ANSEL ADAMS AT 100: SFMOMA EXHIBIT: AN OBSERVATION AND REDESIGN

In studying and observing informal settings and learning design, I find that museums offer a wealth of opportunity for exploring good design and allowing visitors to dream up how they would better develop museum experiences. Because I am deeply involved in photography and am always interested in learning more about the artists who have truly exploded in this medium, I chose to visit the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art during the “Ansel Adams at 100” exhibit. For two months, the museum’s second floor was hosting a myriad of Ansel Adams’ black and white, photographic works from throughout his life. I visited the museum on January 13th, 2002, and went in with all hopes of learning everything I could about Ansel Adams, his life, his work and his passion. While I indeed left the museum with new and valuable bits of information about this artist’s work, I also realized that there were distinct flaws in the museum setting in this particular exhibit and noticed, in some way, that these errors were probably directly responsible for how much learning was accomplished by the visitors to this display. This paper takes a narrative look at the museum design as I observed it in January, specific to this exhibit, and then explores new ways I thought the exhibit might have been better formatted in order to employ the ideal learning environment.

ORIGINAL ANSEL ADAMS EXHIBIT: LAYOUT AND DESCRIPTION

The “Ansel Adams at 100” exhibit was a collection of about sixty photographs from throughout Adams’ history of photographic work. An optional audio tour accompanied the walking tour and I chose to invest in the small headset in order to get the full effect of the experience. I immediately noticed that most people did not choose to rent the small headsets, which later put me at a disadvantage because my pace through the tour was much slower than those who walked it without the guidance of the audio component.

Directed Lines
A woman took my money and handed me a black headset connected to a hand-held device with a number pad on its face. I slung it over my shoulder and rounded the first, dark turn into the exhibit. Much to my dismay, I was fed directly into a long, slow-moving line of people. Before I could even see that first photograph hanging just at eye-level on
the starch-white wall, I had to stand in line to follow the mass of people curving through the exhibit. I wondered if I should play the first introduction on my headset so that I might not have to hold people up when I got to the start of the exhibit. I chose not to, feeling that the mood of the audio track would greatly influence what I got out of the first photograph.

**Beginning the Audio Tour**

Slowly, the line started to move and I was finally standing in front of the first black and white image. Posted next to it were a title and date and a large number that paralleled my audio tour. I punched that number into the hand-held portion of my headset and I began to listen to the corresponding story. I immediately realized how valuable the voiceover was going to be in understanding and learning about Ansel Adams and his photography. However, I was struck by social troubles that plague many a museum patron. The line in front of me (primarily a group that did not take advantage of the audio accompaniment) was progressing and the story piping through my headset wasn’t completed. I gasped, realizing I was hogging the first scene and that the people behind me had yet to enjoy the vision of Adams’ first image. I had to keep moving and continued to listen to the narration while I stepped forward to the next display. I consequently tried to get in the habit of starting the audio segments before I reached the correlating image, but it wasn’t quite the same experience.

**Museum Purgatory**

This process continued and finally I noticed some people stepping around me in order to move at a quicker pace. I never feel comfortable in museums when I feel like I am detracting from someone’s experience, either by holding them up or blocking their view. And yet, I didn’t feel like these individuals, walking so carefree without the aid of a narrator softly whispering in their ears, were really getting the full, learning experience from the exhibit. I almost wanted to slow them down, tell them to return to the entry booth and pay the inconsequential eight dollars in order to ‘learn’ about Ansel Adams! Suddenly, I was the one being disrupted. I felt like the line was closing in on me before I was able to finish the audio that matched the photograph in front of me. I felt slow, idle and worst of all, pressured. So I pulled a daring maneuver. I stepped out of the line that was inching along the wall. I stood back and let the narrator continue to talk at me while I took time staring at the photograph which he described. Unfortunately, the line closed
in around the photograph and this caterpillar of people quickly mended the gap that I had left. I was no longer able to fully enjoy the photograph while the tour continued in my ears. The photograph was too far away to see the distinct details which the author spoke of and worst of all, I was stuck in “museum purgatory”, the place in the center of the room where a few, nondescript people end up when they have no place in line. I was going to have to do the unthinkable. I was going to have to cut back into the line.

Catching Up

I found a break where some other unlucky soul (who also had to let the audio tour catch up) stepped out of line. I snuck back in and resumed my tour. But now, I was concentrating much more on keeping with the pace of the line that I wasn’t sure how much I was really learning anymore. I was distracted and uncomfortable, worried that if the narrations were going too slowly, I was going to have to step out of line again to wait for them to catch up.

After an hour, I made it through all sixty photographs, but by the last few, had given up on the audio tour altogether. Discouraging as it may have been, I just felt too pressured to take my leisurely time through each photo while trying to let the narrator finish his story before I moved on. I rounded the last corner and was unwillingly funneled into a gift shop that was tightly packed with the same people who had been maneuvering in front of me. The shop was no more than the same starch-white walls lined by temporary tables filled with posters, calendars, books and paraphernalia of Ansel Adams and his beautiful works. But I was crammed into a corner while all the people filtered through. I didn’t even have the patience to observe the materials and immediately pushed my way around the center table to get out of the room.

