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Welcome to Exhibits Newslines! I'm delighted to be taking over this column from the capable hands of Beth Redmond-Jones. We've got a wide-ranging set of exhibitions this time, so let's get started!

Museum Educator Charissa Ruth asks:

*Ever wonder what goes on behind the scenes of museums? How do they get all that stuff? I mean, really, how does a museum collection come about? Look no further than the exhibit **Nature's Explorers** at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences. This exhibit explores how the museum was created, and why it is important to collect and preserve the natural world around us.*

The largest section of the exhibit is sandwiched between two smaller rooms. These two smaller rooms display small samplings from the collection demonstrating just how varied the concepts of rocks or trees are when you really think about it. Visitors can also find some explanations of just how scientists collect objects for the museum as well.

The inner room is the heart of the exhibit. On one side is a timeline from the early days of the museum to the present. Not your ordinary timeline, this one comes loaded with pictures as well as collection items to look at and touch. For those who may not be able to partake in the text, there is more than enough to visually read the timeline. The text panels here and throughout the exhibit are short, sweet, and to the point. Many provide short descriptions or ask open-ended questions to prompt visitors to look deeper. On the other side of the inner room are two scientists' offices set up to show some of the similarities and differences between scientists from the early 1900s and a

modern scientist. The older scientist's office is modeled to look like H.H. Brimley's Workroom, the first curator for the museum. Furnished in dark wood and covered in untold number of taxidermy materials as well as other scientific gadgets and tools, it's like peering into a different world. Visitors were drawn to the glass, finding the taxidermy in process fascinating for some and creepy for others.

The beauty of this exhibit is that there is no right way to enter and explore and there is something for everyone to connect to, both to other exhibits in the museum and to their own life. Even though our understanding of science and museums has changed over time, the need to protect our world still remains essential to the exploration of nature.

Gene Dillenburg describes an interesting project from the University of Michigan Museum of Natural History:

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the extinction of the passenger pigeon. Once the most numerous bird in the world, with a population numbering in the billions, commercial hunting in the 1800s wiped out the wild flocks. The last surviving individual died in the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914.

Project Passenger Pigeon encourages museums, schools, nature centers, and other institutions to commemorate this anniversary, and to use the lessons of the passenger pigeon to promote conservation and stewardship. Among the programs they offer is a set of free exhibit panels. Designed by the University of Michigan Museum of Natural History, these richly-illustrated panels interpret both the bird's natural history, and the history of its interaction with people.

The panels are available at no cost on PassengerPigeon.org. Any museum can download the files, take them to their local print shop, and create an instant exhibit. To date at least two dozen institutions in the US and Canada have done so. (That's how many we know of—no doubt there are more, but we have no way of tracking how many people have downloaded the free panels.) Most have augmented the panels with specimens and objects from their own collections. The panels have proven especially popular with smaller institutions which would not otherwise have been able to afford to create a display. And the University benefits by having its interpretive efforts reach a broader audience.

Jo Ann Secor from Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership tells us about the Small Basilica in Plovdiv, Bulgaria:

You encounter the Small Basilica in the very ancient town of Plovdiv, Bulgaria (it predates Rome and Athens) zipping along one of the more contemporary streets that ring the outskirts of the “old town.” The new in situ archaeological museum building is a small gem in the landscape of modern buildings and roadscape that clearly indicates that Plovdiv, originally named Philippopolis by the Thracians, is now part of the 21st century. The new facility was opened in 2013 and exists to contain and preserve the remains of the Small Basilica, an early Christian church that was accidentally discovered in 1988 during the construction of an apartment building. What remained of the 6th century church was a floor of geometrical mosaics of rhombuses, circles and rosettes and a baptistery pool made of marble and decorated with fine mosaics depicting doves and a stag. Historians had discovered that Philippopolis was the home of a local mosaic workshop and, upon their discovery, the mosaics



Mosaic of doves surrounding the baptistery pool. Courtesy of Jo Ann Secor.

underwent emergency conservation along with the discovered adjacent fortification walls.

The Basilica experience begins in the surrounding courtyards which have strategic interpretive signs that provide information about the history of the times and the site. This prepares one to enter the Museum for what is a very pure and authentic experience. A small, modern information desk greets you upon entering. It is low and small enough to not obscure your view of the complete installation. You are invited to move to the left and enter into the main, singular space, where you walk on a raised glass floor over the restored mosaics. A few simple interpretive panels are placed on the side wall and a video on the conservation of the mosaics runs on a far wall. But it is the magic of the space, the ability to walk over these mosaics, in a building that simulates the shape of the Basilica that is so captivating. There is a quiet reverence that permeates the space forcing you to slow down, walk slowly, look more intently at the tiny stones making up the beautiful patterns. The natural light casts a warm glow throughout. And, as you move clockwise, you are able to walk over to the cross-shaped baptistery pool which is where the most vivid and pictorial of the mosaics lie—of doves and a stag. Visitors can walk throughout the area and behind the



View into Brooklyn Block Lab exhibition. Courtesy of Marcos Stafne.

