DESIGN YOUR EXHIBITION

An exhibition tells a story to a visitor. It appeals to people through their senses using:
• visual stimulus, which is the strongest and most memorable
• sensation, such as hearing, which is immediate and associative
• words and reading, which require the most effort and mental processing

BEFORE YOU BEGIN
The physical design of an exhibition is a planned and sequential process. It relies heavily on a structure to ensure that it works. The design comes after decisions are made about what to display and why. The storyline informs the amount of space required, the placement of objects and the sequence in which visitors will move around the exhibition.

The exhibition's message is an essential guide for the design.

BASIC PLANNING
Putting together an exhibition involves a set of tasks that is unlikely to change much, regardless of the size and scope of your particular project. The main variables will be the length of time allocated to each task, the number of people involved, and whether there is any construction work to be done.

Stage one: planning
• General planning and drafting of the budget and schedule
• Writing the brief / developing the story
• Collecting the objects and material for display

Stage two: design development
• Evaluating the objects and doing a potential layout, including graphics, title wall and any other support material
• Finalising requirements for lighting and display (eg plinths, showcases)
• Getting quotes for any production work

Stage three: production
• Writing labels
• Constructing plinths, including time for paint drying and off-gassing (the release of fumes from paints, varnishes and certain building materials; allow at least two weeks)
• Preparing the exhibition space (eg removing unwanted furniture, fittings etc prior to cleaning, painting and final installation)
• Producing graphics (eg reproduction photographs, graphic/text panels or vinyl lettering for a title wall)

Stage four: installation and completion
• Printing the labels
• Organising lighting
• Installing plinths, showcases, graphics, labels and other exhibition support material
• Installing objects
• Opening or launching the exhibition
SPATIAL PLANNING
The initial phase in spatial planning is to work out, from the story or brief, how many main ideas, or themes that the exhibit will have. Usually an exhibition has up to five main themes. Then you need to assess each grouping of objects for scale and size to establish what their display requirements will be. For example, will they need plinths or will they need to be displayed on walls? Do you have a budget for graphics?

You also need to determine an appropriate structure for the exhibition layout and the sequence in which the visitor will move through the exhibition. There are two main types: (1) directed and (2) undirected.

OBJECT DISPLAY TECHNIQUES
There is no single way to design an exhibition. You need to consider the physical relationship between the objects. Think about:

- how you will divide the space, either horizontally or vertically
- whether you will use a symmetrical or asymmetrical layout
- making patterns, particularly if you have multiples of the same object
- contrast between forms
- back-drops

Use strong visual impact to engage the visitor. You can do this through the placement of two or more objects near each other, variation in shapes, and the use of other visual elements such as colour.

Focal points
When a visitor first walks into the exhibition, what are they going to see? Will it attract and draw them in? The point to which the eye is drawn is known as the focal point. The first focal point is a long view. It should be supported by other focal points throughout the exhibition to keep attracting visitors from one point to another.

It is always important to create a hierarchy of the objects you intend to display so you can establish which objects to use as focal points. The colour, texture and form of the objects need to be considered when making these choices.

Grouping and alignment
Grouping is a very powerful way of concentrating the attention of visitors, either through precision grouping or studied carelessness. ‘Precision grouping’ uses alignments that are accurately measured (use a tape measure for exactness). ‘Studied carelessness’ creates a dynamic in a display. For example, a sewing box can be displayed with its contents arranged so as to appear spilled.

Flat objects such as paintings, photographs, prints or drawings need to be hung at a comfortable viewing height. For adults, this is generally 1500mm from floor level, measured to the centre of the objects. After setting this line, you can vary some of the smaller objects just above and below the line, with larger objects on the line. Another way is to align all of the objects at the top. Remember that differing horizon lines within these objects need to be taken into consideration, and directionality in the arrangement should aim to direct the visitor’s gaze. As always, balance is important to ensure a cohesive and effective presentation.
LIGHTING

The most important thing to know about lighting is that over-exposure of objects to high light levels can cause irreversible damage. Photographs, fabric and newspaper clippings can fade in full light levels after months on display. The level of light is measured in lux. Measuring devices known as light meters can be bought relatively cheaply from electronic stores.

You can manage your exhibition lighting by:
• limiting the time objects are exposed to high lux levels
• reducing the lux level of electric lighting to 100 lux, using a dimmer system and light meter
• reducing the amount of natural light using blinds or UV films applied directly to the windows

EMPLOYING A DESIGNER OR ARCHITECT

If your project is a very big one, consider employing a local designer or architect to design your display. They can help you make the most of your project – and your budget – through their experience and knowledge of design, documentation and project management. A designer or architect will work on a fixed fee or an hourly rate. Working for an hourly rate often makes it difficult to assess the final cost, whereas a fixed-fee quotation will give you greater control over your budget.

A fixed fee quotation is calculated on the estimated total number of hours based on the information you provide. If there are additions or changes to the original instructions (eg things you forgot to tell them or you’ve changed your mind), there will be a variation in the cost. Therefore it’s important that you give them as much information as possible. This is usually done using a simple written document or brief outlining the following:
• the aims of the project
• the budget and schedule
• who the contacts are
• the location of the exhibition
• visitor information (eg your target audience)
• written content brief, including communication aims
• information on the objects (photographed and measured, giving height, depth, weight and width)
• other items for inclusion, such as seating, AVs, graphics, title wall, text
• any other parameters, such as whether the exhibition is housed in a building with a conservation order on it

The brief must detail the scope of the work involved and clarify responsibilities. When you engage the designer, these should be clearly outlined in a signed agreement along with agreed processes and deadlines.

Typically, the designer’s responsibilities include:
• doing an accurate measure of the exhibition space if drawings aren’t available
• providing a design concept for approval
• providing an object layout and lighting plan
• providing design and construction documentation
• attending meetings
• supervising production and construction
• meeting the budget and schedule

Typically, the exhibition organiser’s responsibilities include:
• providing exhibition content (objects, graphic, AVs etc)
• providing object documentation
• providing text
• organising electricians and other technicians
• managing all aspects of budget and payment of contractors
• identifying who signs off on the project and co-ordinating sign-off

FURTHER INFORMATION
Exhibition design is a vast and interesting area. The information provided here by the Powerhouse Museum is just a preliminary guide for small displays. If you are designing an exhibition yourself or are employing a local designer or architect who is unfamiliar with exhibition design and museum practices, you may wish to find out more specialist information covering such things as conservation requirements, designing and building object supports, mounting and installation. There are many books available. The following provide good information:

• Exhibitions: a practical guide for small museums and galleries by Georgia Rouette. Published by Museums Australia, 2007

• Museum exhibition: theory and practice by David Dean. Published by Routledge, New York 1994

• Designing exhibitions by Giles Velarde. Published by Design Council, London 1988