

Transforming Thresholds Roundtable

'Interview the Experts – Q&A session'

In the afternoon session of the Transforming Thresholds Roundtable, we interviewed a series of experts from retail, gaming, performing arts and e-learning to tell us about the best practice in their industry. We asked Tracy Harwood (Retail Lab), John Sear (Wall Four), Nathan Human (Citizen 598) and Alex Moseley (University of Leicester) to respond to the following questions:

- 1) Please tell us about the examples of projects that you have been part of or know about where a visitor (or customer, gamer, or learner) has been guided successfully through a foyer or threshold space.
- 2) In your industry/sector what is the general orthodoxy or best practice considered for designing thresholds spaces / foyers / start of the game / start of the learning experience?
- 3) Can you identify any general principles and assumptions that underpin good use of foyer spaces? (e.g. is best practice in your sector/industry related to sensory perception, value for money, multifunctional use of space) Are there any theories that describe this?
- 4) Is there anything else that is important about foyer design in relation to your area of expertise that you would like to tell us (in a sentence!)?

Here are their responses:

Retail - Tracy Harwood from the Marketing and Retail Lab, De Montfort University

Tracy began by explaining to us her research on consumers and their journey through the design space, what in retail contexts is described as the **servicescape**. The journey through the servicescape begins before the consumer enters the physical space of the store, including the online resources and signs or cues provided in the surrounding outside environment.

She provided some data from a case study which illustrated the **eye movements of a customer when moving through a store**. The store had been highly successful, breaking even in 8 weeks rather than in the predicted time span of 2-3 years. The goal of the analysis was to uncover which design factors had been successful in generating that income return.

The lesson learnt from that analysis was that the key factors which attract eye attention are where the **light** is put and the **saliency** of the objects. Advertising and navigation aids don't matter – signage is just not seen by the customer. So in retail, the threshold space is not defined by physical boundaries, and people are led by objects and not by words.

If the customer is not looking at signage how are they finding their way through the servicescape and how can this be designed in order to maximise the sales opportunities for the store? In part, the answer lies in creating different **sight lines** – vertical sight lines (**corridors**) and horizontal sight lines (**horizons**): the process of **scanning** – looking for where you might go – it is not the same as **browsing**. The only time customers browse is when they are in a corridor, or in an enclosed space.

The **exit point** is just as important: retailers will try to keep consumers in stores by increasing dwell time in stores.

People's attention is drawn by **moving objects**, such as the animation in people's faces. They are drawn by movement more generally, so how you cause **people to form in a group** is important. **Light** is key – people will not go into dark spaces. Our primary response mechanism is visual. Neural analysis has shown that the part of the brain that responds to textual stimuli (the front cortex) is not our primary response mechanism. So it is no wonder that verbal content in signs is often ineffective as a form of communication in the initial stages of orientation.

Angus Deuchars from Arup reminded us that **sound** is also important. For example, in some stores the beat of music is used to make people move more quickly or slowly. People respond to sound emotionally. Poor sound quality, or sounds with negative association, or incongruous with their environment will produce negative reactions. This means that museums need to think about how to control noise or a poor acoustic in a foyer (too loud). Important considerations for museums are how to enable good speech intelligibility, and foyers which are used as wider orientation spaces (and so might include multiple groups who are preparing for their visits) have special acoustic needs which must be catered for in their design.

Retail design draws on the familiarity of customers' expectation. In shops these expectations (or schema) are related to **the strip**, the space where the store brings together **extrinsic stimuli** and the visitor's **intrinsic motivations**.

The underpinning theory used in retail has drawn on **holistic research from the 1970s** but with more recent technological developments has now moved on to draw on **eye tracking** (child psychology). Other important fields for understanding customer behaviour have included **anthropology** (naturalism), **military research** (improvised explosive device detection), **environment analysis**, **design space** and consumer behaviour.

The **key challenge** in researching customer behaviour is that the classic research technique is to ask people what they remember and what they were thinking about. But people don't remember what they see, so there is around 70% error in the responses that are gathered.

