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Room for Relevance — An Exploration of Synthesizing Emotional Space with Transdisciplinary Design Approaches

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Room for Relevance — An Exploration of Synthesizing Emotional Space with Transdisciplinary Design Approaches

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Keywords Relevance; Transdisciplinary; Facilitated dialogue; Social Injustice; Exhibition Design

Abstract What happens when we experience something emotionally challenging? We need room to breathe. Some of us, many of us, need to talk about it and process it in a variety of personal ways. Today many museums are valiantly crossing new territory by championing difficult topics such as slavery, human trafficking, gun violence, and racism, to name a few. Museum professionals often struggle with the delivery of these delicate topics, however, a more meaningful tack might be to struggle with the “digestion” of these topics by our visitors. How can we help visitors pause, reflect, and connect? By looking at multiple transdisciplinary collaborations between exhibit designers, media specialists, community members, content experts, and facilitated dialogue leaders, this article will illuminate the importance of giving physical and emotional space for visitors to create and express their own forms of relevance to exhibition content. By expressing their own story, visitors can connect more deeply to the themes and threads so lovingly crafted by museum professionals. This article will provide design-related recommendations that enable visitors to meaningfully connect to content through their own experiences. A case study of an exhibit featuring successful multi-faceted delivery systems will be explored, and their outcomes reported on. Preliminary research includes interviews with multiple levels of museum staff, media and design consultants, site visits, and numerous literary reviews from museum-focused journals and publications. By pairing a variety of exhibit methodologies with ample opportunity for processing and expressing, museum professionals can translate lofty visitor take-aways into documentable experiences. So, let’s give visitors some room.

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In recent years, many cultural institutions have started to embrace a new role as safe places for difficult dialogues. These dialogues could be centered around localized events such as gun violence in a specific city, or more broad topics of social injustices such as slavery or sex trafficking. By raising these kinds of conversations, so many museums are bravely and graciously providing forums for community voices, and building empathetic relationships between visitors and content. By taking on this very important informal educational role, these

cultural institutions are requesting visitors to come face to face with and think critically about difficult, heavy, abstract narratives that can be challenging to emotionally process. This article will explore through research, interviews, and a case study, examples of how to help visitors pause, connect, and create relevance to emotionally charged exhibit topics.

Describing, Defining, and Refining...Relevance in Museum Exhibitions

There are many buzz words in the museum industry such as “participatory,” “decolonization,” “interactive,” “edu-tainment,” “community-driven,” and one that every exhibit team aims to work in — “engaging.” What does it mean to have visitors engage with exhibits? The desired effect can take on many manifestations, but for exhibits centered around difficult subject matter, engaging means to have visitors connect and react to the topic at hand, and, ideally, leave them talking about it after their visit and maybe be inspired to seek a course of responsive action. Allowing for these connective visitor reactions requires space — physical space and mental space. By intentionally integrating a physical and mental footprint for visitors to engage emotionally, while employing an array of exhibit design methodologies to forge connections with many different types of visitors, museum professionals can help audiences find their own voices within the exhibit narrative, build upon their own experiences, and create their own personalized sense of relevance.

Why does creating relevance between visitors and content matter? By creating relevance, an exhibit has the opportunity to be impactful to visitors for hours, days, or even years after their visit. To quote *The Art Of Relevance*, “In the words of cognitive scientists Deidre Wilson and Dan Sperber, relevance ‘yields positive cognitive effect’. Something is relevant if it gives you new information, if it adds meaning to your life.”¹ This is a critical distinction between making just a connection, which is really nothing more than a one-way commonality between content and visitors, and the relevance that is added by the visitor during their experience. When relevance is created, it enables the visitor to use a connection they made to embrace and express new concepts. For museum professionals, these new concepts for visitors, are most often a form of the exhibit’s key messages. Creating relevance is a form of visitor engagement that is the critical transition between visitors simply reading exhibit content versus really digesting it, and seeing how that content applies to their broader spectrum of life beyond the museum walls.

Visitor participation is key to relevance. They must in some way be actively involved in the exhibit to create meaning from it. “People enjoy participation for reasons that go way beyond acquiring and retaining information. Participation and interaction personalize the exhibition environment for visitors.”² This personalization is often the first connection, the metaphorical hook that catches visitors’ attention and gets them involved. This could be achieved with digital, hands-on, or participatory interactives, facilitated dialogue, multimedia, scenic design, imagery or a variety of other means. In addition to providing a variety of types of participation in exhibits, it is important to consider that creating “social spaces where people can discuss ideas have become increasingly important as a way for visitors to deepen their connection to the content of the exhibition.”³ As socialization in exhibit galleries becomes, or should become, more mainstream in the content development process, we must also consider that “as more people enjoy and become accustomed to participatory learning and entertainment experiences, they want to do more than just ‘attend’ cultural events and institutions. Visitors expect access to a broad spectrum of information sources and cultural perspectives...they

expect the ability to discuss, share and remix what they consume.”⁴ These three intertwined concepts can help exhibit developers and designers create the initial foundation and requirements of relevance building — a diversity of non-passive visitor experiences, space to socialize and talk about what they are feeling and experiencing, and for the institution to understand and cater to the visitors’ desires for an array of informative perspectives.

