

DESIGNER MAKER USER: DEVELOPING INTERPRETATION FOR THE NEW DESIGN MUSEUM, LONDON*

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Abstract: *On 24 November 2016, the Design Museum opened in its new location in Kensington, west London — the culmination of a ten-year capital project to create a new type of museum of design for the twenty-first century. Three times the size of its former site on Shad Thames, the new museum has a democratic vision «to inspire everyone to understand the value of design». This vision is underpinned by three core messages: that design is everywhere, that it is for everyone, and that it shapes and improves lives. Communicating the vision is a curatorial endeavour at its core. This endeavour is realised through the interpretative language expressed in the free permanent display Designer Maker User; the temporary exhibitions; and the learning, public engagement and research activities. Underpinning the museum's mission is the democratic impulse of its vision — emphasising the ubiquity and inclusiveness of design.*

Keywords: *design; curating; interpretation; learning; audience.*

Resumo: *A 24 de novembro de 2016, o Design Museum abriu na sua nova localização em Kensington, no oeste de Londres — o culminar de um projeto capital de dez anos para criar um novo tipo de museu de design para o século XXI. Com três vezes a dimensão do seu antigo local em Shad Thames, o novo museu tem uma visão democrática «para inspirar todos a compreenderem o valor do design». Esta visão é sustentada por três mensagens centrais: que o design está em todo o lado, que é para todos, e que molda e melhora vidas. Comunicar a visão é um esforço curatorial no seu âmago. Este esforço é realizado através da linguagem interpretativa expressa na exposição permanente gratuita Designer Maker User; nas exposições temporárias; e nas atividades de aprendizagem, envolvimento público e investigação. Subjacente à missão do museu está o impulso democrático da sua visão — enfatizando a ubiquidade e a inclusividade do design.*

Palavras-chave: *design; curadoria; interpretação; aprendizagem; público.*

On 24 November 2016, the Design Museum opened in its new location in Kensington, west London — the culmination of a ten-year capital project to create a new type of museum of design for the twenty-first century. Three times the size of its former site on Shad Thames, the new museum has a democratic vision «to inspire everyone to understand the value of design». This vision is underpinned by three core messages: that design is everywhere, that it is for everyone, and that it shapes and improves lives. Communicating the vision is a curatorial endeavour at its core.

* With thanks to Alex Newson, Senior Curator.

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This endeavour is realised through the interpretative language expressed in the free permanent display *Designer Maker User*; the temporary exhibitions; and the learning, public engagement and research activities. Underpinning the museum's mission is the democratic impulse of its vision — emphasising the ubiquity and inclusiveness of design.

Focusing on the interpretation approach developed for the permanent display *Designer Maker User*, this paper explores how the museum made the transition from being a specialist, paid entry offer in Shad Thames to its new incarnation as a more inclusive and accessible museum of design — with a threefold increase in visitor number targets. The transition from the former site to the new one was itself a design process which entailed a fresh approach to the display and interpretation of designed objects. Following design thinking principles, the challenge came first, and was reframed as a project: «the project is the vehicle that carries an idea from concept to reality»¹. How could the museum create a permanent display of twentieth century and contemporary design drawing on the museum's collection that was accessible and inspirational? How can it develop an exhibition that is grounded in the everyday vernacular of design, without assuming any prior knowledge of design practice or history on the part of the visitor? Three stages were involved in addressing the problem, led by the Senior Curator Alex Newson with formative inputs from consultancies as the need arose. For the purposes of this paper, these stages are captured in a reversal of the title of the permanent display to reflect the user-centric approach of the project: hence *User, Maker, Designer*. In discussing the content of the display, I draw extensively on conversations with Newson.

FIRST, USER

Central to the permanent display project was a need to understand the interests and expectations of the user — i.e., current, and prospective audiences. This involved addressing questions of relevance, of how to curate a display that would be meaningful to visitors, and how to give them insight into the ubiquity and impact of design on everyday life. Phase One of the capital project, which started in 2011, saw an intensive and sustained consultation process that would continue across the life of the capital project, with curatorial content and approaches regularly tested. This close engagement and conversation with visitors culminated in the direct input by audiences through the crowd-sourced wall of design that stands at the entrance to the permanent collection display.