There is a further challenge in how far we can apply the ideas that Tracy outlined, because people are not just shopping when they are in a museum (so do they look

differently). The work of Bruno Ingemann on eye movements in library spaces is interesting here.

Key points that we need to consider for the design of museum foyers from the perspective of retail:

Lighting and sight

How are the sight lines and lighting used in entrance spaces to orient visitors and help guide them to particular parts of the museum's spaces and exhibitions?

Servicescape

How does the museum design its servicescape, from initial point of visitor contact through to the final point of visitor exit?

Modes

How are different modes of communication designed into layers of meaning (e.g. have verbal signs been over-privileged at the expense of image, sound)

Schemas and saliency

When visiting a museum, the visitor does not approach with the same familiar expectations, nor with the same intrinsic motivations (e.g. to purchase something). How do museums provide extrinsic stimuli in their equivalent to the 'strip' which can engage with the range of intrinsic motivations that might be taking place?

Gaming: John Sear – Wall Four / University of Birmingham

John began by explaining his interest in creating games and enabling people to play games together in real spaces. He showed some interesting examples of games which had been used in the spaces of museums and their foyers, including:

Interference (Eric Zimmerman and Nathalie Pozzi). In this example, John reminded us that the kinds of games put in foyers do not need to be digital. Instead, there are people who guide 'players' to join in and tell them with what role they need to take. This is quite different to video games, where the player's purchase of the game necessarily entails a motivation to take part, and relies on well known expectations of how to engage with the material.

Musical QR codes at Nottingham castle is a game using QR codes on pieces of cardboard. When the visitor carried the QR code into different spaces, different sounds were activated. When multiple players carried QR codes, different combinations of sounds could be created.

Both examples led to discussion of the distinction between **games** and **play**, where games are structures with rules and which entail strategy. Engagement tends to be longer. In contrast, play is unstructured and engagement tends to be shorter.

John reminded us that really good game design is incredibly difficult, and enabling people to join in with a game can be more difficult still. If you put people into an unstructured space they are not productive. In game design, structuring that start point might be likened to the opening credits for a film, where players enter the **magic circle of the game** and in so doing, agree to enter into the codes and strategies of the game. The challenge of transferring this metaphor of the 'magic circle' to the museum foyer is how to naturalise the transition into that space.

One solution is not to think about the foyer as a space in which actual games (in a 'hard sense of gaming') might be played but rather as environments in which particular **game mechanics** might be integrated. As **David Burden** from Daden suggested, the solution is to add some cues which help people know how to interact with the museum (those cues are medium agnostic, rather than just digital), such as **icons** or **assets** that could be collected, and which might bring a sense of direction and engagement. **Colour** and **images** are typical resources here.

It is difficult to know how explicit the instruction to the 'visitor as player' might need to be. Ideally, educating the visitor and enabling them to engage with what lies ahead in the exhibitions should be '**by stealth**', but the preparation (conceptually speaking) needs to be completed sufficiently by the time they exit from the foyer into the main exhibition space. Different visitors will respond variously to game-like stimuli: children are more likely to play whereas adults might 'read the manual'.

Factors which encourage people to join a game are **critical mass** and **anonymity** (e.g. the use of the dark in John's collaborative cinema game).

The discussion of gaming allowed us to think about how the scaffolding and feedback used in gaming enabled deeper engagement and immersion. This engagement is also described as '**flow**' (the pleasure of immersion within a given experience, whether that be learning, play, shopping).

The key points that help us think about the museum foyer from a gaming perspective:

The magic circle

How can museums use the foyer space as a point in which the 'codes for play' are set out 'by stealth' and prepare people for engagement with the exhibitions that follow?

Game mechanics

What icons or assets can be included in the foyer as part of engaging with the 'game' of visiting the museum?

Immersion and engagement

What factors inhibit or enable flow in the foyer?

Performing Arts - Nathan Human from Citizen 598

Nathan began his presentation by reminding us that in performance terms, the nature of the intended **audience** is all important in determining **the point of the story** and how you might want the audience to engage with it. Some people do not want to engage actively, but prefer to engage passively, just to stand back and watch.

