

Transforming Exhibitions into Unique Visitor Experiences

Curated Events at the Canadian Museum of History

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left

One of the programs was a dance performance. Here, we see hoop dancer Rhonda Doxtator from the Oneida Nation during her performance in the *Indigenous and Urban* gallery.

At the Canadian Museum of History, we transform exhibitions into dynamic, holistic visitor experiences, which we call “curated events.” Our approach reimagines galleries so that an entire space—not just an exhibition itself—is curated, allowing us to cross boundaries and blur lines between exhibitions, programs, live performances, and even art installations.

Although teamwork has long been the norm from the outset of any project at the Canadian Museum of History, in the past, programming was generally developed at a fairly late stage in a project’s timeline—created and added to what had already been developed by other members of the exhibition team. With the advent of curated events, we changed how we conceived exhibitions and programs. This shift in philosophy had implications at every level of project development: how we worked as a team; how we designed a gallery; and the exhibition content we featured within our spaces. This article describes our process, using one of our first curated events—*Indigenous and Urban*—as a case study.

A Shift in Philosophy

The Canadian Museum of History, the country’s national museum of human history, is both the largest museum in Canada and one of its most visited. Located in the National Capital Region, it is also one of Canada’s oldest public institutions, with roots dating back to 1856. Known for its expertise in museology, history, archaeology, ethnology, and cultural studies, the museum attracts a general audience comprised of Canadian adults, families, and young people, as well as international tourists of all ages.

Over the decades, traditional types of exhibitions and programming had become

the norm. In recent years, though, the museum has undergone a number of major changes, ranging from a major physical renewal to significant shifts in thinking about how we do our work on a daily basis.

Although these changes have been highly successful and well received by the staff, management felt that we needed to do even more when it came to how we conceive and perceive our exhibitions and programs. Such transformation, we felt, would not only keep us from falling into a rote presentation of cookie-cutter exhibitions, but would also refresh and reboot how we do our work. This, in turn, led to a new process that we’ve developed and implemented over the past two years. While the process is not necessarily new in the museum field, the extent to which we’ve incorporated it may offer lessons for others who are seeking a more integrated approach to exhibitions and programming.

One of the first steps in creating this process was to rethink the entire visitor experience at the Canadian Museum of History. Why do visitors come to the museum? What are they looking for? Studies, like the ones by Anik Landry and Michel Allard,¹ have shown that today’s visitors are primarily seeking meaningful experiences. As museum professionals, however, we often see the activities we provide as necessary “deliverables,” while visitors simply want an experience, and do not necessarily care whether that experience comes via an exhibition, a program, or a family activity. First and foremost, they are looking for something that will be interesting and entertaining—and if they learn something new as well, all the better.

¹ Anik Landry and Michel Allard, *Le musée à la rencontre des visiteurs* (Sainte-Foy: Éditions MultiMondes, 2011).

To address this realization, we developed what we call an “Experience Development Process,” a formal document that is now an everyday tool for the staff, which emerged as we rethought museum activities. Instead of viewing exhibitions, programs, workshops, and lectures as distinct projects as we always had, we now see them as part of a comprehensive offering. At the heart of this shift was basic, common sense: some of our visitors do not necessarily come for a specific activity. Instead, they come to spend time with family and friends, and to explore something new.

We reflected not only on what we offer, but also on how we use our public spaces and engage with audiences. The idea behind curated events is that museum galleries should not be thought of only as exhibition spaces, but as places where visitors can explore and experience a given subject or theme in various ways, through a variety of media.

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Indigenous and Urban, which we presented in summer 2013, is a good example of this paradigm shift. In this curated event, the thematic thread was the presence and life experiences of Indigenous people in Canada’s urban centers today. In order to convey the event’s key messages through a range of media—2D and 3D art, video art,

documentaries, live performances, theater, workshops, and lectures—we developed new ways of working, and new ways of designing, and populating, our spaces.

Creating New Ways to Work: How We Redefined Our Team

Traditionally, our exhibitions were first developed by a curator. The interpreter and the project manager would come in later in the project’s development. Although teamwork was involved, people were working in silos for periods of time. The curator was the lead and the other members could be seen as support for the project. As part of our new process, we assemble a multidisciplinary team from the start. The curator is, as he/she always has been, the heart of a project; however, from the first day of planning until the exhibition officially opens, the project is also guided by a team that includes a program planner, a project manager, a lead designer, and a creative development specialist (at the Canadian Museum of History, a creative development specialist is responsible for the interpretive work on an exhibition—essentially overseeing visitor engagement with the content).

Working closely with the curator, the team defines the target audience and develops a text strategy and storyline for the project. Once key messages, text strategy, and themes and their organization are defined, a scenographer/3D designer begins working with the curator and the creative development specialist. Their primary task involves arranging exhibition content within the space to ensure that it effectively conveys the established key messages.

