



From Hall to Highway:

Taking a Permanent Exhibition on the Road

by Joe Imholte, Heather Farnworth, Charity Counts, and Whitney Owens

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Introduction: Joe Imholte

Traveling exhibitions can bring many benefits for their organizers: revenue, increased visibility, connections with other museums, and a wider sharing of core mission, to name just a few. Many museums have considered taking one of their “permanent” exhibitions—either directly from the floor or in another form—on the road to capitalize on these benefits with an existing resource. Few projects actually make the jump, and the ones that do often transform into something else entirely.

I have been engrossed in this topic for some time, imagining the impossible (such as a traveling City Museum) and the improbable (traveling Museum of Jurassic Technology), but also envisioning the possible—exhibitions that are exceptional at their host institutions that could be exceptional temporary exhibitions at other museums as well. My short list includes *The Power of Children* from the Indianapolis Children's Museum, the Weston Family Innovation Centre at the Ontario Science Center, and *Science Storms* at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, among many others.

The topic comes up not only when we discuss incoming temporary exhibitions, but also when we consider new projects for the core galleries at the Science Museum of Minnesota that could travel eventually. In fact, we're currently planning to replicate an exhibition that recently opened here in order to create a touring version, and we're brainstorming ways to do the same with another project.

Why do some exhibitions make this

transition, while others don't? Some museums simply may not want to tour their exhibitions or may not have the capacity to do so. But for those that do, my assumption has been that the limiting factor is money. However, I have learned that while money is almost always a factor, it is not always the factor that prevents an exhibition with itchy feet from touring. Museums take myriad circumstances into account when they're evaluating a permanent exhibition for travel. We'll consider several of these factors herein, and suggest creative ways to move exhibitions from hall to highway.

Physical Factors: Heather Farnworth

Some exhibitions simply make the conversion to travel better than others—and it's helpful to be realistic about how much re-work is productive and acceptable when transforming a permanent exhibition into a traveler. At the Ontario Science Centre, our newest traveling exhibition, *Imagine*, is based on permanent exhibits from our Weston Family Innovation Centre. Over the years, we observed that the concept of innovation resonated strongly with our visitors, and we wanted to extend these experiences outside our own walls.

As we discussed the possibility of creating *Imagine*, we considered a number of questions: Is content alone a sufficient reason to turn a permanent exhibition into a traveler? Is an amazing exhibition at home always going to work on the road? What else should influence the decision?

If your organization finds itself taking on a similar challenge, here are some key parameters to consider:



A traveling City Museum? Yes, please! Photo courtesy Bette Schmit.

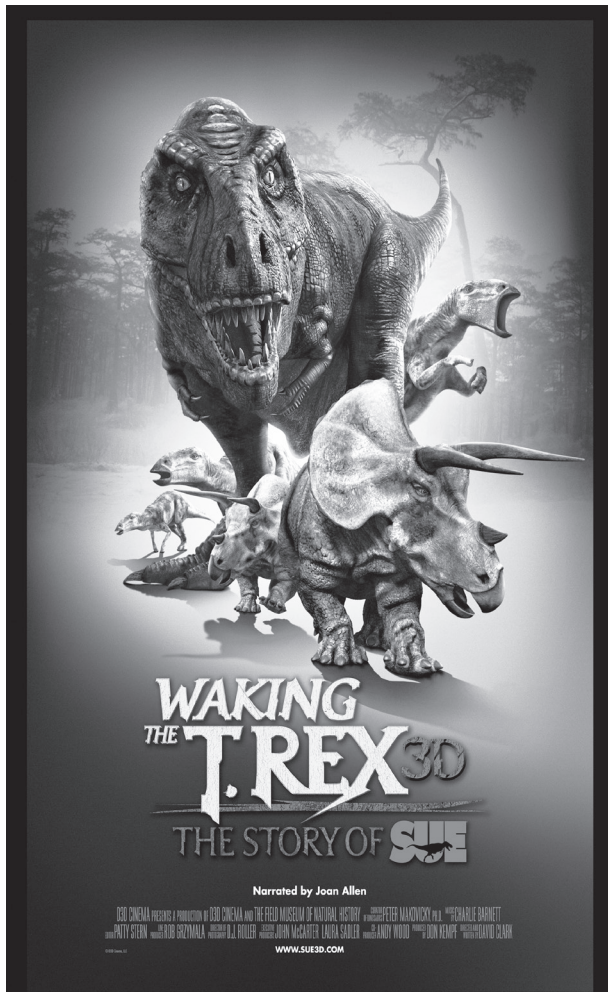
- **Audience:** Is your exhibition's current target audience too exclusive (i.e. targeted only to youth or adults)? Most venues will want the traveling exhibition to sustain the interest of a wide range of audiences.
- **Languages:** How text-heavy is your exhibition? Does it translate well into multiple languages? Do you have space for additional languages, more graphic panels, or touch screens for some of the heavier content?
- **Technology:** Is the exhibition's technology up to date and sustainable on the road?
- **Rights:** A permanent exhibition sometimes includes authentic artifacts; make sure you have the rights to travel them. Balance the value of authenticity against the risk of artifact damage; the road can be rough on delicate objects.
- **Robust Design:** Huge structures can look great in your gallery but may require redesign to break into components that can easily fit in a crate, truck, or sea container.

