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A speech at the seminar "Scenography in exhibitions and museums" at

## Typological development in exhibition design in the Netherlands

Thinking of museums, often the image of a monumental building springs to mind. In this building we expect to find rooms filled with historic objects or large halls displaying art. Traditionally, the museum's main focus is 'the object' or 'the collection'. And thus exhibition design is a supporting shell around this collection. Apart from textual information, directly linked to the displayed objects, there is no information about the topic of the exhibition. The design follows a scientific approach or a certain aesthetic fashion. Its ambition does not reach beyond a cosmetic approach.

With the conceptual or thematic exhibition we see a reversed version of this hierarchy. Here the story plays the central part and the objects or relics have an illustrative function. These exhibitions usually have an educative goal and are developed with the advice of scientists. We can find these presentations in science or nature museums.



Within this distinction of object-orientated and conceptual exhibitions, we design the latter. And mainly in the field of these conceptual exhibitions major changes have taken place since the mid 80's. In an attempt to reach a wider audience we have consecutively experimented with different ways of exhibiting. The positive aspect of this process is that we have found new ways to display that can be used simultaneously.

I will now give you an overview of the means of communication as a typology in chronological order. Subjective as I am, it will follow the development our company has made through the years; the examples given are taken from our own projects.

Initially it was sufficient to add a short text to the displayed objects. As the demand for more explanation increased, these texts became more important and definitely longer.

Now the text was often placed on separate panels, usually with illustrations. Since museums were merely experienced in developing catalogues and print, graphic design agencies were asked to design the exhibition. As a result the design became dominated by the use of text. The presentation became separate from the content; one could describe these as 'dressed' exhibitions. Then with the arrival of audiovisual media and moving objects the visitor became actively invited to start parts of the exhibition. With such examples our typological overview starts:

### **“Dressed” exhibitions**

The visitor looks at the objects displayed in the exposition. Usually textual information is placed near the object. Often the design consists of nothing but panels with text and illustrations. The emphasis of the design is an aesthetic one. These expositions are usually centred upon artefacts and historical or scientific information.

#### **Historama, abbey of Middelburg**

We were asked to show the history of this abbey by placing large photographs and big legible texts on the walls. It seemed to us that the text provided - a complete book - would in this way not be read by the visitors. We thought it was best to separate the text from the images and to always display it as a book, every time opened on a different page. As we did not want to disturb the specific historical quality of the abbey we used modern materials with an historic feel; canvas with wooden knobs, wooden plates on chains and silk-screen printed text that looked like parchment.



*'Historama' (Historical exhibition in the abbey of Middelburg)*

### **Active exhibitions**

In this type of exhibition the visitor not only walks around, he also has the opportunity to start machines or objects, mostly by pressing a button or automatically, by the use of a sensor.

#### **Milieu op de korrel, Tilburg**

A journalist described this interactive exhibition we designed for a nature museum as follows: “At first instance the nature museum was exactly what one could expect from it; stuffed animals, an aquarium with various reptiles and fishes, feel-it-yourself-skins from deer (complete with bullet holes) and pinned-up butterflies. Good, but not really titillating. A bit further, some huge models of insects already charmed us. The real surprise however was at the end of the exhibition. We entered a room with bright coloured objects. Especially after all the familiar objects we’d seen in the other parts of the museum this intrigued us. The first thing that caught our eye was a cartoon figure on a toilet and 3 pig heads, a bit further. Funny, but a bit odd. It all looked very lively, but nothing was happening. Not until we walked a bit further. As soon as we approached the pig heads they stretched their noses towards us and farted. When we pulled the lever of the toilet a voice out of nowhere started talking to us. This happened throughout the whole exhibition; things happened because we walked past something or because we touched something. In a very exciting

fashion environmental issues were being brought to our attention. Not in a patronising way, but witty and understandable and in a way that makes it impossible to just have a passive glimpse. The subject of the exhibition might at first instance seem boring but what they've done with it is definitely different!



*'Milieu op de korrel', Tilburg ('Playing tricks on environment')*

In the 80's, in the Netherlands, there was an initiative to build a science centre. With the prospect of huge government funding everyone wanted to be involved. I also was part of this process. En masse we left for the mother of all science centres; Frank Oppenheimer's Exploratorium in San Francisco. His CookBooks seemed to be the recipe for a successful exhibition.