It is also critical for museum professionals to account for and craft content for the many visitor and learning types. Whether it is “explorers, facilitators, experience-seekers, professional/hobbyists or rechargers,”⁵ or “streakers, strollers, and studiers,”⁶ or “visual, aural, reading/writing or kinesthetic,”⁷ or Gardner’s multiple intelligences, as basic as the principle sounds, holding the metric that the entire team be in collective agreement on providing layered and diverse delivery approaches to a variety of visitor/learner types is key to helping visitors create relevance. Writing, designing, and fabricating exhibitry for such a breadth of visitors is no doubt complex. Complexity is costly. So often during final project phase refinements, great ideas can become dangerously simplified into less of the glorious universally designed concept that was once envisioned. Diverse audience approaches must be a design team measurable objective throughout the entirety of the exhibit creation process.

As most museum professionals know, we so often try to cram as much messaging and content as possible into whichever sardine can or ocean liner-scale of space is allotted. It is important to consider the emotional demands we are asking of visitors, especially in terms of processing deep, abstract, and charged stories. With any continual forced intellectual march, it is critical to provide both physical and mental breathing room, or “pause” areas, which provide a place to “debrief emotions and process thoughts.”⁸ This helps visitors to assimilate, synthesize and process the multi-faceted messages museum professionals hope they come away with in tough-topic exhibits. A “pause” area could be any area that is intentionally light on content; a physical and conceptual interstitial space like a hallway, corner area, theater space, bench, or even simple captivating visuals on a wall. It could be any space that is less conceptually noisy than other areas. A pause area can be a radical shift from everything else in the exhibit, and affords the visitor the opportunity to transition from a passive role of receiving information to an active one by expressing their responses. After a few galleries of heavy emotional topics and immersive environmental surroundings, a short reprieve in a content-light space permits visitors the chance to refresh stimuli and conceptual absorption. It is at this point in a physical and emotional juxtaposition from previous galleries, that museum professionals have the best chance to invite visitors to make their own unique connections to content, add their own new information to their experience, and to create relevance.

Defining what it is that should be added to the visitor experience in terms of relevance is crucial. “Relevance only leads to deep meaning if it leads to something substantive.”⁹ In the following case study at the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, the hope was that visitors find a connection to historical and contemporary stories throughout the galleries and that they “feel that the desire for freedom – and the pursuit of liberty – are universally shared experiences.”¹⁰ One concept that helped support this deeper revelation is in the final gallery, which highlights the theme “Your choices affect others.” The intent was to enable visitors to see themselves in the content by connecting to a range of people and events spanning from the Civil War era to present, and that the choices and actions that resulted led to a greater, collective, unified march towards freedom. The exhibit team then wanted visitors

to see that their choices and actions were similar to the examples they see around the gallery, that their choices and actions no matter how significant or insignificant affect others, and they can help everyone move towards a better and more equitable society. The demand is lofty to say the least. By striving to facilitate connections and permit visitors the time and room to shape how what they see is relevant to them, museum professionals can help translate conceptual “big ideas” into real visitor experiences.

The case study below looks almost exclusively at the “Freedom Gallery,” the final gallery of the visitor experience. With help from facilitated dialogue leaders, media and content specialists, exhibit designers, and staff photo researchers, this transdisciplinary design team collaborated to thread visitors from a highly immersive nineteenth-century exhibition space to a bright contemporary gallery where their connections and expressions become meaningful and memorable museum experiences.

Case Study: Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center

The Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center’s new permanent exhibition, *One More River to Cross*, is located inside a former U.S. Customs house, at the former base of the last bridge before crossing to Canada. The city and natural wonder of Niagara Falls was a major tourist hub in the 1800s and drew visitors from all over the country, many of whom were slave owners. This immersive and experiential exhibit introduces visitors to a handful of real characters, follows their struggles for freedom, and looks deeply into their experiences and choices. “Visitors are invited to consider parallels and other important historical and contemporary stories, with the hope that these stories and connections will allow for deeper thought, consideration of new or different perspectives, and prompt actions in our own lives.”¹¹ Towards the end of the exhibit, the experience of historical human and social injustice transition into contemporary universal questions communicated to visitors through a variety of exhibit techniques.

