

HISTORY OF EXHIBIT DESIGN

Jon Coe (1986). Towards a Coevolution of Zoos, Aquariums, and Natural History Museums. Proceedings of the 1986 American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums.

Coe traces the history of exhibit design in zoos, aquariums, and natural history museums in this fascinating paper. A summary of each historical period is described below. The reader is referred to the original paper for more details.

1. Royal Collections. Early wild animal collections were owned by royalty. "The animals were caged in the last word of Baroque symmetry." In addition, curiosity collections by royalty may have been the first natural history museums.
2. Public Collections. As with royal collections, the organizing concept for public collections was "based on whimsy and entertainment." Travelling bear shows and "curiosities of every description" were the focus.
3. Taxonomic Organization. "The rush was on to see who could identify and name the most species or collect the oddest or rarest or most dramatic specimens..." This trend began in the middle of the 18th Century.
4. Habitat Exhibits. In museums, Bullock in 1809 is credited with the first habitat exhibits and dioramas. The British Museum and the American Museum of Natural History were leaders in this movement. In zoos, Hagenbeck's moated exhibits in a park near Hamburg, Germany, became the model imitated by zoos everywhere.
5. Modernism. "The movement towards modernism in art and architecture has had a profound effect on exhibit design." This approach is characterized by simplification, abstraction, and universal abstraction. "The love affair with machinery in the 1930's and 40's resulted in thinking of buildings as functional architectural machines." Modernism approach assumed that all problems could be solved by technology. "The tile-lined room with a glass front and stainless steel furnishings became the norm for most larger zoo animals."
6. Landscape Immersion. Woodland Park Zoo and the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum were leaders in landscape immersion. The attempt of this view is to duplicate as accurately as possible, the animals' surroundings. The emphasis is on 'soft' exhibits using vegetation and natural substrate and hiding the 'hard' elements such as walls and

buildings. Although Hagenbeck's work influences this view, the attempt of landscape immersion is to allow the visitor to "become physically and psychologically immersed in the recreated habitat of the animal."

7. High Tech Exhibits. Science museums, zoos, natural history museums and aquariums are all using high tech exhibits today. This approach "usually surrounds the visitor with a 'high tech environment' as well as a collection of technological hardware." Examples include touch screen computers, laser disk video systems, holograms, and robotics.

STAGES IN FORMATIVE EVALUATION

From C. G. Screven (1986). Exhibitions and information centers: Principles and Approaches. Curator, 29(2): 109-137.

In one section of this excellent, comprehensive article, Screven discussed the following two stages of formative evaluation.

1. Pre-design stage ("Front-end analysis")
 - Definition of goals. Initially, this may include goal-free observations to help establish the goals.
 - Prioritizing goals.
 - Translating goals into measurable objectives.
 - Develop test items and observational methods.
 - Pretest audience.
 - Revise goals, objectives, methods or proceed to the formative stage.
2. Formative stage
 - Planning and testing mockup components of key displays.
 - Test communication effectiveness.
 - Prepare and test mock-up with cued visitors (people asked to study mock-up).
 - Floor test the layout with noncued visitors.
 - Make changes until objectives are met.

Put your visitors on exhibit -- Subscribe to Visitor Behavior

If you have not yet sent your subscription to Volume II of Visitor Behavior, complete the order form and send it today.