The 'normal' museums were very hesitant to adapt to this "shallow theme-park" approach. But also here the urge to explain more and to educate became more and more apparent. And with the success of the first of these type of exhibitions they became enthusiastic. In fact, they became so enthusiastic that until far in the 90's it was commonplace to think an exhibition was not complete without some 'do-things'.

Today the interactive principle is still a valid way to get a visitor more involved with a subject, to make the visitor question, to see relations, to come to conclusions. We don't state an opinion; we give the visitor the tools to form his own. The interactive principle is especially useful for thematic exhibitions in science and nature museums. An exhibit lets the visitor experience a basic principle. I often explained to our clients what interaction between the exhibit and the visitor really is:

### **Interactive exhibitions**

"Try to learn to cycle by looking in a show-case and pressing some buttons". Interactive exhibitions bubble with enthusiasm. They have a light feel to them and provide information in an original way. We strive to make both children and adults experiment and thus have experiences. 'Interactive' means that some form of a dialog between the visitor and the exhibited elements takes place. The visitor does something that starts an interaction with the exhibit; in order to get new information the visitor has to do more. The visitor does not walk around passively, he or she is involved. This goes further than pushing some buttons. Key factor is that it has to be inspiring. It has to be interesting and it's allowed to be good fun.

Settings are created that excite and evoke actions. They don't describe exactly what there is to discover, they give the visitors the opportunity to discover themselves. If explanation is needed it is brief, simple and clear.



*'Professor Plons', Rotterdam, an exhibition about naval basics for children*

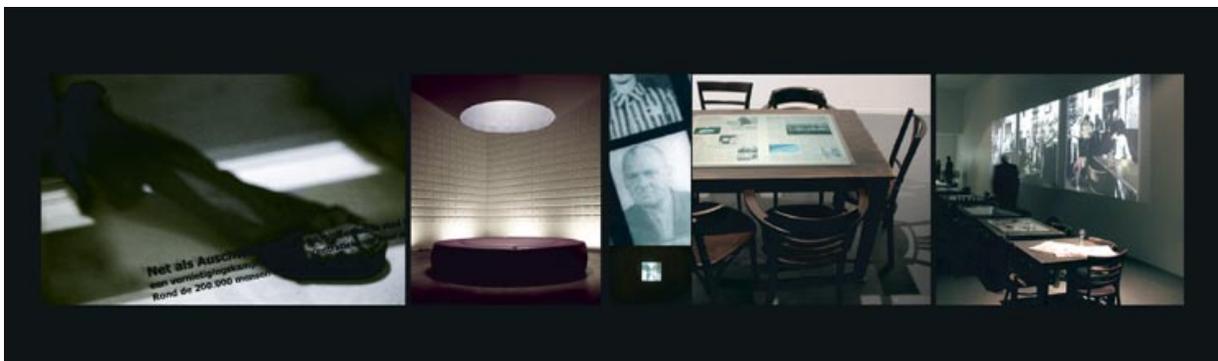
How is this difficult? Problems that seem simple are often difficult while simple problems appear complex. Even for experts some things are difficult. An element that is not totally understood at first sight is not necessarily unsuitable. The visitor is allowed to think!

By trial and error the visitor experiences what does not work in certain circumstances. He discovers, on his own level, the optimal conditions. Just answers are not very interesting; a phonebook is filled with it, and unfortunately so are quite a few exhibitions. We want the visitor to question, to see relations, to come to a conclusion. Playing is, in contrast to what some think, not insignificant; one learns the most by discovery.

This is how we achieved interaction between visitors and the exhibition elements. But what intrigued us even more was the possibility to achieve interaction between the visitors themselves. Or following our typology...

### **Social exhibitions**

Exhibitions that lead to a deep, thought provoking experience. Visitors are invited to discuss the exhibited elements. The visitors' own way of experiencing the exhibition, partly formed by their individual background, play an important part here.



*National Monument Camp Vught, Vught*

## Identity

The 'Kunsthal' was invented to exhibit objects, in a museum without its own collection. But we created exhibitions without a collection, in a museum. To explore the definition of a museum, the Dutch Museum Association, held a seminar in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam with the theme: "What is a museum?" The outcome was a definition that a museum is an institute that collects objects, conserves and studies them and displays them to the public. So by these standards should we consider a zoo a museum? "No," said the museum world "A zoo does not conserve." "Yes," said the zoo "because we have a large live collection." The definition also put us in strange situations; once we created a great looking exhibition, in the form of giant pop-up books. Just before the opening the museum quickly got stuffed birds from the depot to add to the exhibition; after all it was a registered museum.



