributions and refinements, especially Peter Zuure (production), Manon Laterveer and Hansjorg Ahrens (content), and Erik Jan Elderman (administration). They will recognize many of their ideas and approaches in this text. At the same time, *Mastering a*

Museum Plan has had the full support of Drs. R.J.M. (Ronald) van Hengstum, general director, Naturalis.

For Vanda Vitali, the spirit of *Mastering a Museum Plan* has its roots in the logicist analysis of Jean-Claude Gardin, to whom Dr. Vitali is also grateful for having instilled in her an understanding of the need for any interpretation to have a well-developed method of reasoning. Collaboration with Pierre Royer, François Confino, and their consulting teams over many years has brought numerous refinements to the working method and specific components emphasized here. Lou Levine and Dan Rahimi, as well, clarified approaches to master planning that are singled out in this publication. The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Foundation is acknowledged for sponsoring the development of the infographic design for this publication.

Karen Jacobson's copyediting was masterful. Working from our rather complex PowerPoint presentations, designers Gail Swanlund and Jon Sueda of STRIPE developed an imaginative visual language for the infographics and text of this volume and also helped us clarify our work.

Betty Sedor managed the publication process with her usual dedication, tenacity, and effectiveness, while Fred Mooij and Christopher Coniglio supervised the production of this complex publication in an exceptionally efficient way.

To the above individuals, as well as to all those who read the text and offered comments, the authors are most grateful.

The support of the Mondriaan Foundation as well as the University of Southern California International Museum Institute, and its director Dr. Selma Holo, is gratefully acknowledged.

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Introduction

The Scope of This Publication and Its Audience

FOR VIRTUALLY EVERY MUSEUM, the display of its collection, or the creation of a temporary exhibit related to it, is a central, ongoing activity. *Mastering a Museum Plan* focuses on certain critical factors in the process of conceiving, defining, organizing, and realizing long- or short-term installations.

Indeed, the development and delivery of a museum display, regardless of its size or complexity, may vary from place to place and involve all sorts of people: staff from the museum's various departments; volunteers; trustees; donors and collectors; artists; representatives from local, regional, or national public organizations and governing bodies; consultants; and many others. Regardless of when and how they may be involved in the process, each will be interested in the content and message of a museum's intended display, why and how it is to be presented, and, ultimately, the effectiveness of the overall ensemble in public.

Mastering a Museum Plan therefore argues for the development of a particular strategy, involving certain essential components, for the realization of museum exhibits. This methodology stems from the authors' extensive involvement with long-term collection installations and temporary displays at large, encyclopedic museums. It is background that allows *Mastering a Museum Plan* to serve as an essential guide for the creation of new museum exhibits and the full realization of their intentions.

In addition, although the authors come from two different museum cultures, with different methods of approaching exhibit development, a recent collaboration allowed them to compare and contrast their particular approaches and methods of creating an exhibit. This has made the authors more aware of the need for museums to systematize important aspects of the exhibit-planning process. As a result, *Mastering a Museum Plan* has been developed for the international museums community.

Other books or sources outline the main steps that might be involved in the exhibit-planning process. They usually do not recognize, however, or sufficiently emphasize how important it is for a museum, when undertaking the creation of an exhibit, to organize its knowledge and resources in relation to the intended message, and to be sure to follow particular steps during the design and development of an installation.

Mastering a Museum Plan provides invaluable advice on organizing museum resources in order to define and then draw out essential or particular messages from research and collecting activities. This information can then be used more effectively within the overall context of certain critical aspects of the exhibit development process. Such a strategy can assist in the building of an installation scenario, including the design of the display materials, and increase a museum's capacity to communicate its message to different visitors while providing more informative and meaningful experiences to engage or activate their imaginations. These are especially important results for museums involved in the reconstruction of complex natural or cultural processes, which can be particularly challenging to present.

Mastering a Museum Plan will be of interest to museum professionals, exhibit designers, and architects, as well as to museum studies teachers and students—indeed, to anyone involved in creating and realizing

successful visual communication. All readers will find that the book provides helpful insights into how one can organize resources, identify key ideas, and then create a more forceful and consequential public presentation or display.

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The Essence and the Outline

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MUSEUMS ARE COMMUNICATORS. Their essential “language” is primarily visual: objects, with their individual settings and overall scenography; moving and still images; labels and text panels; media presentations; and so on. These elements, and their overall effect, are vital visual components of a display. They come together in a gallery space to engage visitors in a particular message (perhaps a story, a concept, or extended information on a particular subject). The audience then “reads” the narrative by walking through the space and looking at the display, not necessarily moving along a strictly prescribed path.

The challenge, then, is to get the museum’s message or intentions across, to translate them into a visual and spatial language that will engage the audience and communicate effectively. The consequence of that “translation” depends upon how well the collective information and resources behind the message have been structured and, in addition, how well certain aspects of the display, particularly its design and presentation, have been considered and carried out.

Indeed, a museum with complex, interrelated stories may want to summarize the knowledge of an entire field or discipline (for instance, a museum of natural history that wants to explain evolution or biodiversity). To do so, the museum should assemble and then structure its research findings and collection materials in such a way that the underlying rationale of a particular discipline also becomes evident when the desired information and supporting elements are eventually set out in a gallery display.

Equally consequential, the strategy of structuring a museum's resources can contribute to a visitor's recognition of the museum's many roles, particularly the complexity at the center of large, encyclopedic institutions.

To translate its knowledge and resources into a display, a museum will usually follow a plan, which may be highly developed or more informal. In all likelihood, a team composed of museum professionals from inside and outside the institution will be involved, along with certain work protocols or procedures. That process, and the intended message to be shared with the museum's audience, will ultimately reflect the museum's core body of information and holdings, and how it is organized, as well as how other critical components of the planning process, such as installation design and teamwork, have been realized.

Although the strategies emphasized in this book are directed particularly at exhibit planning, they are likely to be relevant for any type of systematic planning process that a museum might undertake, such as organizing live public programs, exhibitions on the Web, or other online presentations. The creation and realization of such projects also benefit from a well-structured organization of the museum's knowledge and collection resources, along with the use of other integrated planning strategies, described below.

At the same time, the strategies presented in *Mastering a Museum Plan* will also increase the effectiveness and relevance of a visit for the museum's many audiences, give further expression to its role, and generally increase public awareness and recognition of the museum's special place in its community and in the wider world.

As well, in **section 2**, below, *Mastering a Museum Plan* provides a philosophical foundation for the methodology and particular aspects of master planning that follow.