¹ BROWN, 2009.



Fig. 1. Crowd Sourced Wall, entrance to *Designer Maker User*

Source: Design Museum, London

This process of developing visitor- or user-centred interpretation finds theoretical co-ordinates drawn from visitor studies in the museum field. It is not an innovation in theory but is yet to become an orthodoxy in curatorial practice.

Our mission is to educate. We cannot do that if we are not serving visitors. We cannot survive if we are not assessing and satisfying the needs of our constituents².

In essence, the project was to develop and inculcate a new model of design object interpretation. The aim was to move away from a heavy focus on discipline, and to avoid making implicit assumptions about the «design capital» of visitors — by which I mean, a body of design history knowledge and design literacy gained through higher education and cultural milieu. Audience research at the former Design Museum revealed that 67% of visitors were specialists, either working, teaching or studying design. For the new museum, the ambition was to develop a programme

² HILL in PITMAN, 1991.

that made no assumptions about visitors' a priori knowledge and understanding of design. This shift is manifest elsewhere in the field of curation in new modes of thematic collection display which dismantle a perceived singular authority of the grand collection narrative — often realised chronologically or by discipline — to offer a variety of more accessible and inclusive ways in to understanding³, or alternatively through new approaches to interpretation that enable the generation and production of cultural meanings from the perspective of the individual visitor⁴.

In the research into comparator institutions and their permanent displays, Tate Modern's radical rethink and thematic representation of their collection upon opening in 2000 was the most resonant with what the Design Museum aimed to achieve. This approach eschewed chronology and discipline in favour of broadly accessible themes. Literature in museum studies positions such approaches as a challenge to the modernist museum project. This project places emphasis on one-way transmission of factual information, arising from specialist knowledge, to a nominal museum visitor. This visitor is viewed as an «empty vessel» to be filled with knowledge — irrespective of their own life experiences, and divorced from the real world, local contexts that informed the conception, production and reception of content⁵. Curatorial orthodoxies exist in curating design: Professor Jonathan Woodham, in his conference keynote, described one such orthodoxy as a form of «moral didacticism» expressed as a curatorial mission to improve taste, through a common sharing of iconic objects amounts to something akin to a «canonisation» of design. I use that term advisedly to suggest both the creation of a canon of design across the twentieth century (Woodham's example being the ubiquity of the Olivetti 1969 red Valentine Typewriter designed by Ettore Sottsass and found in design collections worldwide irrespective of local contexts) and simultaneously, an elevation of status of these objects to something akin to that of sainthood or at least a modicum of godliness — by which is meant, good taste. This deracination of content eschews the nuts and bolts of real world, local context and the messiness of the business context of design. In the case of the Valentine (a plastic case, with a matte finish, designed to be as durable as possible) this real world context is expressed through the tussle between Olivetti's drive to maintain brand reputation and quality with the designer's impulse towards democratisation and ubiquity through offering a low cost affordable price point. Olivetti won. Woodham proposed an alternative museum narrative on the Valentine in which interpretation would not fight shy of Sottsass's own reflection on the piece as a failure. As the designer recounts:

³ LANG, REEVE, WOOLLARD, *eds.*, 2006.

⁴ BLACK, 2005; SIMON, 2010.

⁵ HOOPER-GREENHILL, 2000.

I worked sixty years of my life, and it seems the only thing I did is this fucking red machine. And it came out a mistake. It was supposed to be a very inexpensive portable, to sell in the market, like pens... Then the people at Olivetti said you cannot sell this⁶.

Rethinking the agency of the permanent display in the museum context is a provocative undertaking — especially when it disrupts established ways of working:

Audience research can be an irritant to those curators accustomed to developing the museum product as they see fit. It can also provoke resistance where it challenges prefigured beliefs and assumptions⁷.