The experience begins in the public atrium of the newly renovated Niagara Falls Amtrak train station where a fifty-foot wall brings to life the harrowing journey many African Americans took to escape slavery, many of whom went north to Canadian border towns like Niagara Falls. Here, visitors on “Freedom Conversation” tours engage with museum staff who are trained as facilitated dialogue leaders. These visitor experience specialists “talk about boundaries, group dynamics, and invite all to contribute to the conversation and listen to others’ perspectives.”¹² These conversations are impactful throughout the exhibit experience because it sets the tone that this safe space invites visitors to express their reactions from the very beginning. The facilitated dialogue narrative arc initializes the ability to address “community building, sharing one’s own experiences, exploring beyond one’s own experiences, synthesizing and closing the learning experience.”¹³ According to museum director, Ally Spongr, “the staff uses exhibit components throughout the facilitated dialogue, which strengthen the story and how the museum connects visitors with take away messages.”¹⁴



Figure 1: Underground Railroad historical overview wall and gathering area. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, Amtrak Station Atrium. Photo: Copyright 2018 Kim Smith Photo and Seth Frankel/Studio Tectonic.

Once prepped, visitors enter an arrival gallery featuring a recreated train station platform and a town building from the 1850s-60s. They are introduced to key characters that reappear throughout the exhibit including freedom seekers, businessmen, abolitionists, bystanders, bounty hunters, waiters, and tourists, each discovered through research of historical documentation. Visitors will later see that these characters embody the same core universal human and social injustice values voiced by the contemporary figures they will meet in the final gallery.

From the train station, visitors move to the famed Cataract House hotel, a nexus of underground railroad activity in Niagara Falls at the time. This immersive space elaborates on the dual roles played by many waiters, freedom seekers, tourists, and townspeople. In the subsequent gallery, a theater space set within an immersive ferry landing and toll booth under a bridge, the two most common ports of exit for Freedom Seekers at the time, depicts dramatic and emotionally moving illustrated short stories of escape. These moments were the heart and climax of many Freedom Seeker experiences. Next, visitors walk along a recreated section of the historic International Suspension Bridge, previously located across the street. Halfway across the bridge, they cross a projected boundary line- "SLAVERY - United States, FREEDOM - Canada". At this denouement, visitors see what life was like on the other side of being on the run, and take note of the choices and continued struggles Freedom Seekers worked through after surviving an unimaginable journey. It is at this point, that visitors round a corner and enter a short hallway, a physical, emotional, and narrative "pause" point, and then enter into the Freedom Gallery. This gallery pulls visitors into the contemporary, provides multiple points of personal connection, and permits them to respond and add to their own experiences from their time at the museum, and from the entirety of their lives.

How Does The Freedom Gallery Create Relevance?

“The understandings of the information in the exhibit and the message are very much the results of a group effort.”¹⁵ As with any good project, it is the sum of work from many teams that creates a successful product. The Freedom Gallery is no exception. The following breakdown of exhibit approaches identifies, not in any particular ranking, the series of elements that work together to help visitors pause, connect, reflect, and create relevance.

Exhibit Design

Throughout the exhibit, large fabricated metal arrows with high-level inspirational text fly through the space. These arrows subliminally guide visitors through their experience conceptually and physically and feature a highly curated collection of contemporary and historical quotes about freedom. By the time visitors reach the last gallery, these quotes build to a collection of aspirational messages that become visually depicted around the gallery through a blend of text and imagery. The longest quote arrow leads visitors down a short hallway flanked by a large mural on one side and a glass wall on the other. The glass wall is lined with life-size representations of the historical characters that visitors first met in the recreated train station, standing alongside contemporary Western New Yorkers. This transitional space marks the end of the immersive environment and fulfills the purpose of the physical, emotional, and narrative pause that enables visitors to slow down and process.



Figure 2: Gallery entrance showing life size historical and contemporary figures. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, Freedom Gallery. Courtesy of Seth Frankel, Studio Tectonic.



Figure 3: Photo Mosaic wall showing events relating to freedom. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, Freedom Gallery. Courtesy of James Neiss/Niagara Gazette.