I had to go back to the empty audio tour table to return my headset and then backed around to enter other MOMA exhibits. I had been a bit discouraged by this experience, not only because the long, crawling line didn’t leave me feeling comfortable about taking in the exhibit at my own, slow pace, but moreover because there was really no way to do so even if I wanted to. I went home to think about ways I could improve the space of this museum exhibit so that people could attack it at different paces and everyone would walk away with a terrific learning experience.
ANSEL ADAMS EXHIBIT REVISITED: NEW LAYOUT AND DESCRIPTION

Tour Flow
The biggest disjoint between the exhibit design and the learning potential in the Ansel Adams exhibit came down to the nature of people’s touring pace. Because people digest information at different rates, and because some people (like me) choose to take more time to ingest the information, I felt that there were those people who were at a disadvantage for really getting all the juicy details out of this display. A museum with such a popular artist on exhibit is bound to get an overwhelming response of visitors, but how best could the museum set up the photographs in order to accommodate all of the different ‘learners’ who come to see Ansel Adams’ work? If there had been some way for people to move at a steady pace on a lower level floor, and then a place for people who chose to stop, listen to the audio tour and take their time ingesting the information and images, the museum might have better accommodated the different types of learners to this exhibit. I felt that the way the flow was set up, there was little option for me to step out of line to enjoy one of the photographs and learn a little bit more about Adams’ intent. A two-tiered type of display might have solved this problem, allowing me to step away from the line and learn more about specific images.

Wide Open Spaces
The intent of this display was to show Adams’ work over a period of time – from the beginning of his career to the end. It probably didn’t make sense to set this exhibit up like many others, a random display set among a maze of walls where people could dart back and forth between images as they chose. Unfortunately, this timeline of photography seriously inhibited my ability to avoid the crowds that stifled my pace. In many exhibits, I’m free to move around, perhaps selecting an image that is not mobbed by visitors, and take my time to view it from a comfortable distance. In the Ansel Adams exhibit, I was unable to do so. My audio tour, as well as the sequence of photographic images followed a specific path from beginning to end. While this is much more effective in learning about the historical succession of Adams’ work, it became difficult to concentrate in the shoulder-to-shoulder line that linked each subsequent image. Thoughts on improving this might revolve around setting up large displays of Adams’ photography from various eras and collecting these works on various walls throughout the museum. Allowing the visitors to view large wall spaces full of the art from particular
periods might prevent people from getting stuck in a cattle line in order to see the images. Like in many museums, collections of art on large display walls accommodate a greater number of people as the visitors gather around these extended spaces and view from many different angles.

**Universal Audio Interaction**

I would re-design the exhibit in order to provide audio tours for all of the guests. I think there is an important element in hearing a narrative about an artist and I really feel like audio is truly an enhancement in the learning environment. I realize there are countless people who are inhibited by headsets and feel that the learning experience is driven by the art or display itself, but in my mind, a free ‘audio room’ would be of added benefit, without distracting the flow of traffic through the display. I envisioned supplemental ‘audio-rooms’, just central to the era-walls that I described earlier. These audio rooms would replay narrations specific to the joining area while flashing large images on the wall. I feel that this feature might create a more interactive and enjoyable learning environment wherein people could visit the audio rooms, emerging with ideas, thoughts, perspectives and feelings of Ansel Adams. With a new understanding of an era of Adams’ life and work, the visitors would flow back out into the large, open areas and have a better connection to the photography on display.

**http://www.sfmoma.org/adams**

Finally, I realized that the Ansel Adams exhibit was supplemented by a wonderful online tour at the SFMOMA website. It was a delightful and condensed version of what was seen in the SFMOMA during the Adams’ exhibit. Unfortunately, I don’t think that this exhibit was promoted as a ‘learning extension’ to what visitors found in the museum. Instead, the close of the exhibit was a crowded gift shop that didn’t really leave the exiting visitor with a spark of enthusiasm about how to learn even more about Ansel Adams. Kiosks set up with this additional information might have proven valuable tools for visitors interested in getting more insight into Ansel Adams and his expertise. Furthermore, simple promotion of this site in the museum environment might have developed a better interest in retention of the information people learned while examining the true works of Adams’. I didn’t find this site until weeks after my visit when I was looking for additional educational materials on Ansel Adams. I happened upon this beautifully designed site and wondered how many of the visitors I encountered that
January afternoon might have utilized this as an extended learning tool once they left the museum.

**ANSEL ADAMS EXHIBIT CONCLUSION**

It occurred to me, during my visit to the Ansel Adams exhibit, that museums have so much to offer people in terms of a learning experience. I think that all in all, the Ansel Adams display was a clean, structured module and was a terrific teaching mechanism for young and old to learn about Adams. However, it struck me, after having been exposed to discussion about adequate and effective learning environments and spaces, how important it is for museum exhibits to be displayed in a manner that truly fosters the learning they intend. Simple visitor flow can impact the learning to such a great extent. I went in to the SFMOMA exhibit aware that I wanted to leave with a newfound understanding of Ansel Adams. Despite the distractions, I forced myself to learn new and exciting concepts about black and white photography and about Ansel Adams himself. However, for the unsuspecting visitor who isn’t entering a museum saying, “I’m going to learn something today,” it is most important to develop the right design that will, upon their exit, have influenced their knowledge bank in some specific way. This is a great challenge for museum directors and will continue be an important component in museum design.
Diagram of Existing Ansel Adams Exhibit

BEGIN EXHIBIT

Audio tour desk

Gift gallery

Exit

Other exhibits

Stairs

Photographs displayed on these walls

Photographs exhibit displayed along inner walls

SFOMOA: ANSEL ADAMS AT 100 EXHIBIT

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March 4, 2002
ANSEL ADAMS EXHIBIT APPENDIX 2

Diagram of Ansel Adams Exhibit Redesign

SFMOMA: ANSEL ADAMS EXHIBIT REDESIGN

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march 4, 2002