For the new Design Museum, adopting the language of a design project which places the user at the centre was a way of navigating this audience development process by framing curating within the practice of the discipline. Audience research could be understood as design behaviour that seeks to get under the skin of the visitor to understand better their interests and motivations. Audience development activity comprised a series of audience consultation fora across 2011-2015. The museum worked with groups from its main visitor constituencies to develop and test approaches to design curation. These constituencies included families, students, teacher and tutors, designers and general adult visitors, with a balance between existing visitors and prospective visitors. The consultation sessions usually lasted 3 hours and were designed and facilitated by colleagues trained in visitor consultation working alongside the curatorial team. Each session was structured around a series of different elements to test; for example, different perspectives or tone of voice used in textual interpretation, or different approaches to interactive activities ranging from low-fi analogue to more involved digital formats. A continuous feedback loop was maintained between the consultations and the curatorial and learning teams, so that content and approaches could be refined and tested on an on-going basis.

Alongside the programme of audience, the museum commissioned a substantive piece of work on audience development by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, a strategic research consultancy working within the culture, heritage, leisure, media and charities sectors. This work, essentially an exercise in audience segmentation using MHM's «culture segments» model, was used alongside qualitative insight from the audience fora and demographic research carried out by Audiences London, to build up a

⁶ ETTORE SOTTASS, 1993 in LARSEN, 2017.

⁷ BLACK, 2005:10.

picture of the type of interpretative approaches that would best deliver the museum's mission to inspire everyone to understand the value of design today.

SECOND, MAKER

The steering group undertook extensive field research activity into how comparator institutions were curating permanent displays of design. Underpinning this was the equivalent of a «literature review» of curatorial approaches worldwide to exhibiting design, commissioned from the design studio From Now On. Additionally the museum worked with a consultancy, Tim Gardom Associates, to develop an interpretation tool kit that would enable the transformation of the material culture of design into powerful and impactful experiences that would engage, inform and inspire visitors by presenting content in ways that were relatable to the lives, experiences and expectations of visitors.

Field research revealed that many design collections tended to be part of larger collections of fine art or decorative art, or even science. This tended to influence how the collections were displayed and interpreted — often as a fetishizing of the object itself, with a series of designed objects placed on plinths and displayed as sculpture, co-opting the language of display from a fine art context — an area explored elsewhere⁸. Other collections tended to place a heavy emphasis on the history and chronology of design. All of these approaches are valid and, in many cases, suited the exquisiteness of the exhibits and the collections. However, the museum's focus was to be about the impact of the designs rather than on the designs themselves. In many cases the most important aspect wasn't the object itself but the story it told, with the user at the centre of this story.

We looked most closely at Tate Modern in London, where I had worked as Senior Curator in the Education Department from prior to opening in 2000 until 2006. When Tate Modern first opened in 2000, collections were presented thematically rather than chronologically or accordingly to schools or disciplines. This decision was unusual — and vaguely controversial — at the time. However, it has subsequently proven to be hugely successful and enabled a new generation of people to connect with contemporary art.

Surprisingly we didn't find any examples of design collections presented thematically. There were plenty of examples of temporary exhibitions, but no permanent collection displays. That provided us with our challenge — our design project. The basic premise for our resultant thematic approach is that design is a process carried out by people, for people. And at its heart is a dialogue between three key participants: the designer, the maker and the user. The display comprises objects

⁸ CHARMAN in FARRELLY, WEDDELL, 2016.

from the collection, loaned items, graphics, video and specially devised interactive installations. It tells a number of stories from different viewpoints — technological, social, from the domestic to the geopolitical. The overall triadic concept «Designer Maker User» provides a useful starting point, giving visitors a frame of reference to understand the range of experiences and ideas that they will be encountering. Curation puts the visitor at centre stage, preferring a design-centred, audience-focused approach to an object-focused one. The narrative therefore takes precedence over the object. The notion of understanding visitors as users is also indicative of the museum's ambition to situate the museum as a learning resource for visitors, one that can be returned to repeatedly, fostering long term, sustained engagement.

We wanted visitors to appreciate that every product and service they use has been designed. How did they get to the museum? Did they use a bicycle, a bus or a train? Did they find their way using a website or a map? When they chose their clothes that morning were they influenced by a weather report on their phone or a style they saw on Instagram? If they did any of these things, then they were using a designed service or product.