This transition flows into the primary exhibit elements of this not-so-large gallery, which include two photo mosaic walls made up of more than fifty tiled photo images. Radically different from the rest of the exhibit, these mosaic photo walls serve as a conceptual pallet cleanser and beg for deeper visitor inspection. With this hook, line, and sink tactic almost exclusively reliant on a collection of imagery, visitors see that the more modern imagery and surrounding messaging still reflect the same human and social issues as in the historic galleries. Saladin Allah, a visitor experience specialist at the center, poses, “It’s not a transition from past to present, it’s a chronology they are going through. When is the exact time when the night becomes day? There is no real point that demarcates that, it’s a transition. That’s how the two galleries tie into each other. One of the ways this works is quotes from modern times that links to contemporary people.”¹⁶ The overall interpretive and exhibit design approach is intentionally very simple. One wall is comprised of *events* related to freedom, and the other of *people* related to freedom, but most people probably would not notice that. On one of those walls, a lockable wall display case allows for museum staff to change out daily newspaper headlines, enabling the time span of connections to remain ever present. The intent for this conceptual pause area was for the photo-snapshot stories to invite visitors to make a memory connection to a photo, if even just a single one, and to be receptive to conversations about the difficult topics of human and social history embedded within it. After visitors allow for a little introspection, the rest of the exhibit works together to express the universality of seeking freedom.

Written Content Development

A “content” light approach, does not necessarily mean less writing, rather more thoughtfulness about what is written. There is a small gallery introductory panel about

continued struggles for freedom that actually “isn’t often read, but that’s okay because visitors are already clued into what the gallery is doing.”¹⁷ Once attracted to the mosaics, visitors read short eight to fifteen word captions identifying the person or event and the relation to freedom. This minimal text identifies just enough of the photo context to beg visitors to fill in the gaps of what they know, or ask about what they don’t. For example, in the image below, a well-known actress and an unknown young Yemeni woman are featured. The photo selections represent that roles as large as leading a march or as small as wearing your culture proudly are equally important upstanding and powerful actions. The upper image caption says “About 1976 in Buffalo, New York. A young Yemeni woman at home in Buffalo, whose population includes immigrants and refugees from all over the world.” The lower image caption states, “January 21, 2017 in Los Angeles, California. Actress Tracee Ellis Ross speaks at a Women’s March On Washington solidarity Sister March.”



Figure 4: Detail view of installed exhibit photo mosaic graphics. Adjacent photo snapshot graphic panels. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, Freedom Gallery. Photo: Copyright 2018 Kim Smith Photo and Seth Frankel/Studio Tectonic.

Visual and Photo Use

Content developers helped photo researchers create an initial outline of the kinds of photos to look for. The focus included a mixture of people and events, men and women, individuals and groups from many different places, more than a century-long time span, and most importantly, a mix of notable and not-so-notable subjects all doing notable acts for Freedom. “In fifty images we couldn’t possibly cover everything, and we really wanted to include local

images from Western New York. We didn't follow a metric, we really just wanted to look at stories of freedom in a global context, we didn't want to get too deep in the details...By putting unknowns and knowns together, they are all still stories of freedom."¹⁸ It is this aspect that makes the photos so palpable, so relatable. The photos are where local and non-local visitors equally connect to the larger exhibit narrative. "The Freedom Gallery evokes personal connections more than any other gallery because of its wide array of people, places and events depicted there, nearly every visitor finds SOMETHING that resonates with them, and find something they can share."¹⁹ They see their own memories of human and social issues in the photo walls. People like to talk about their own memories. The images they see and respond to give them the courage to do just that.



Figure 5: Museum visitors explore the photo wall in the Freedom Gallery and connect to events related to freedom from the Civil War era to present. Courtesy of Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center. Photo by Alanadetolarts Photography.

Media Use

Including Western New Yorkers was a very important decision for the team. The center of one of the large mosaic walls features a large media piece focusing on five individuals from the Buffalo and Niagara Falls area that bring a real world and tangible connection to the abstract messages conveyed by the quotations and photos. In actuality, "visitors don't really notice that the people in the video are locals...they just see them as universal stories."²⁰ The five interviewees, first noticed as life-size figures along the glass wall in the gallery transition,

speak to the universal messages and relationships with freedom. For example, each video clip starts with a title slide “Freedom Is...” followed by the written description of the gestalt of the two-minute or so long clip, “Being able to choose,” “Having a voice,” “To laugh and to dance.” These are the fervent words of the subjects in the stories. With media treatment, their simple words are empowered and represent universal concepts that speak to everyone. It is clear that the locals in the film survived extremely dark times, as did the historical characters highlighted throughout the previous exhibit areas. “One can’t make an equivalent with slavery, but they were all oppressed.”²¹ The topics in the media pieces include human trafficking, fighting for Muslim women’s rights, experiencing racism, avoiding death for freedom of speech, and empowering black youth. These are difficult, intense stories, but “everyone was helping others...giving a voice to a community...empowering kids...helping Muslim women not cower, helping kids be themselves, to laugh and to dance, and to look through to the positive.”²² Looking at the choices these people made after surviving the circumstances they were in, one sees that the storyline isn’t their sadness, rather, their choices are having a positive effect on them, on those they are directly helping, and now on the museum audience. Their triumphs speak specifically to them, but their issues and actions speak to all of us. Visitors hear their stories, and see where and how it applies to their broader life experiences, thus helping create relevance.

