

A metaphor approach to exhibition design

The purpose of my work is to liberate the expressive potential of the cultural-historical exhibition by introducing a method where the subject of the exhibition and the sensual material are shaped into a sensual-conceptual expression. Today's most common model of the exhibition, the juxtaposition of artefact and text, is only *one* way of presenting a subject and it is not a very rich way of doing so.

I would like to see the production of exhibitions as an experimental work with a greater exchange between the perspectives of the museum scholars and the designer. A common starting point for the continued work is required, for the understanding as well as the rendering of the subject. The metaphor constitutes such a possible starting point and the metaphorical approach thereby offers a new position for the co-operation between the designer and the museum scholar.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the years, in my practice as an exhibition designer, I have worked with aspects of the metaphor approach in different assignments, but I have never had the opportunity to fully put it to the test. This presentation is a step towards a more precise articulation of my method. I would like to test the metaphor approach practically as well as theoretically.

In order to describe my method, I will give examples from the two largest exhibitions in which I have participated: "Time/H99" ("Tid/H99", Helsingborg 1999) and "See the City" ("Se Staden", Malmö 2001). In the first-mentioned we were three designers and one ethnologist in the original project team. The result, a very sensual exhibition, was characterized by this fact. In the second project, I was the only designer, working together with four experts on the subject matter (two archeologists, an art historian and an architect). In this project we used the metaphorical thinking for the overall design concept, whereas the exhibition became a compromise between paradigms at the detail level.

PROBLEM

If the cultural-historical exhibition no longer is about displaying historical artefacts, but the exhibition is seen as a sensory expression, the relationship between the museum scholars and the design process must be highlighted. The task of the exhibition is to communicate an understanding of a theme to the visitor. The question is: How does one get the abstract concepts of the museum scholars and the sensual material to relate to each other?

The starting point of the exhibition production is academic material, the subject. One must define the limits of the subject and articulate it as the object of a design problem. This means that the statements of the exhibition are worked out starting from the subject and the sensual material at hand: space, lighting, sound, texture, images, video, artefacts, etc. How does one get the sensual material to yield a meaning that relates to the subject? How does one control this process?

Abstract concepts are understood in forms and shapes, and the sensual material produces meaning

The exhibition "See the City" was intended to show the conditions of architectural creativity. The original idea of the project team, before I was taken on, was that the exhibition should have Vitruvius' ten books on architecture as its starting point, with themes such as: position, material, ideology, construction, function, decoration/style, proportions, public buildings, etc. I suggested that we re-articulate these aspects of architecture into questions, which architects in all periods of time might have asked themselves: Where shall we build? What shall we build? With what shall we build? etc. Seen from this perspective the visitor would be invited to take the position of the architect.

One must not only define the limits of the subject. It must also be understood anew starting from the situation of the exhibition, which is not the same as understanding it from the categories of traditional research. In the exhibition situation, the point of

view of the visitor must be taken into account. We must find out what is relevant to tell the visitor. A perspective on the subject matter must be chosen. [1] Defining the limitation of the subject could be understood as projecting a perspective onto the subject. The exhibition can only show aspects of the subject, never cover it entirely. The task of presenting the subject has now already begun. The choice of perspective decides the selection of information that will be used to form the exhibition.

Anders Fogh Jensen says, in line with Lakoff and Johnson, that *all* understanding is metaphorical projection: we transfer structures from the known to the unknown. In that way, a new picture is drawn, both of that which was previously unknown, and of that which was known to us. The metaphorical projection highlights some of the aspects of a phenomenon, and hides others - a picture is drawn, but the phenomenon can be drawn again from other metaphors and thereby be understood in a new manner. [2] This insight is useful in articulating my method, understanding the choice of perspective as a conscious and explicit metaphorical projection.

On the other hand, we have the sensual material, which is to yield meaning in the exhibition (statements about the subject). The basic design idea of the exhibition cannot simply be a question of organising the material, but must itself be a carrier of meaning in order for the exhibition to produce a unified expression. The basic design idea will govern the choice of which sensual materials to use, also how these should be worked to produce a meaningful expression.

Donald A. Schön points out how the material interacts with understanding in the design process. The sensual material “responds” as a resistance to the understanding or as new meanings, and thereby contributes in specifying the perspective laid on the design problem. Schön calls this process “reflection-in-action”. [3]

If we apply Schön’s “reflection-in-action” to the exhibition situation, this would mean connecting the viewpoint of the museum scholars to the design process, making both the understanding and the sensual representation more concrete and precise. The design work is not only a question of “translating” text to a sensory expression, but it produces meaning and offers possibilities for reflection.