Loosely speaking, the exhibition is divided into three separate sections, each dedicated to one of these different perspectives. However, there is also the sense that this is a messy and continually shifting conversation. Previously there was separation between these different perspectives whereas as today, digital technologies have torn down these boundaries, allowing a single person to be designer, maker and user — all from the comfort of their bedroom.

The designer zone was the hardest one to resolve: the aim was to demonstrate the scope and scale of the role of a designer. If we were doing this exhibition 100 years ago, we might have a display of silver, then a display of ceramics, then a display of glassware. If we were doing it twenty years ago, we might have had a display of graphic design, a display of architecture, a display of fashion. Both of these approaches felt wrong. We were trying to get people to look beyond design being defined by rigid disciplines. We wanted to say that design is a process and a way of thinking, and so the opening section greets visitors with a quote from Ernesto Rogers from 1952, in which he referenced how in a typical day a Milanese architect would turn their attention from designing a spoon, a chair and a lamp to working on a skyscraper: *dal cucchiaino alla città* («from the spoon to the city»). The spatial ordering of the display reverses this to take visitors from the city to the spoon, but the concept remains the same — an evocation of the scope and scale of design.

The zone starts with the city and architecture. Objects include a model of a gerberette from the Centre Pompidou sprayed orange — to signal it is a model, not an exact replica. Next to this is a display about city transport schematics demonstrated through the metro maps of the London Underground — one of the most iconic



Fig. 2.
Installation shot of the model of the gerberette
in the Designer section
Source: Design Museum, London

design features of London — and New York’s rejected map by Vignelli; then around the corner the front of the new tube train designed by Priestman Goode, with accompanying multimedia content.

The entrance to the permanent display takes visitors through a timeline corridor that has a video triptych at the end. The timeline wasn’t in the original curatorial plan, but audiences consistently told us that providing co-ordinates for historical context was a necessary component, hence its inclusion. Across the whole exhibition there is a rich vocabulary of interpretative approaches in evidence: text, moving image, audio, digital interactives, analogue activities, with a curatorial tone of voice that is propositional, straightforward, at times provocative, and gives voice to the three constituents comprising the three elements of the display.

This section concludes with a schematic installation of Margarete Schütte-Lihotsky’s so-called *Frankfurt Kitchen* (1926). The piece was commissioned as an installation, rather than undertaking a loan of the original (in so far as a mass manufactured design can ever have an original — but that is a matter for another paper) in order that visitors could enter the kitchen and experience the key spatial dynamics of the design. A quote by Schütte-Lihotsky positions the design in its socio-



Fig. 3.
Schematic installation
of the Frankfurt Kitchen
Source: Design Museum, London

-political context and underlines the rationale for this curatorial decision: «women's struggle for economic independence and personal development meant that the rationalization of housework was an absolute necessity».

The final exhibits in this section, positioned on the end wall of the installation, are some of the prototypes and finished product for the S'Up Spoon. This is a piece of cutlery designed originally for an individual, Grant Douglas, as a culinary tool that would enable him to eat liquid foods with minimal spillage and with dignity. It is also of benefit to others with cerebral palsy, Parkinson's, essential tremor and shaky hands.

THIRD, DESIGNER

The 2D and 3D elements of the display were designed by Studio Myerscough, in an iterative process underpinned by insights from the user and maker phases, testing and building on feedback loops.

Alongside audience development initiatives, the museum at Shad Thames had experimented with three alternative design approaches to the permanent display. The first, *This is Design* in 2011, set out to test the idea of using thematics in the context of a permanent display, on a neutral background borrowed from the language of

the white cube. Thematics included: Innovations in Manufacturing and Materials using the chair as a typology; Identity — personal and corporate; Sustainability and Consumption; Digitisation and Miniaturisation; and Design Archetypes. This thematic approach provided the blueprint to some extent for a more worked up iteration for *Designer Maker User*, in response to the need for accessibility and the appeal to a mainstream, non-design specialist audience.

