

# ENGINEERING EXPERIENCE

## Destination design in the interactive age

**Peter Higgins, Creative Director of Land Design Studio Ltd, considers the diversity of leisure experiences on offer to consumers, from speciality shopping malls to long-established museums, and the increasingly important role of interactive technologies in delivering memorable – and forgettable – experiences.**

Stephen Bayley, most famous for removing himself, pre-development, from the post of creative director of the Millennium Dome, suggests that we are going to die of complexity. He says that 'the excess is baffling, never before has there been so much choice, confusion, segmentation, media fragmentation, data smog and popular bewilderment'. As competition grows for leisure spend, it is growing increasingly difficult to separate the offers.

### Seeing through the jargon

Consider the 'citadel' shopping experience: enclosed behind towering windowless edifices containing synthetic scenography that the creators genuinely describe as the filmic storyboard event, in an attempt to make the visitor the central character, thus

fusing fantasy, commerce and entertainment. Though a seductive metaphor to attract retail operators, it could not be more inappropriate. A storyboard is a device that totally predicts the structural form of the narrative; it can in no way be connected to the assemblage of reconstructed urban grain that forms the backdrop to ubiquitous banners, push-cart vendors, street performers, music and jostling people. *Commedia del arte* meets Federico Fellini.

There is the argument that the skill of 'placemaking', an expression devised by architect Jon Jerde, actually responds to the importance of mass taste and human need. People do come in their droves to his supermalls, though their only real taste of urbanity is the journey from their parked air-conditioned automobile, to the portal of the air-conditioned mall. There is never the suggestion that people meeting here will ever build any relationship or commitment to one another, nor is there any suggestion that the semiotic symbolism of the piazza, agora, or civic forum should actually encourage discourse or exchange of ideas. The only real sense of community is the community of consumers, who are encouraged to express themselves freely in the way that they feel best equipped and empowered: by consuming.

It may be irritating for the architects of the ersatz movie setting that, at last, behind the

secondary facades of shop fronts, the true personality and self-expression of the movie extra is allowed to flourish. Actually, the basic retail experience is entirely active, even interactive. Individuals, partners and families communicate with one another and sales staff to support the decision-making process; it engages the participant with complex sampling that can incorporate sophisticated, cognitive processing, classification of alternatives, data analysis, and personalised aesthetic expression – and they may only be purchasing a hair spray.

Retail interior styling designers are now being challenged by web designers and interpretive interactive museum designers to consider the customer interface, where the colour of the sofa that I am sitting on can be changed by casting a smart-tagged colour swatch into a responsive wooden dish. A commercial mobile phone merchandising environment may be transformed into an evening bar setting by reconfiguring the daytime projection hardware, to create an ambience of real-time large-scale web-cam city imaging ... choose your city.

### Creativity versus formula

Brand experiences are really more focused retail opportunities. They are a form of immersive conditioning that pretends to



provide a serious information function alongside slick audiovisual presentation. The dilemma of providing such data, however, is that the single brand promotion brings with it an inevitable lack of objectivity. Niketown New York, for instance, carries lightweight, missable fiction and non-fiction storylines throughout, via sporadic museum-style object displays, and forces an occasional large-scale audiovisual show upon the visitor. This has the unfortunate effect of making customers feel as though they are in the front row during the commercial break at the movies, with the house lights on.

The brand experience is ubiquitous now, helping to deliver the essence and spirit of cars, malt whisky, chocolate, even the life of a Benedictine monk. Excluding the latter, the creative process is often in the hands of the marketing department, which has discovered it can join the creatives in developing integrated presentation strategies. Working outside of their domain, the advertising agency has to demonstrate its ability to think and create 'below-the-line experiences', using unfamiliar media in real-time environments. Often the final effect is that of a supercharged tradeshow, for which the public ultimately has to pay in order to be sold the brand.

The mother of all brand experiences has, of course, been Disney, born in 1955 as Disneyland. The talented team of beardless Disney engineers has set the standard for the stage-managed, nurtured environment, delivering perfectly scenographed settings. The problem is that the genre of moviemaking does not necessarily transfer to the tangible, built environment. Questions of scale, lighting, juxtaposition, even the surreal foam-filled characters, devalue the fantasy world that is otherwise so complete it requires no imagination or intellectual participation on the part of the visitor. There is an overwhelming passive expectation of the brand that is consistently delivered in a safe, dependable, homogenous way. Even on the dangerous bits, the white knuckles are pink. It's as comforting as seeing the sanitised paper strip on your hotel lavatory seat.