An intentional media production approach helps prevent distraction from these deep stories. Throughout each short film, still photographs paired with audio tell the story instead of video recordings. The photos “lift you above the particulars of everyday life,”²³ and keep the bird’s eye view of the messaging on track. This important decision may only fall into the “things not noticed” category, but that is the art of exhibit design. What we don’t see influences what we do see. This media production approach flows effortlessly with the surrounding photo walls while bringing the core meaning of the stories into just the right light and environmental equilibrium.



Figure 6: A media piece featuring five local Western New Yorkers anchors the gallery with contemporary stories that speak to universal messages of freedom. Niagara Falls

Facilitated Dialogue

As previously stated, facilitated dialogue plays a large role in this exhibit, specifically with group visits. The museum has several visitor experience specialists who have trained intensively with a facilitated dialogue program created in collaboration between the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center and the International Coalition for Sites of Conscience. “The Freedom Gallery is used to draw out contemporary issues in other galleries,”²⁴ which really ties the comprehensive narrative experience together. “If the tour group has not yet arrived at a place where they’re having conversations about contemporary social justice issues yet, the Freedom gallery is a safety net that guarantees these conversations will occur.”²⁵ Facilitated dialogue enables visitors to respond to shared stories between themselves and the visitor experience specialists, and to contribute to the conversation either openly or privately. “In one part you give people the space to share, but you also allow people to be more introspective about what they are experiencing.”²⁶ At this exhibit, visitor experience specialists play a key role in “turning memory into action,”²⁷ helping visitors address the questions brought up during the dialogue, and to work through and discover their own added meaning in their museum experience.



Figure 7: A visitor experience specialist leads a group of visitors through a facilitated dialogue tour. Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, Arrival Gallery. Courtesy Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

Staff Observations

No formal post-visit evaluations have yet been conducted, but many museum staff have witnessed powerful visitor reactions to the overall exhibit, and specifically to the Freedom Gallery. The select statements below are a collection of comments from two of the several visitor experience specialists as well as members of the museum leadership team.

- “When we get into the Freedom Gallery, and my group slowly stops talking to me, that's when I can see it sort of ‘hit them between the eyes.’ That's when I know they've digested it.”
- “People realize when they arrive at the Freedom Gallery that this isn't a history museum.”
- “We receive donations, thank you cards, and side conversations about how much the content connected with them.”
- “The exhibit encourages visitors to draw their own conclusion.”
- “I love when people are leaving with thoughts, not just ‘wow that was cool.’”
- “When they leave- they're still talking about.”
- “People understand what we're trying to show.”
- “People are often contemplative after watching the videos- more introspective.”
- “They LOVE the images...They go RIGHT for the mosaic images.”
- “Some people converse with me about what I said, but in their own words, which tells me that they understand.”

Strategies for Creating Relevance

Any museum professional will say creating exhibitions is not formulaic in nature. Each project is lovingly nurtured for months if not years and forms its own personality and essence. There will always be a unique collection of tactics for success for every project, but at the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, here is a short list of the transdisciplinary methodologies that work together to support the creation of relevance between exhibit content and visitors in the museum's Freedom Gallery:

1. Physical space to permit narrative changes and sensory rest.
2. Content-light areas to allow for mental processing and slow content consumption.
3. Juxtaposition of design approach to provide a scenic/environmental “reboot.”
4. Varied exhibit implementation approaches for diverse learner types.
5. Content crafted to reach a variety of pre-existing audience awareness memories (if possible), that sparks personal connections.
6. Reinforcement of previously introduced topics.
7. Visitor engagement.
8. Specific personal experiences that translate to universal concepts.
9. Breadth of viewpoints that look at the same theme, through various lenses.

In conclusion, these guiding principles will help visitors not only pause, reflect, and connect to exhibit messages, but also find and add their own form of relevance to their museum experience. It is difficult to hold so many considerations in mind while creating exhibits, but essential in helping to communicate high-level messages about emotionally charged narratives to a broad audience. Visitors want to connect and they want to create personal meaning from what they see. We just have to give them the support, encouragement, and physical and emotional room to do just that.

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Notes

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