The metaphor approach

The two basic problems of the exhibition - How shall we define the subject? (a main question for the museum scholars) How shall we present the subject? (the main question for the designer) - can now be approached by *one* strategy. This is where experimenting starts; one starts working the material by way of shaping and understanding simultaneously. The metaphor functioning both as the perspective and as the basic design concept will guide the process. It will offer a strategy, which will function as a guideline for the material and will as well put up resistance, both theoretically (if one chooses to view the problem from a certain viewpoint, what will it then look like?) and by way of forms (as a material of possible shapes, actions, signs, etc.).

In “Time/H99” the original assignment was: “Make an exhibition on the 20th century.” The question was how to enter into this vast subject. I suggested that we build the exhibition as a “travel centre”, where the visitors could travel back in time as different characters, travelling in business class, on a charter trip, as backpackers, etc. By an analysis of what meaning the possible perspectives of the characters gave us, we could have chosen their “stories” from the history of the 20th century. The

perspective of the exhibition would have been laid out quite openly: “We have chosen to look back on the 20th century through these characters’ eyes, and then we see the following...” Beyond this, the “travel centre” would also have given us a set of situations, spaces and objects to elaborate sensually, thus forming the language of the exhibition.

The metaphor strategy has a bearing not only on the structuring of the superior level of the exhibition; by continued experimentation, I think the metaphor can lead the way in specifying the details of the exhibition: the finding and shaping of its fields and elements. The subject will thereby also be defined with a more detailed precision. The viewpoint of the experts will, so to speak, be examined and laid out concretely and spatially in the exhibition.

Due to many reasons, I was forced to abandon the metaphor approach at the detail level in the exhibition named “See the City”. The “studio of the architect” was made the basic design idea. But, at the next level of the exhibition, there was a compromise between the guiding metaphor and the traditional view on exhibitions. One of the items where this could be seen was “the desk of the architect”, displaying themes such as functions, aesthetics and proportions. My idea was to show the different themes by working the material that one would find on the desk: sketches, drawings, models, photos, etc. There was, however, no elaborate perspective on each theme, from which to form the expression. The surface of the table was outlined according to the idea of the “desk of the architect”, and the visual material was laid out as if it was the work material left behind by the architect. Then, short texts were added to the table, but the design of the texts did not relate to the idea of the “desk of the architect”. They were summaries of facts and one could say that this design was borrowed from another metaphor, the “schoolbook” (actually, a metaphor more fitting in the dominating exhibition paradigm).

If I had had the opportunity to use the metaphor approach for the further development of the desks, I would have looked for one metaphor, one perspective, for each table together with the museum scholars. These new metaphors would, combined with the idea of “the desk of the architect”, make out the starting point for the elaboration of the material. Text, if any, would be treated according to the guiding metaphor *on the same level* as the visual material.

For the exhibition “Time/H99” we did not use the metaphor of the “travel center”. Instead we used the metaphor “the residence”, with a kitchen, a bathroom etc. We assigned ourselves respective rooms for detail planning. In the living room, which became my responsibility, I had a greater possibility to continue the metaphorical work, but this also could not be followed through. Part of the living room – the postmodern time – was introduced by a long-pile rug with projected war images from Vietnam, laid out behind a vitrine. From inside the vitrine, Sonja Åkesson’s poem “Jag bor i Sverige” (“I live in Sweden”) was heard. The rug represented the concrete form of the metaphor “having the whole world on your carpet”. This image showed the penetrating force of the television, which entirely changed the way we use the living room. I chose the long-pile rug since it signalled a “high degree of cosiness in the heart of the family”. The images of war were black and white documentary pictures from the archives of Swedish Television and projected without any accompanying sound.

An unintentional effect was that the projection made the long hairs of the rug look like the thick strokes of a brush, as if the rug was a black and white painting. Had there been more time,

the next step would have been to ask if this was a desired effect, if it added anything to the rug as a statement. If not, what could then replace it? What other rug-materials would give what kind of effects? What other meanings could be exerted from these effects? By testing one's way forward, together with the museum scholar, the expression of the rug could have been specified and deepened. It is crucial that this "process of articulation" be given due time when the goal is a sensual-conceptual expression. This is where the designer and the museum scholar try out and specify the expressions of the exhibition, so that the exhibition really gives the desired understanding for the perspective of the expertise. The main focus of the exhibition should be on this interaction between the museum scholar and the designer.

With the metaphor approach I seek to create a new form of exhibition, a new situation of understanding, addressing the visitor as a sensual *and* an intellectual being.



"See the City", Malmö 2001. "The architect's office" - "The desk of the city planner"



"Time/H99", Helsingborg 1999. "The living room" – postmodern time – the 80's bookshelf.

REFERENCES

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2. Anders Fogh Jensen, *Metaforens magt - Fantasiens fostre og fornuftens fødsler*, Forlaget Modtryk, 2001. Fogh Jensen reads George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's metaphor theory critically, claiming unlike them that metaphorical structuring is a two-way process.
3. Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner - How Professionals Think in Action*, Basic Books, Inc., 1983.