

A Sense of Place Within The Space

Robert M. Woltman
Albuquerque Museum
Albuquerque, New Mexico

“Designers work with *sensual delight*. What could be simpler or more powerful than sensual delight? If we can begin with what pleases people, and make that part of their experience, understanding and knowledge will follow.”

Joan Nassaur in Fischer (1993)

If an exhibit designer gives sensual form to the idea behind an exhibition, then what is the vocabulary used to shape that form? Color, light, texture, sound and space combine to build an environment that encourages a meaningful, multi-layered dialogue between the object or artifact, the place, and the visitor. It is my intention to discuss this design vocabulary and to give examples of how its elements have been used at The Albuquerque Museum to impart a sense of place.

Color

Color is one of the designer's most powerful tools. An intense red tile wall can give definite clues about, for example, an exhibition of contemporary art from Spain. Yellow is often cited by color psychologists to be the preference of psychotics; what would be inferred by the use of chromium as a background color for black and white photographs of Frida Kahlo?

Color can be used in an historical sense to emphasize the masterpiece qualities of a Rembrandt or a Rubens; for an installation of works from the Armand Hammer Collection, the walls behind paintings by those and other old masters were a deep, rich vermillion.

I have, on many occasions, wandered through our temporary exhibit gallery when, in preparation for a new show, all the walls are rearranged, freshly painted and empty. In the deserted rooms of this new space, the saturated colors seem to emanate from within the walls themselves, and somewhat sadly, I think that art and visitors here could only be a distracting intrusion. Such is the power of pure color.

Color in Light

Besides opaque, painted color, transparent color—color within light itself—can be a compelling element in an exhibit space. We have used it to light the empty perimeter walls of installations to impart a peaceful, meditative mood. On another occasion, a rose/apricot combination was employed to simulate dawn skies behind an antique biplane for a history of aviation exhibit. Mounted in front of the lamps, pieces of simple theatrical gel material (available in dozens of colors) can do wonderful things.

We have also used a combination of colored light on painted-color surfaces. Color seen under those conditions appears especially vivid and almost glows. Because it is so visually compelling, we have found that this technique works best as accents in small, isolated areas.

In *Unbroken Threads*, an exhibition of New Mexico crafts from our permanent collection, suggestions of architectural elements—a circular, kiva form for Native American art and a chapel displaying Hispanic religious images—are used to again provide a sense of place.

Places in Spaces

Color and light need an area in which to work. I sometimes describe one aspect of what I do as “the orchestration of visitors’ experiences in a space” and there are some installations noteworthy for how the physical spaces work to create a “sense of place.”

For *Carthage: A Mosaic of Ancient Tunisia*, a traveling show of antiquities organized by the American Museum of Natural History in New York, we sought to create the feeling of a “Roman place” by suggestions of architectural elements and by displaying the exhibit’s mosaic floor fragments on the floor, rather than on the large, easel-like stands supplied. We also included details such as latex cast brackets holding the faux verdigris finish conduit pipe used as stanchions around the floor pieces. Low walls visually open up the space and provide something for people to lean on. We also used painted, faux shadows on the bases of the columns for no purpose other than visual delight. The overall effect gave the feeling of walking through the ruins of a Roman city.

Maya: Treasures of an Ancient Civilization was a hugely successful international touring exhibition that we organized back in the mid 80s. A blockbuster in every sense of the word, it was a truly grand experience. Again, architectural elements gave a feeling for some of the archaeological sites where many of the artifacts were unearthed. Various accent colors corresponded to different sections of the exhibition, but with the large number of artifacts, photomurals, labels, etc., the background was confined to a neutral grey.

In the *Awards in the Visual Arts* exhibition of contemporary art, the works by Petah Coyne were among the most compelling. We isolated them

in what was almost a separate room. The black sand that coated the pieces was intended to fall off over time and when it did, it created a point of interaction between the sculpture and the floor. All this would have been lost on our dark brick floors, so we temporarily installed a debatably extravagant (but worthwhile, in my opinion) white sheet vinyl floor.

A recent exhibition here was *The Human Factor: Figurative Sculpture Reconsidered*. The sculpture populated a stark environment that many viewers found “spooky” or “scary.” Perhaps some saw a hint of themselves in these often lonely figures. I don’t think I ever saw anyone sitting on the sofas we provided the entire time the exhibit was up. One visitor commented that the couches (covered with raw canvas, intentionally give the somewhat the feeling of unmade beds) looked uninviting. Perhaps visitors thought they were violating the privacy and intimacy of this gallery’s inhabitants by sitting (uninvited?) on the furniture. Perhaps they thought it was art and shouldn’t be touched. For whatever reason, they didn’t linger.

We have been making a very conscious effort in the last few years to provide incentives and opportunities for spending time in exhibit spaces. There are comfortable places to sit, to read something related to what is being displayed, to socialize with other visitors. There are in-gallery opportunities to observe an artist or craftsman at work or to take part in some activity. Museum-going is more often than not a shared experience and we’re trying to promote that whenever possible.

Our public has noticed:

“We have visited many museums and this is the first time we’ve encountered books lying in an inviting manner with easy chairs available. Your museum is lovely and a visual delight.”

“I love the intimacy of the spaces you’ve created.”

“A most welcome oasis.”

Auditory Delight

Music and sound are powerful devices we’ve used quite successfully for years and I would like to recount a few of our more satisfying experiences with auditory delight.

I knew we were successfully suggesting the desired mood of the lost, mythic frontier for the *West/Southwest* exhibit of landscapes and Western art when one of the security officers remarked that the music I was playing (slow movements from Copland’s *Rodeo* and *Billy the Kid*) was “pretty, but kinda’ sad, you know?”

For *Adventures West*, an exhibit with similar content, I commissioned a work that incorporated the song of a meadowlark—so evocative of the range landscape for anyone from the West.

In researching possible themes and phrases for a modern interpretation of what is thought to be Roman music for the afore-mentioned Carthage exhibition, I found interesting sources in Hebrew and Middle Eastern music and studied accounts of Greek and Roman instruments.

Lost and Found Traditions was a large show of American and Canadian Indian material from all over the map -- no one particular tribe's or nation's music could be used, and it wasn't practical to include everyone. What was composed was a beautifully simple piece for synthesizers, variations on a theme, punctuated at the beginning and ending with the calls of crows. The sounds, combined with the blue light that bathed the perimeter walls of the gallery created an ethereal, spiritual atmosphere.

By incorporating music into installations, one could say that we move from the theatrical to the cinematic, indeed we have come to refer to this accompaniment as a "sound track."

I wish to emphasize, however, that use of this device should be done with discretion. It should not be intrusive, either by content or volume. It is there to suggest, to provide a catalyst for the visitor's imagination, and to reinforce and enhance the overall message of the exhibition.

Perhaps what is most important to a sense of place is the feeling on the part of the visitor that the museum *itself* is a special place, not only because it houses wonderful things, but also because there are people there who have taken great pains, who have expended considerable energy (and maybe had some fun) creating something that proclaims "this is unique, this is exciting, this is delightful, this is imaginative." By giving of our sense of imagination, we release and nurture it in the visitors, the people who ultimately co-create these places with us. As Leonard Bernstein said, "The gift of the imagination is not just the artist's—it is a gift we all share."

References

- Fischer, A. (1993). Aesthetic conversation: An interview with Joan Nassaur. *Artpaper*, 12(6), 12-13.