*"Blumberger Mühle", Angermünde, Germany*

After the somewhat concise, educative and technical influences of the science centres all of a sudden there was an interest in thematic exhibitions. But even more important, it became possible to create a certain atmosphere. Many designers see an exhibition as a collection of designed elements in a space. We always let the design evolve from the theme and therefore it will always have an association with that theme. We like making use of a metaphor for the main shape, or design, which holds the rest. The spatial experience is what counts! This turns the museum in a place where the visitor can be placed into a theme by diving into a total experience. This takes us to our next typological step:

## Evocative exhibitions

Exhibitions in which the atmospheric experience is most important. The visitor becomes part of the total experience he is thrown into. The theme is presented in a theatrical manner, with the use of audiovisual media. The experience that is offered should be as concrete as possible and the simulation of a certain situation has to be as convincing as possible. Quite often the visitor stays in the same spot and is here audio-visually active.

The information is given in an entertaining way. This is a total experience that seems, for budget reasons, exclusively available for the big attractions.



*'Industrion', museum for industry and society, Kerkrade*

Also the middle sized museums want to be part of this development, but the cost of interactive exhibits and scenery is often too much. Certainly when applied in a temporary exhibition. Furthermore there is the danger that the content becomes less important than the dominating design and achieved effects. This development in which we initially were pioneers, seemed to get lost in its own success by a forced goal of audience participation and education.

This is illustrated in the following newspaper article. "Evening visits, preferably after a lecture and followed by Egyptian, Greek or other appropriate snacks is the least a modern museum has to offer. Dyeing textile, a picnic, a pop concert or a course in story writing, the museum visitor of today needs to be excited. A museum that does not join in this experience economy is old fashioned. (Source: NRC Handelsblad)

We were looking for a good and affordable style of exhibition design that had respect for the objects while still intensely supplying information. This takes us to our next typological step:

### **Software driven exhibitions**

Exhibitions in which the software applications and collection are physically apart. The objects are displayed in the exhibition space and software interactively provides information. The software application continually makes the visitor go to a part of the exhibition or an object. The visitor can use a traditional exhibition of objects much like a database of information. This form of exhibiting works well for different target audiences; elderly visitors might prefer to simply look at the objects while younger visitors might be more attracted to the software which, more or less, forces them to look at the objects. An advantage of this is saving money by not having to build complicated exhibits. There is also more respect for the objects; they're not build-in. One of these exhibitions had all the used displayed objects photographed and these images and the software were put on a CD-ROM that was distributed to all high schools. That's not a bad left over from a temporary exhibition!



*'Huysmanshoeve', Nature Visitorscentre Eeklo, Belgium*

### **Future of museums**

Also the Dutch government and the Dutch Museum Association think about the future of the museum. Initially the government wanted more use out of the existing collection in de museums. The idea was that the Dutch museums, over a thousand of them, have a shared collection. A new name was born: 'the collection the Netherlands'. This plan meant an unlimited exchange between the Dutch museums. The result however was that, even more then before, the museums kept their collection to themselves, in order to maintain their right to exist and uniqueness.

Another way to use the museums more efficiently was to make them more accessible for a wider target audience; extra funding was made available to aim at 'newcomers' and children. While developing an exhibition we also made sure it was compatible with the curriculum of schools.

Lately the government seems to be more and more concerned with big projects such as renovating the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. They score more with the public by doing this then with initiatives in minor museums.

The Dutch Museum Association used its 75<sup>th</sup> year of existence to discuss the future of the museum. The following ideas about the future were presented:

- 1 The Virtual Physical Museum  
(This museum has both a virtual and physical collection)
- 2 The Custom Made Museum  
(This museum is a competitor with other recreational activities)
- 3 The Museum as a Monastery (Maintenance, conservation and research)
- 4 Together on the Road Museum  
(Collaboration with other heritage organisations)
- 5 Two Faced Museum (Museum and commercial organisation)
- 6 Mega Museum (Large with specialised employees)

The design solution does not exist. New possibilities however have come to light. We will always be searching for more, on the border where the museum's approach meets the visitor's. We will meet future techniques and are aware of what we want from the visitor. However ambitious in our work we might think we are, the reality could be totally different. A headline from NRC Handelsblad puts things in perspective: "Museums future lays with wheeled walker"

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