

# Too Many Cooks Boil the Wroth— Exhibits, Teams, Evaluation

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## Introduction

This talk has been inspired by Elaine Gurian's keynote speech to the Visitor Studies Conference in Washington, D.C. two years ago (1990). There she opened up the topic of exhibition teams. This is an important topic for evaluators because it addresses the context in which much of their work takes place. While Elaine's speech was valuable, it nevertheless left me feeling that there was more to be said on the subject.

We expect a team to have a composition and organization that's related to the job it has to do. We would not normally expect, for example, to send out a ballroom dancing team to represent us in a professional football match. Yet this is the sort of hit-and-miss approach that museums often take towards the development of new exhibits—with the expected results. The premise of my argument is simple: an exhibition closely reflects (or models) the team that puts it together. By extension of this argument, a harmonious team has a good chance of producing an integrated exhibition, and a divided team *will* produce a fragmented exhibition. So it is important to get the right people in the right places, and in the right relationships to each other.

## Some History

The Natural History Museum, London, is typical of Europe's large, traditional museums in that a top-down approach was originally taken to the design of its exhibits. The starting point was the building. The showcases were then fitted, in an architectural arrangement, into the galleries. Finally, the objects were fitted into the cases, and the gaps between them filled with labels. The fitting out of the cases was done by a curator or a small curator-dominated group. At their best, the results fitted Brown Goode's (1891) definition of an "efficient" exhibition: "a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen" (p. 433). Needless to say, this definition embodied a now discredited view of the audience as highly-motivated self-improvers.

The Pressa exhibition, created by El Lissitzky in 1928 in Cologne, marked a turning point in exhibition design (Bayer, 1961; Chanzit, 1987). Before then, a gallery had been a visually static cube, with flat images on vertical walls. In principle, science exhibitions followed the same pattern. Herbert Bayer took the next step forward at the Building Workers' Union exhibition in 1931 in Berlin. He created a dynamic environment comprised of a raised walkway, dynamic exhibits (rotating graphic panels), press-button displays, enormous photographic enlargements, and an extended field of vision for the visitor. In subsequent exhibitions in the early 1940s in the United States, he introduced the spotlighting of individual displays. Bayer attempted to produce total communication environments, as he self-consciously turned exhibitions into planned experiences in space and time. Most large, modern exhibitions show traces of Bayer's influence. This is certainly true of two recent, permanent installations at The Natural History Museum, London—*Ecology* (1991) and *Dinosaurs* (1992).

It seems to me that changes in exhibition styles have everything to do with changes in society, and—regrettably—nothing, or almost nothing, to do with exhibit research and evaluation. The driving force comes from our post-modern, or consumer, or post-industrial society (call it what you will), that is dominated by technology and has pervasive media and advertising industries, instantaneous electronic communications, and, above all, a pluralistic culture in which the boundaries between high art and mass culture have been eroded. Obviously, what I am saying about changes in exhibition styles applies more to science and natural history museums than to art and history museums, which are still, on the whole, embedded in high culture, and make little effort to communicate with a wide audience by demonstrating their relevance to contemporary life.

In contrast to the one-man exhibition of Brown Goode vintage (and curators normally were men), our recent *Dinosaurs* exhibition required a team of over 50 different skills, trades and professions to put it together. Teams are often seen as the magic solution to nearly all contemporary problems. But as most people know who have worked in a team on a significant project, they are not normally, or even usually, plain sailing. As Elaine Gurian said in Washington, D.C., teams are not the answer—they are part of the problem, but we have nothing better, so we had better do the best we can with them.

In talking about teams, I shall concentrate on the front-end of the work—the creative stages—because unless these succeed, no worthwhile exhibition can be produced. And in criticizing the traditional curator-led system, I am not being gratuitously anti-curator. Rather, I am talking about the roles people play in the circumstances in which they find themselves—and I am, of course, making generalizations. If I seem to dwell too much on the traditional system for producing exhibitions, it is because our criticisms should give us an idea of what a good solution to the problem of the exhibition team looks like.