## **Museums: changing context, changing technologies**

The emergence of entertainment as a fundamental part of the commercial environment has impacted hugely on museums, as they are now simply just another

part of the wider destination market. Museum Directors, now called CEOs, are running scared. Architects are charged with creating 'brandmark' buildings. Even the nomenclature of the building carries a brand, as the \$350 billion Guggenheim testifies. Marketing and business plans are subverting the traditional positioning of museums as receptacles of the authentic, destinations for sensual perception and critical thinking. Consider the physical extent of the subterranean shopping mall at the Louvre, for example, or, as the strapline of a national campaign famously declared, the V&A's transformation into 'an ace caff with a museum attached'. The Natural History Museum, meanwhile had the paleontologists squirming but the public queuing round the block to check out the smell of its latest animatronic dinosaur. And it's easy to imagine that architect Richard Meier had more than an eye on the corporate soiree facilities when creating his spectacular masterplan for Mr Getty's new Los Angeles museum.

Indeed, how much should the architecture reflect and support the function and emotional state of the visitor experience? A visitor to a museum may be in search of beautifully conserved objects, presented in a sensitive and intelligently interpreted way, or an art collection defining the very essence of an artist's work, encouraging sensual perception and critical thinking. Both may now be subverted by the very building that provides the enclosure, practical requirements may be ruthlessly subordinated.

Architect James Stirling said of the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart that it would be better without paintings. It seems that often the works of art are guests of the architect. Even at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, where the building demonstrates a distinctive narrative, exhibition designer Ralph Appelbaum confessed that the building and interior treatment failed to develop simultaneously. In respect of the idiosyncratic 'interpretive' building types, often the architect/client fails to understand the needs of sequence, media/communication facilities, the use of natural or artificial light, and the pace and rhythm of the narrative, or even the very existence of a narrative. As the four stainless steel drums emerged out of the ground for the National Centre for Popular Music in Sheffield, the client declared that there were no fewer than *five* stories to convey. Not too surprising, then, that this £15 million centre closed within one year of its opening, a classic case of form swallowing function.

**Brand experiences are focused retail opportunities, but bring with them an inevitable lack of objectivity**



The critical zeitgeist of a museum experience potentially enables the collaborative opportunity for interpretive architects, scenographers, communications and new media consultants, writers and curators to encourage us to investigate the diversity of our culture through active information exchange, incorporating both intellectual and sensory engagement.

## Engaging the museum visitor

The significant competition for consumer spend requires the museum to constantly judge its value offer against its established visitor profile. Here, intuitive media and interpretive sensory devices, which exist within neither the home nor the commercial domain, can encourage visitor learning through physical and cognitive engagement, and provide guests with access to a hierarchy of data and information. The development of

the San Francisco Exploratorium has set the standard for provision of such visitor opportunities for engagement and discovery. As with the birth of any new genre, this centre for hands-on interactivity has been referenced and rebuilt throughout the world.

I believe that the time has come to reassess the methodology by which we may encourage people to engage with discovery learning. It is no longer appropriate to depend entirely on unreliable and unimaginative electromechanical mechanisms, or dull and unengaging touch-screen interfaces, which serve only to deliver slabs of binary yes/no learning or enable guests to visit the museum's website. Such ubiquitous devices are derivative, and often better reserved for home use. If they are not subject to imaginative development, they will demean the important role that museums have come to play in the commercial marketplace.

Early research has shown that the work of certain new media artists has unknowingly investigated some of the criteria that may

now be applied to the museum environment. The concept of delivery of information for a large group of people activated by an avatar/navigator is one such example. To achieve this, the audience and avatar need to be collectively aware of the context and intellectual objective of an interpretive installation. The ultimate delivery of the material needs to be coherent enough - and big enough - to be experienced by larger groups. This method of presentation capitalises on the power of real space, and the ability of people to experience the collective dynamic. Many novel techniques may be applied to the navigation devices incorporated within the avatar installation.

The concept of data delivery is probably the most interesting application. Layers of data may be stored in a variety of sound and image formats. Traditionally, the presentation of such material is screen-based, at a scale that rests in the domestic domain. This proposal actually encourages the participant to capture information by virtue of their

presence in sensory environments. When the 'player' realises, for instance, that their physicality and movement may be camera-tracked and processed as, say, a virtual linear timeline, then appropriate audio-visual material may be delivered. Move one step and change time - and associated interactive media - by 10 years, or 5,000 years, all for the benefit of the surrounding audience, who are engaging in 'passive interactivity'.

As well as delivering people stories, such environments may enable investigation into issues of place and location, a familiar requirement of the interpretive process. Large format mapped surfaces may be physically walked, and personalised hotspots selected, to describe particular place narratives through sound and image. It is this concept of connection by virtue of personal physicality that provides the all-important cognitive link encouraging and supporting memory learning.