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altar, which is still under reconstruction, with pencil sketches and plastic cover very evident. From this area, visitors can ascend a cascade of frosted-glass stairs to a small, modern box—a mezzanine where one can get a great view of the entire space and the mosaics. You can also sit here and watch a video about Plovdiv. The restrained nature of the restoration, interpretation and architecture allows the authenticity of the site and its beautiful objects to reign in full glory. A quiet applause for the Small Basilica.

We head from Bulgaria to Brooklyn with Marcos Stafne of Brooklyn Children's Museum sharing news about **Brooklyn Block Lab**. The **Lab** was originally conceived as an add-on experience for the **Building Brainstorm** exhibit, but has taken on a life of its own because of the popularity of the experience.

The **Lab** features four different types of blocks that we specifically picked based on research and visitor testing. We brought together a full set of unit blocks, a set of Imagination Playground's new small blocks, over 500 Magna-Tiles, and a generous supply of Kapla Planks. Aside from the blocks, we have six play research assistants who are documenting conversations in the **Lab** as well as

working on independent block activities and projects.

There is a lot of intention behind the placement and selection of our materials. I researched a number of block exhibits across the country to see what's happening with block play in informal learning environments. Most block experiences in museums are positioned as engineering activities, preschool (early childhood) activities, or free play experiences with Imagination Playground. When examining academic literature on block play, a large body of research covers the benefits of block play and language development or social emotional learning. We placed our four types of blocks in four different zones. Our Unit blocks are played with directly on a big carpet. We have two circular tables per zone for kids to play with the small Imagination Playground Blocks, Magna-Tiles, or Kapla Planks.

It's been surprising to see the types of conversation that have sparked in each zone and how much family engagement occurs because of the table placement. Large round tables encourage families to work together. We've purposefully kept signage rather light—just enough information text for folks to know what the blocks are called. We designed two to three activities for each table for parents or kids who need a little push to get started, but once the creativity gets going, the activities are dropped (which we think is great) and collaborative building and conversation start to heat up.

And finally Eric Siegel shares this recent experience:



Carl Andre exhibition at Dia Beacon. Courtesy of Eric Siegel.

Dia Beacon is a converted factory in Beacon, New York that is now a series of galleries devoted to conceptual or minimalist modern art. Those categories do not credit the variety of the work that Dia Beacon shows, nor the austere and sensuous beauty of the building. The galleries range from football field (American football that is) sized to very intimate, and the light is, as far as I can recollect, all natural. So the atmosphere of the galleries changes from hour to hour and from a warm, diffuse daylight to basement shadows. The building and the grounds are works of art themselves, with windows and landscape unobtrusively but elegantly designed by Robert Irwin, the brilliant artist who creates profound effects through minimal interventions. And the general genre of work shown at Dia also relies on very restrained materials and designs.

Carl Andre is a contemporary American artist whose work extends back into the 1950's. Several very large spaces at Dia Beacon are currently devoted to his installations and sculptures, which he makes from industrial materials such as railroad ties (he worked as a maintainer on the railroad for several years) to sheets of treated metal. He also was a poet who used the written or typed word as much for its visual effect as for its meaning.

It can all seem very arcane and art world insider baseball but in this gorgeous setting, the sculptures in particular had a stunning impact. From an exhibition designer's point of view, working in these extraordinary large spaces with natural light offers the opportunity to create landscapes of sculpture that feel much more dimensional than the traditional gallery space, but more contained than the work in the nearby Storm King Sculpture Park.

The building and the collection represent the highest aspirations of contemporary institutional art and are displayed with the kind of understated elegance that, like an Adirondack "camp," demonstrates almost bottomless wealth through its casual detailing (the deMenil family of Dallas Ft Worth are the founders and funders of Dia Beacon). Whether or not you think you like contemporary art, Dia Beacon and the Carl Andre exhibition are well worth the visit.

Have you had an exhibition experience you'd like to share with colleagues in future Exhibits Newsline columns? Email me at: paul@orselli.net with your ideas! ✨

Correction: In the article "21-Tech: Engaging Visitors Using Open-Source Apps" in the Fall 2013 Exhibitionist, Vol 32.2 the co-author with Ceclia Garibay was incorrectly named as Cheryl McCallum. Co-authorship should have been attributed to Keith Ostfeld, Director of Educational Technology at the Children's Museum of Houston. Mr. Ostfeld may be contacted at kto@cmhouston.org. The error has been corrected in the online version of the article.