Ensure that any modified exhibition is durable enough to withstand constant use and carries any necessary instructions and safety certifications with it.

- **And More:** Variable ceiling heights, loading docks, hoists, crate storage, and countless other considerations inform production and design. Components must be modular, adjustable, and flexible—or the exhibition that looks terrific in your gallery may seem ill-fitting in another space.

Using our own checklist as a guide, adapting the Weston Family Innovation Centre into a traveling exhibition was not without its challenges: the key was making this project an organization-wide priority to ensure collaboration amongst our team of designers, researchers, and fabricators. With careful planning—and drawing from our past experience producing other traveling exhibitions—we redesigned and fabricated a new 5500 sf traveling exhibition on innovation. Time will tell, but we believe we made the right decision, and *Imagine* will start touring in January 2012.

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Waking the T. rex: The Story of Sue: Some museums have translated their exhibition content into large-format films such as Waking the T. rex, based on SUE at The Field Museum. Photo ©Giant Screen Films/D3D Cinema.

positively answer key questions:

- Can we find money to build it? If we do, will visitors come?
- Is the content relevant to a broad, potentially international market?
- Would other museums be willing to pay a fee for it?

If we are unable to answer these questions with a resounding “yes,” then the idea remains only an idea. The same process applies to concepts inspired by our permanent galleries.

One example is our permanent exhibition, *The Power of Children: Making a Difference*. This exhibition shares the stories of three children—Anne Frank, Ruby Bridges and Ryan White—who faced profound trials and emerged as heroes of the 20th century. *The Power of Children* offers families the opportunity to explore the challenges these children faced by immersing them in recreated environments filled with objects and sound and light shows that tell their stories. With its rich historical content, live performances and diverse themes, it is not difficult to see how this exhibition would have appeal as a traveler.

We first tested the idea with potential venues and determined that their initial interest made it worth exploring further. We then identified the obstacles this venture might encounter. Among the challenges were many of the factors that Heather mentions above, including revision of design, copyright restrictions, intellectual property rights, artifact substitutions, and funding. Concerns like

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One must consider many physical—and budgetary—factors when evaluating a permanent exhibition for travel, so it is best to begin these discussions as soon as possible. Like packing for any trip, always consider what you need and what will fit in the suitcase before you hit the road.

Those That Stayed Home: Charity Counts

Though it is tempting for a successful exhibition producer to imagine every new idea as a traveler, not all permanent exhibitions are destined to make the transition. Typically, when a museum turns to its permanent galleries for inspiration, it is as an afterthought (albeit an understandable one, given the time and money invested in a permanent project): “This exhibition is extraordinary! What if we made a traveling version?”