When it comes to producing a curated event, it is imperative that the program planner be part of the project’s development from

Indigenous and Urban: Floor plan

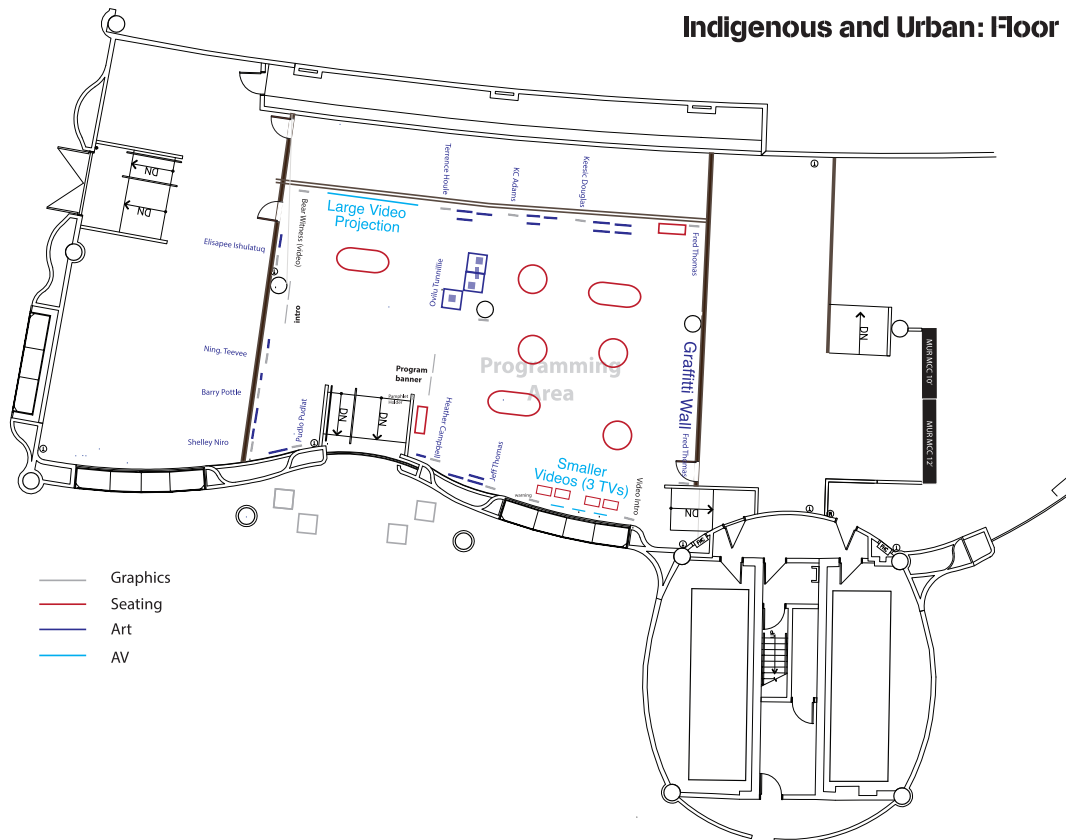


fig. 1.

Gallery floor plan, *Indigenous and Urban*. Design by Kerry McMaster, 2013.

the very beginning. For *Indigenous and Urban*, the program planner even worked with the curator during the research phase. When the curator and the creative development specialist developed key messages, the program planner was also part of the discussion, influencing the means by which the exhibition's messages would be delivered. As such, instead of using programming solely to reinforce the exhibition, programming became a means to deliver. For example, instead of using a text panel or objects, we used a theatrical presentation to interpret the life experiences of a family moving from a reservation to a city.

As we shaped this new approach, we did face challenges. One was developing a new type of experience at the same time that we were implementing a new process. Innovation in how we do things can surprise the visitor, which is often what we are looking for, but it can also come as a surprise for the staff members who have to adapt to a new way of

working. As a lesson learned, communication and change management are key in implementing any new idea. Each member of the team wanted to contribute and make the project a success but would, at times, feel a little lost in how to do it. Clarity of each person's role, expectations, and who has the final say, is something that we now define more accurately.

Multipurpose and Multifaceted: How We Designed Our Space

The design decisions for the space in which *Indigenous and Urban* was presented had to take into account the fact that programming would change frequently. We had to carefully consider every element, from the choice of colors (we used a gray cityscape with pops of bright color) to the choice of seating, lighting, placement of exhibition elements, and more (fig. 1).

Above all, the design needed to allow for flexible use of the 2,000-square-foot space,



fig. 2.

A 3D rendering of *Indigenous and Urban*. This shows the loose disposition of the seating as well as how we kept space for programs.

accommodating scheduled, in-gallery programs and events. But at the same time, the exhibition also had to feel like a complete experience when there was no programming. We decided to divide the gallery into different zones. Some of these had relatively fixed content (such as 2D and 3D works of art, text panels, and videos). Others were looser and more readily adaptable to a given activity. In both cases, though, when there was no special programming, the gallery still felt like an exhibition.

Flexibility would be a constant concern throughout the project's planning and development phases. To address the need for flexible seating, for example, while remaining within our allocated budget, our designer incorporated beanbag chairs of various sizes in the middle of the gallery. This circumvented the formality of a traditional gallery setting; it also enabled quick layout

changes (fig. 2). Plus, visitors could move seating at will, allowing them to choose their own view point and spend more time watching videos, contemplating works of art, or having a conversation. We also included more conventional seating for people who either could not, or would not, use the beanbag chairs.