## **New access to old objects**

Something that will remain central to the museum will be the authentic object, protected for purposes of security and conservation. Whilst such valued objects will always be heroic and 'untouchable', it is vital that we discover new ways of investigating them more directly, giving visitors psychological access to their secrets and enabling them to metaphorically unlock the protective glass case. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer has proposed a process that will enable the visitor to track and 'touch' objects via a digitised hand. Under his proposal, once the virtual hand is engaged, facsimile objects such as resin casts of pattern or texture may be touched with the other, to provide an uncanny cognitive connection. Additionally, the actual object, which may be subject to low-level lighting or have obscure detailed information, may be accessed and enhanced through large-scale screen manipulation for an extended audience. This particular feature of the device would only be made possible by having access to high-quality digitised imaging of the object collection, which could be provided by a digital archiving programme.

The museum website has an intrinsic value that is not always appreciated by a visiting audience: its inherent potential to provide considerable depth and hierarchy of information, which may be best accessed at a remote location, away from the museum. In response to this hypothesis, Land has

developed a responsive website, the 'Walk in Web', which actually generates the ambience of the Futures Gallery environment of Thinktank at Millennium Point, recently opened in Birmingham, where it is possible to interact with, or affect, the information presented. The notion here is to excite and inspire 'on-site' in order to encourage the visitor to revisit the website at their own particular level, in their own time and place. Though not adopted by the client, this is a clear response to the website merely being used as brochureware. Again, as the scale of presentation is exceptional then there is a sense of collective activity.

## **Learning from precedents?**

The comparative conceptual and financial failures of both the Millennium Dome in London and the Hanover Expo have been well documented. The critique has mainly been levelled at the misguided aspirations of the executives who delivered wildly optimistic and unachievable business plans. It is a supreme irony that in this 'age of the experience', in which themed, branded, 'placemaking', interpretive centres are an established part of our culture, the 150-year old Expo tradition of experimental simulation and stimulation has failed in such spectacular fashion. Certainly in London this was self-inflicted by 'Cool Britannia' arrogance and naivete. With almost £1 billion to spend, and having commissioned the entirely inappropriate dome structure that provided compressed perimeter spaces dedicated to the pavilions, the executive team recklessly hired architects who provided a style fest of high-tech deconstruction and abstract symbolism, all of which haemorrhaged budgets and marginalised narrative content. Other pavilions were in the hands of production companies with a background in narrowband, corporate face-to-face business. Add to this the rejection of the need for a creative director, the lethal scepticism of the British press and impossible projection figures of 12 million visitors, and cartoons of the upside down Dome represented as the sinking Titanic seemed justified.

However, the greatly stretched, inexperienced client team failed to intercept the aspirations of Land to realise a zone dedicated to play. With self-determined criteria that it should be non-didactic, experiential, instantly interactive, robust,

**Intuitive media and interpretive sensory devices can encourage visitor learning through physical and cognitive engagement, and provide guests with access to a hierarchy of data and information**

supporting an entirely broad-based audience, we were able to design and build a showcase for international new media artists embracing the concept of digital play. Supported by Ars Electronica, the project established a responsive architectural structure, with highly effective sequencing and participation mechanisms, which established new and refreshing ways to engage and involve the visitor with fascinating, intuitive digital interfaces. It is entirely within the spirit and tradition of the Grand Expositions that the knowledge and experience gained from this experiment has encouraged the development of the previously described projects within the museum domain.

### **Valuing destination design**

There is no doubt that the authorship of experience engineering remains in the hands

of a diverse body of people, from commissioning agents to creative deliverers, in the public and private sectors, across fields as diverse as retail, commercial leisure and heritage. The marketplace is currently awash with mumbo-jumbo about 'edutainment' and 'infotainment', and we seem to have lost sight of the fact that, within the destination economy, as in other commercial walks of life, consumers remain consumers. This fundamental principle should drive the design of new environments, whether they are being delivered as retail, leisure or heritage destinations. The same can be said for the interactive and interpretive techniques that are to be offered within these settings: if it doesn't add value in a meaningful, innovative way, why is it there?

Brand thinking, applied properly to destination design, can work wonders. But misguided conceptual attempts to implement and grow destination brands are more

harmful than helpful. Brand objectives are more likely to be fulfilled when the focus moves onto the visitor, thus ensuring that the conceptual thinking reflects and supports the function and emotional nature of the intended visitor experience.

Disparate destinations should be open to surprising inspiration. Smart interpretation and interactivity from museums can influence visitor attractions and retail centres, which can in turn offer commercial acumen and a healthy attitude to popular entertainment. Ultimately, successful projects will recognise features that build a stronger relationship between consumer and brand, and encourage development by a broad-based and collaborative creative theme.

*All images shown depict interactive exhibits at Futures Gallery, Thinktank. Courtesy of Land Design Studio Ltd*