## The Traditional System

The traditional system is shown in Figure 1, and it doesn't work well. If there is anything museum exhibit professionals have collectively demonstrated, it is that this system does not produce good exhibitions for the visiting public. Some of the problems with this system are:

1. People work in uncoordinated compartments, with no one mediating the creative process. This results in important things, notably the audience, going unconsidered and it generates mutual suspicion, not teamwork.
2. Curators decree which objects are to be shown and what is to be said about them. They tend to care about objects, not people, and to worry about their reputation for scholarship, which is inappropriate for most exhibitions.
3. Designers are reduced to window display: they function as decorators, not communicators, and at best are involved in damage limitation.
4. Educationalists are brought in too late to contribute, and may be involved mostly in a process of damage limitation.
5. There is no feedback, and therefore no possibility of improvement to the system or to the quality of the exhibitions it produces.

This system represents a difficult environment in which to introduce evaluation. It is a subject-matter-led system, and is blind to the need for evaluation because it is blind to the audience. Suggestions for improving exhibits are inevitably seen as challenges to the authority of experts. Moreover, it normally gives rise to temporary team-structures, which are not around to benefit from the results of summative evaluation. A curator may work only once in a career on an exhibition, and have no opportunity to put into practice the lessons learned from the experience.

Stanley Freed (1991), an anthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History, has recently remarked that exhibitions "may take 10 or more years to build and are seen by millions of visitors in the 50 or more years they exist" (p. 70). I see things differently. Ideally an exhibition should take no more than 18 months to design and build, and there should be a gap of no more than six months to the first revisions. As most people here will know, large exhibitions are never finished, they just get abandoned when the initial time and money run out. But this need not be a weakness—it can, indeed, be a strength. It means, if the museum is so minded, that an exhibition can be picked up again from time to time and be under continuous development and modification. The traditional system cannot cope with this view of exhibitions.

## What Successful Team Work Requires

The above arguments can be developed through a longer chain of reasoning to give the following conclusions on the requirements for successful team work:

1. Acceptance of the aims of the project by all members of the team.
2. Acceptance of the target audience by all members of the team. Self-fulfillment is important for creative people but the focus of attention must remain the audience.
3. Recognition of the skills of others and a willingness to give them freedom to practice. This requires mutual respect, and the giving up of privileges (e.g., the curator's right to decree what shall be shown and how).
4. Recognition of the appropriate skills to practice (e.g., distance, not face-to-face, teaching; design for communication, not decoration; constructive, not destructive evaluation).
5. Acceptance of a project control system by all members of the team. This means knowing not only *what* you have to do but *when*, and the ability to deliver on time.
6. Willingness to learn from mistakes. This is essential if evaluation is to be worthwhile.
7. Management structure that fosters the above qualities. It is possible to have all of the above qualities, but spoil the best efforts of all involved by setting up a system that undermines them.

## The Smithsonian System

Figure 2 shows one attempt to provide an "enabling" management structure. This system was developed at the Boston Children's Museum and introduced to the Smithsonian museums by Elaine Gurian. The Broker is simply the project manager who controls the money and ensures deadlines are met. In addition to contributing the skills of their disciplines, the Advocates foster co-operation. They convince other team members to work with them and with each other, for the good of the project.

There is no single best team approach. All of them can work or fail depending on the circumstances and the motivation of the team members. In setting up a particular team structure we are trying to improve our chances of success. We are looking for a robust system to carry us through the hard as well as the easy times. In the light of these comments it may be impertinent of me to comment on what I have called the Smithsonian system, particularly as I lack knowledge of its worth in action. It is clearly an improvement on the traditional system. Nevertheless, at least three things worry me about it:

1. The lack of creative leadership. The Broker, as a project manager, is in a reactive rather than a proactive role. Who generates a

detailed vision of the exhibition as an integrated piece of communication? And if there is no vision, how can conflicts be resolved constructively and intelligently?

2. The three advocates could easily slip into their traditional roles, particularly if they do not agree about the audience. Leadership abhors a vacuum, and nine times out of ten we know who is going to grab the power. So there must be a danger of regression to the traditional system.
3. The evaluator or educator is in a very exposed position, in the absence of creative leadership. This person, in challenging the views of others, may receive insensitive and/or ignorant demands for answers that he or she is just not able to give: "So you don't like my idea; *you* tell us what to do, then!" At best, the evaluator or educator may only be able to suggest an approach or a way of thinking about a problem.