At The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, we contemplate a potential new traveling exhibition seriously and decide to proceed only when we can

required 17-foot ceiling heights make the existing design for *The Power of Children* impractical as a traveling show. A revised structural design would also necessitate a new artifact plan, requiring permission to create replicas of current loans or to purchase new objects that would be fit for the often extreme conditions of travel. In addition, an extension of intellectual property rights for the exhibition seemed unlikely.

The challenge of acquiring necessary funding presented a final obstacle. With a variety of new projects to fund—projects that generate staff and client excitement—it proved difficult to justify giving this exhibition priority over others. Moreover, we would have needed to educate potential underwriters about the value in funding an exhibition that already has been built once before. With a talented pool of resources, our museum would likely be able to overcome these obstacles—but it is for these reasons that this particular traveling exhibition remains only an idea.

Other Roads: Whitney Owens

If your institution finds itself similarly challenged to turn its permanent exhibition into a traveler, you might consider other roads—especially since many museums don't have the resources needed to support a full traveling program. With good organization and a little marketing savvy, museums are finding non-traditional ways to make their permanent exhibition content “travel” without leaving the loading dock.

Some museums have turned material developed for permanent exhibitions into film content for the big screen as the Field



Families explore the recreated home of Ryan White in *The Power of Children: Making a Difference* exhibit. ©The Children's Museum.

Museum did in making the film *Waking the T. rex: The Story of Sue* with D3D Cinema. (D3D, 2011; Field Museum, 2012). Providing scientifically-vetted content, images, and a compelling story to a large-format film company can be a way to share permanent exhibition content with audiences around the world. Co-developing a film often requires some sort of up-front investment but can yield royalties after the film enters distribution; an additional benefit is that the film company can market and book the film on its own, lifting a logistical burden from the contributing museum.

Other institutions, such as Science North and the Exploratorium, have utilized a “catalogue” approach to reproduce materials that they originally created for permanent exhibitions (Science North 2011, Exploratorium, 2006-2012).

Museums may make a series of interactives, media pieces, images, or footage available for wholesale purchase; some parties also customize the component to the buyer's needs. The sale of interactives often involves flat-fee arrangements, while the license of images and footage may work within more of a royalty or per-use fee structure.

Several museums, most notably the American Museum of Natural History (2012) in New York, have expanded the

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OSC's newest traveling exhibition, *Imagineate*, was inspired by the Weston Family Innovation Centre. ©Ontario Science Centre.

catalogue approach, licensing complete packages of designs and content from permanent projects to other parties. This method can be especially useful in working with international venues, who can't necessarily afford high shipping costs or who need to redesign an exhibition to accommodate a second or third language. In addition, this strategy can solve size constraints, so that another institution can adapt a project to fit its space perfectly.

Finally, some museums have turned expertise gained from creating permanent exhibitions into opportunities to provide consulting and services (Science Museum of Minnesota, 2012). Several museums have offered their creative services to outside parties to help design and/or build experiences as high-quality as the ones they present onsite.

To explore any of these options, an institution should remember these tips:

- Organize project files from the start to minimize revisions once the exhibition has been built.
- Consider negotiating broad rights for images or footage that you intend to license (and ensure that your vendors do the same); licensees must be able

to reproduce these resources legally.

- Create a licensing or sales agreement that protects your intellectual property, and safeguard your good name by reviewing what clients produce with your content.

With the world continually shrinking, virtual ways to travel exhibition content will only become more popular—and are excellent options for institutions that cannot create a full-scale traveling program.

Conclusion

As with most things in the museum world, one size does not fit all when it comes to the reasons an exhibition—in whatever form—does or does not make the transition from hall to highway. Traveling permanent exhibition content presents an extraordinary opportunity for an institution to share its mission and brand with a wider audience, but the power of an exceptional exhibition or visitor experience remains strong even if it stays put. Someday we may see a traveling City Museum or Museum of Jurassic Technology—but until then we can eagerly look forward to visiting these icons in their original halls. ✨