The second iteration of the permanent display was entitled *Extraordinary Stories About Ordinary Things*. It had mixed success with non-specialist visitors as interpretation took the perspective of a modernist design disciplinary context rather than focusing on use or impact. However, a central area activity table that offered visitors the opportunity to respond to design briefs and became a programming hub for light touch talks and demonstrations was very popular. Building on this, the third iteration of the permanent display, *Collection Lab*, took the concept of the dialogue between the three groups and tested the proposition of design as process as the key curatorial concept. In so doing, it introduced the language of the studio into the display. Interpretation was based on the user perspective rather than on design history. Building on visitor feedback, there were more opportunities for visitors to respond to content for example in voting activities, and an area with a range of hands-on activity, for example, looking at different material properties. Overall the curatorial voice was more propositional and discursive than in the preceding iterations, and empowered visitors to see their perspectives and their voice in the design process and understand that as consumers they had some agency in the role and value of design.

Collection Lab was designed by Studio Myerscough, who went on to design *Designer Maker User*. The relationship between Senior Curator Alex Newson and Studio Myerscough was a genuinely creative collaboration. When exhibiting design, both 2D and 3D environments take on a particular resonance for the visitor. Each are design disciplines in and of themselves, meaning that the experience of the exhibition as a whole is part of the curatorial narrative and shapes visitor experience sensorially and emotionally. The 2D and 3D design decisions within an exhibition environment are as integral and intrinsic to the visitor experience as the «content» of the exhibition or display.

For the new Design Museum, Studio Myerscough's brief was to design the display in conversation with the architecture of the building, encompassing the new interior designed by John Pawson and the retained and refurbished original architecture of the former Commonwealth Institute. This is of particular note given the permanent display's position underneath the museum's sweeping hyperbolic paraboloid roof. In designing *Designer Maker User*, conceptual and physical coherence was particularly important; enabling the integration of architecture, way finding and design content. Studio Myerscough's design solution was to create a space in contrast to the fully

enclosed «black boxes» of the two temporary exhibition galleries. The exhibition design works as a synthesis with the architectural design and way-finding works to provide a satisfying sequence of architectural experiences from entry into the atrium up to the display on the top floor. In this context, the design brief posited a difference between a museum that shows contemporary art (where the exhibits' primary relationship is often with the architecture of the building) and other kinds of museums (where the exhibits' primary relationship is with the setting of the exhibit of which they form part). In *Designer Maker User*, exhibits are placed within elements that support the display, and are organised in such a way as to address the architecture of the building, in particular the roof and the second smaller void that opens up views onto the office reception space and Sackler Library and Archive. The permanent display has a clear relationship with the public spaces of the museum: it is visible from all publicly accessible spaces.

Designer Maker User ends by returning the visitor to the centre of the design process. A more worked up, but still very low-fi, analogue version of the hands-on table first tested in *Extraordinary Stories about Ordinary Things* creates a *Work in Progress* zone. Visitors are invited to respond to a selection of design briefs, and to share their design solutions with other visitors by displaying them on the wall.

Adjacent to the permanent display is the museum's residency studio for the Designers in Residence programme. For 8 months of the year, this is a working studio



Fig. 4. Work in Progress table, *Designer Maker User*
Source: Design Museum, London

hosting a group of early career designers as part of an Arts Council of England-supported initiative to nurture the next generation of creative professionals. For the remaining four months it is a display space for the residents to show their work. The studio's location works to underline one of the museum's key messages — that design is a process, and about people rather than things.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Rethinking design object interpretation in the museum context is predicated on understanding the intimate relationship between exhibition curating and visitor experience. It is complex and nuanced, framed by tensions between the museum's commitment to public access, its responsibility towards the care of collections for the purposes of scholarship and posterity⁹ and the institutional business model to which footfall through exhibitions is a key contributor. In its first year since opening, visitor numbers to the museum were 780,000 — significantly exceeding its annual target of 650,000 visitors, with the majority of people going to the permanent display. Average dwell time is double what was anticipated, suggesting that the display has achieved its aim of appealing to a wider audience constituency than at its former location on Shad Thames. New visitor research is currently being collated in order to inform qualitative insight and the display's further development. While there is room for development in the interpretative approach based on visitor feedback and the ever-changing external context (in particular, the implications of a post-Brexit UK on the tourist economy and funding landscape) — the museum's user-centred, experiential and story-led curatorial approach demonstrably meets user need — the first and last principle of design thinking.

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⁹ MCCLELLAN, 2003.