### The London System

Our new approach at The Natural History Museum, London was based on the system set up by Otto Neurath in the Social and Economic Museum, Vienna (1924-34) (see Marie Neurath's [1974] review). This is shown in Figure 3. The Vienna museum was small, involving only a handful of people, and Neurath could control everything, including contacts with subject-matter specialists. The transformers, working under Neurath's direction, acted as guardians of the public. They converted information from a form that suited the expert into a form that suited the lay person.

This system has been adapted to serve the larger needs of The Natural History Museum as in Figure 4. The outcome of the planning stage and the basis of the design and production stages of an exhibition are the *brief* (or the programme in the United States), a document drafted by a senior member of the exhibition team. This document gives direction to the project and is the basis of its management. It includes aims, story-line, audience analysis and constraints, and is concerned with messages not objects. It incorporates the results of front-end evaluation, visitor surveys and relevant summative evaluations. The draft brief is always widely discussed—because we are a national museum—and there is only limited room for personal and idiosyncratic views in the public galleries (cf. a TV programme or newspaper).

Exhibit researchers and designers work closely together in a series of partnerships to function as transformers. They are able to draw on the expertise of their specialist colleagues, in their task of turning the abstract brief into specifications from which exhibits can be built. The brief is careful to leave scope for creative work.

By way of comparison, Figure 5 shows a system used for making scientific TV programs in the United Kingdom. The three systems (Vienna,

London and TV) have one major point in common. Projects are the responsibility of professional exhibition or programme-makers, not subject-matter experts. This person (or small group) develops a vision of the project as a coherent original creation. And this person (or small group) champions the project through all its difficulties. We can take this comparison with TV further, because one of the most important messages I know about designing successful scientific *exhibitions* comes, in fact, from TV (Singer, 1966).

The televising of science is a process of television, subject to principles of structure and demands of dramatic form. Therefore in taking programme decisions, priority must be given to the medium rather than to scientific pedantry! (p. 13)

This statement can be rewritten, to match the present context, by replacing "televising," "television" and "programme," with "exhibiting" and "exhibition" respectively.

The good professional exhibition-maker understands "principles of structure and demands of dramatic form" as they apply to exhibitions. There is no good reason why the curator should. He or she is an expert in his or her own field and an invaluable source of knowledge for the exhibition maker. But when it comes to exhibition-making, the natural strengths of curators are, in the circumstances, weaknesses. The outlines of the argument are given in Table 1. I must stress, however, that I am talking about the roles that people play. Some curators can switch from one role (scholar) to the other (communicator), but perhaps not many.

Table 1

Comparison of Qualities Found in a Curator  
and a Good Media (Including Exhibit) Researcher

<u>Typical Curator</u>	<u>Good Exhibit Developer</u>
Painstaking	Quick
Does not recognize deadlines	Meets deadlines
Has empathy with peers	Has empathy with audience
Knows how to bring in extensive information	Knows how to throw out excess information
Follows "interesting " leads	Sticks to the job at hand

Many of these ideas can be summarized by noting that exhibition-making, like TV programme-making, is now a creative art in its own right, rather than the hand-maiden of other disciplines.

### Contracted-Out Design

It is not always possible or desirable to carry out design work in-house. The Natural History Museum now contracts out the design and production of its major new exhibitions, though we keep planning and quality control in the care of an experienced core team of in-house staff. Basically the system works as it did before.

Table 2 examines the strengths and weaknesses of contracting out and doing work in-house. Again there is not time to develop the arguments in detail. But I would like to ask whether the need for full documentation and briefing is really a disadvantage, as shown in the Table, or whether it is an advantage.

Table 2

#### Strengths and Weaknesses of In-House and Contracted-Out Exhibition Design

	<u>Advantages</u>	<u>Disadvantages</u>
<b>In-House</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Consistency</li> <li>•Familiarity with museum operations, collections and conservation needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Too set in ways</li> <li>•Limited capacity</li> <li>•Difficulty in keeping talented staff</li> </ul>
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<b>Contracted-Out</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•New blood</li> <li>•Wide range of skills and experience available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Lack of familiarity with museum</li> <li>•Need for fuller documentation and briefing</li> </ul>

It is difficult to fit formative evaluation into contracts with external design companies because of the uncertainties it introduces over time and money. This tends to shift the emphasis onto front-end work and the writing of the exhibition brief. There is always a trade-off between thinking

and acting in exhibition-making. Good results tend to come with experience, so it is essential at some stage to get the hands dirty by making exhibitions and evaluating them. But I believe there is a place for a more thoughtful and reflective approach—for more use of existing research results. On the whole then it is perhaps no bad thing to have to stop and think harder at the beginning of a project, whether the work is to be done by the museum staff or by an independent company. However, the thinking must have form and direction, and this is now much easier thanks to the efforts that have been made in recent years to produce an organized and cross-referenced research literature.