Another flexibility related concern was what to do with the videos when there was a live performance in the space. It was not practical to have the museum's technical team coming in and out of the gallery several times a day to stop and restart all audiovisual elements. Instead, we installed the videos with a central system that could be activated with a remote, allowing docents to easily turn AV elements on and off.

Lighting, like the space itself, was modular. It accommodated a wide variety of programs,

and, like the AV, was easy to adjust with remote-control access. The space was thus able to accommodate a lecture series, a theatrical play, weekend craft workshops for families, and a live dance performance. Together with our other design elements, it helped to make the programming an equal partner with the exhibition, and as much a part of the messaging as the works of art and text panels hanging on the walls.

Creating a Holistic Experience: How We Incorporated Content

Every work of art and every program in this curated event came from Indigenous artists and individuals, and related the various life experiences of First Peoples living in Canadian urban centers. The selection of art and programming—whether film, sculpture, print, dance, or any other medium—described the challenges of adapting to a changing way of life, and raised important issues about injustice, such as discrimination and stereotyping.

The artworks in *Indigenous and Urban* were of various mediums. Some were typical of any traditional art exhibition, like the photographs and engravings hung on the gallery's walls, or sculpture presented in display cases; others were different. Video screens displayed short movies from First Nations videographers. The performance space was occupied on a regular basis by artists. Every week, a special live program was scheduled to take place in the gallery. We had film showings followed by discussions with the filmmaker; dance shows; author readings followed by discussions; and more (intro image). Every Saturday, we held arts and crafts workshops for families. These different works and performances—sometimes humorous, always thought provoking—were all linked together by a

We intentionally left one of the gallery walls blank. We invited the self-taught Winnipeg Métis artist Fred Thomas to begin creating a graffiti mural during the launch of *Indigenous and Urban*, then to complete it over the course of several days.

main message about the diversity of the urban Indigenous population and what it means to be Indigenous in the city today.

We faced a specific challenge with media; our goal was to have it work seamlessly with the objects and images. For the short films by Aboriginal videographers, we used three small screens with headphones, which helped isolate sound. In addition, these looped videos were programmed so that even if the same film selection was playing on all three screens, they were not synchronized, making it appear that there were always three different films playing.

Another major feature was a highly dynamic wall projection of a music video, which featured the First Nation DJ electronic-music group “A Tribe Called Red,” well known in Canada for remixing traditional powwow music with contemporary club sounds. Like the videos, it was looped, enveloping visitors in its pounding rhythm as soon as they entered the gallery.

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fig. 3.

The graffiti artist, Fred Thomas, painting his mural as visitors observe and interact with him.

and Urban, then to complete it over the course of several days (fig. 3). The idea was that visitors could watch the artist paint, and interact with him. The work changed continuously, allowing visitors to come back during the day and see how the mural was progressing.

In addition, we installed a remote camera in the space. As the artist painted, the camera took pictures—every minute. Once the mural was completed, our video team created a two-minute, accelerated, time-lapse presentation from the photographs, which also featured a short biography of the artist and a brief description of his work. We uploaded the video to a screen near the mural. People who visited the gallery, even after the artist had finished painting the mural, were able to see how the work of graffiti art had come to be, allowing them to vicariously experience the excitement of seeing a work of art created live.

In the end, the fixed works of art and live programming completed and mirrored one another, while remaining independent elements. This curated space thus became a place where people were invited to not only contemplate art and read text panels, but to lounge, to discuss what they saw, to listen to

music, to participate in live performances, to create, and to play. We capped off our curated event with a live performance by A Tribe Called Red, which drew many of their fans—and turned the museum into a massive music and dance happening.

Final Thoughts

For us, the major achievement of this curated event was the creation of a richer, more varied, and more dynamic experience, which changed depending on the time and day people visited. A dance performance might occupy the center of the gallery space at one point; at another, an Indigenous author might be discussing his or her novel before a live audience; at yet another, the music video by A Tribe Called Red might take center stage. Having a series of programs changing every week for one exhibition is not something that we usually do. In this case we did, and visitors left us positive comments. The last powwow attracted so many people that we were at full capacity, and, we reached a new audience of young adults.

Small changes—such as whom we involve at the outset of a project, how we view a space, and how we develop our offerings to visitors—can lead to a more integrated and

complete experience for our audiences. This project confirmed for us that innovation is not necessarily defined by a generous budget or the use of new technology. It can simply be in how we approach a topic and how we see our spaces and our activities. This is something that all institutions can achieve, no matter their size.

There have been times when going outside traditional models has proven to be challenging for us as a staff. But this effort has pushed us to think differently. The curated event is not a revolution, nor is it new in the museum world. At the Canadian Museum of History, though, it forced us to reimagine how we use our galleries, and allowed us to be more daring and creative by blurring longstanding lines between exhibitions and programs. ■

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