### New Deal for Designers

I have devoted a number of comments in this discussion to curators, educators and evaluators. It might be appropriate then, to finish with some words about designers, who often feel left out and unappreciated at meetings of exhibition professionals. In the right circumstances, designers are a major creative force in exhibition work. Yet I feel they are often badly managed, and in turn they are often suspicious of evaluation. The following ten rules for working with designers will summarize much of what I've said today:

1. Identify *one* champion for the project within the organization. Regardless of background, this person should be a professional exhibition maker, and will have a *vision* of what the organization is hoping to achieve.
2. Agree to a thorough *written* brief with the designer before the practical work starts. The brief is the basis of all relationships with the designer, and it is the responsibility of the project's champion. A designer is only as good as his or her brief. An evaluator has major role to play in putting the brief together for an audience-oriented exhibition.
3. Appoint a designer you have confidence in and let him or her get on with the work. There's no point in contracting with a creative person if you simply bring him or her down to your level of creativity with too much interference. Too many cooks...!
4. If the project is too big for the "champion" to manage alone, delegate authority to a project manager to keep the project to the brief, on time and within budget. This is the limit of the project manager's authority. He or she is not responsible for the initial conceptualization of the project or for briefing of designer.
5. Channel *all* instructions and decisions (but not working interactions) to the designer through one person, normally the project manager. Anything else is guaranteed to cause confusion. Too many cooks...!



6. Arrange fixed report-back sessions for the designer at the outset and *stick* to them. Creative people do not work at their best if they are unnecessarily messed about or harried to present half-baked ideas. The same goes of course for the management of an evaluator.
7. Give reasoned arguments for rejecting a designer's suggestions, particularly if the suggestions are consistent with the brief. No designer can do good work if subjected to quixotic or *ex-cathedra* decisions; a designer needs feedback like the rest of us. An evaluator is likely to shine in these circumstances.
8. Do not change the brief once the work has begun unless you are prepared to pay for the decision in time and money. Some late changes may be unavoidable but explanations should always be given unless you want a frustrated designer on your hands. Evaluators need to understand and be sensitive to the designer's point of view, especially as there may be a conflict of interest in trying to move the work ahead. At all events, the need to avoid late changes strengthens the case for front-end evaluation with the results written into the brief.
9. Identify someone, normally the project champion, who will decide between conflicting interests. It is simply impossible to please all of the people all of the time and higher management should back the project champion unswervingly. He or she may be the Director in a small museum. But the Director is unlikely to be a professional exhibition-maker in a large institution, and here the task is best delegated. There is of course no gainsaying the Director's right to the final word in exceptional circumstances.
10. Hope to get more from a designer than a playback of your own ideas. You should be looking for what you should have asked for rather than what you actually asked for. Much the same applies to management of evaluators.

## Conclusions

It was stated at the beginning that it is important to get the right people in the right places, and in the right relationships to each other. But teams are not just about having the right skills in the right places. My plea is also for tolerance and understanding among team members. Evaluators have as much to gain from this as anyone.

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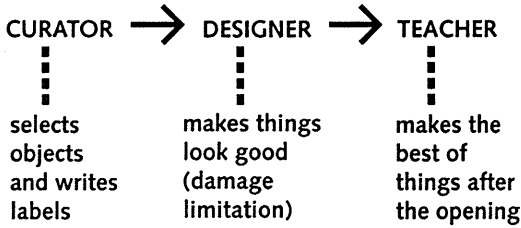
## Addendum

I recently rediscovered Birch's (1982) paper, in which he suggests modelling exhibition work after the set of activities involved in mounting a play. These activities overlap and interact, but usually follow a sequence:

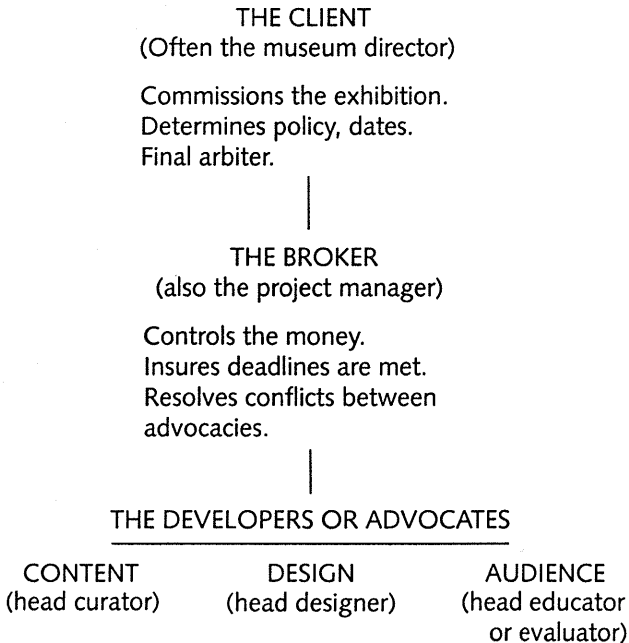
1. Play is selected.
2. Preliminary discussions among director, set designer, technical crews.
3. Set design begins.
4. Play is blocked and rehearsals commence.
5. Set construction begins.
6. Rehearsals, set construction and technical staging proceed together, each modifying and being modified by the others.
7. Dress rehearsal and opening night.

The suggestion is that exhibition work should be more like this, i.e., more free-wheeling and less linear than the sort of systems I have described. The flaw in Birch's proposal lies, as might be expected, in the difference between a theater production and an exhibition. Theater is a labor-intensive activity, with 75 to 80% of its costs going to people, and considerable flexibility of action is retained throughout. Exhibitions, on the other hand, are not labor-intensive, except at certain stages in their creation. Typically less than 50% of the origination costs go to people, and the physical form of the exhibition medium precludes flexibility of the sort noted by Birch at stage 6. I can see no alternative to the linear development process for most exhibitions of any size, as we see in TV and the movies.

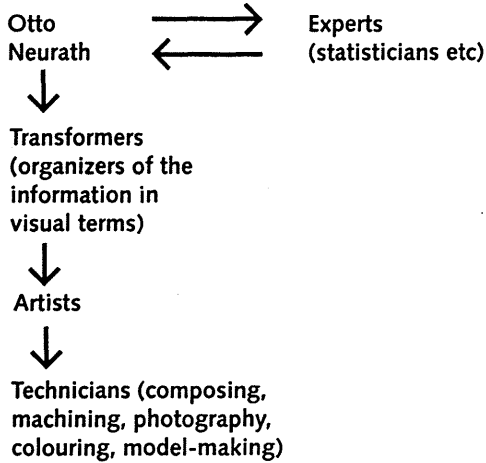
**Figure 1**  
**The Traditional System for Mounting Museum Exhibitions**



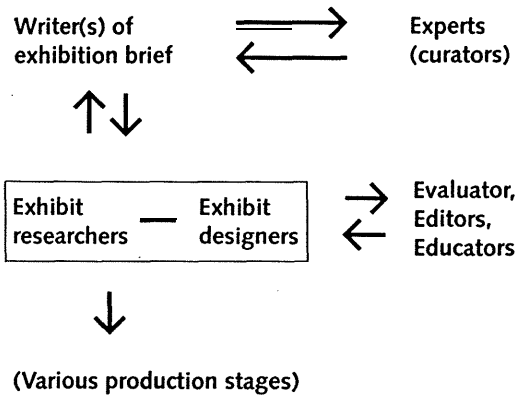
**Figure 2**  
**The System Employed at the Boston Children's Museum for Mounting Exhibitions, As Introduced to the Smithsonian Museums by Elaine Gurian**



**Figure 3**  
**Otto Neurath's System for Producing Exhibitions**  
**at the Social and Economic Museum, Vienna (1924-34)**



**Figure 4**  
**The System Introduced at The Natural History Museum,**  
**London in 1975 for Mounting Exhibitions**



**Figure 5**  
**The System Employed by David Attenborough,**  
**and Others, for Making Scientific TV Programmes**