Nathan went on to talk about his experience of performing in street theatre as a parallel example of creating engagement with an unlikely audience. He suggested that in order to help people feel as if they can come in to the museum, it was important to begin with something small and **familiar** so that people would actually watch the performance (or in the case of the museum, want to come in and watch the rest of the show).

Drawing the **boundaries** around the performance space is important so that people know where they are safe. On the one hand, the performer needs to be friendly, approachable, and offer an engaging performance. On the other hand, they need to respect the personal space of the audience. The performer needs to **make the offer** of engagement, which allows the audience the choice of whether to enter the transaction or not.

This can be difficult, because the museum foyer is like a 'cold open' for a comedian: it has not been staged in a way to enable the performer to 'make an offer', and it is difficult to target your offer if you don't know who your audience will be.

The ideas from performing arts which might help museums rethink their foyers can vary depending on the expertise and perspective of the advisor. For example, a set designer would suggest that how the foyer looks is all important. But behind all of this, you need to know what **story** the museum wants to tell about itself, and how this narrative is shaped by the museum's **identity and interests**.

We then discussed examples of performative elements that had been successfully integrated into the threshold experiences of particular visits. Examples included:

- using pictures on the stairs leading into a museum,
- the Natural History Museum who used a member of staff to tweet about what was happening while the queue into the building was waiting,
- Tate modern's use of a focal art piece to raise the right expectation of the gallery: a curious and commanding object
- Theme parks, such as the aquarium in Disneyland, which simulating the experience of going under the sea while the visitor was in a lift

However, we need to be careful not to overstretch the visitor's expectations at the threshold point (e.g. the smell of the chocolate outside a museum about chocolate-making was enough stimuli so that people didn't actually need to go in).

Points to take forward into museum foyer design from a performance perspective

Like gaming, performance arts might best be thought of as providing metaphors for engaging visitors (rather than turning the foyer into a stage with actual performers).

Making the offer

How can the museum staff in a foyer 'make the offer' of engagement with the museum in a way that is both inviting, but allows the audience to take up the transaction at a number of levels?

Tell the story

What is the narrative that the museum wants to tell? How do the objects and signs in the threshold relate to the museum's identity? How have these been selected and structured to fit within the larger 'servicescape' from pre-journey preparation to post-visit evaluation? How does the foyer help bring resolution to the story of the visit?

Familiarity is useful

Boundaries and familiarity are important in enabling audiences to feel safe and so to engage with performances

Passive engagement is not necessarily 'bad'

E-learning: Alex Moseley – University of Leicester

Alex began by sharing an example of good practice where a set of online materials had been developed effectively to enable learner to engage with their course: the distance learning History programme at the University of Leicester.

The programme designed its VLE so that opening environment changed around certain fixed points. The main structure of materials stayed the same (so that learners could find readily priority pieces of information such as assessment), but other features (such as the banner at the top of the page) changed in format and in content in relation to the aspect of the learning experience that was relevant at a particular point in time. The key to successful engagement **was the mixture of the familiar and the surprising.**

How you structure interaction needs to be designed in a way that enables people to get back on track. Sending a message need not be thought of negatively as inducing passivity: you can empower people by sending them a message – a powerful message. The **structure and format** for the content is important in how you build the identity and message to students.

Theories of how you might design educational materials have relied heavily on **constructivist frameworks**, which sequence the initial orientation + provision of materials + application to real life scenarios. Orientation is where the expectations

for the learning experience is set. It is important to match the orientation with the later learning experience: **to set expectations at the right level and be consistent** in meeting expectations throughout the learning experience. For example, a course that began with an intensive series of activities in two weeks (such as how to use the library, how to use IT facilities etc), followed by much less frequent and less intense activities will result in disengagement and loss of motivation as a whole. Game-based approaches work, as does an incremental approach which uses a trailer for the next thing as a taster: **something new** will attract their eye.

Key points to apply to threshold spaces from an educational perspective:

Familiar and surprising

How can we structure the information and cues for engagement within the entry to museums in a way that balances the familiar with surprising/new elements?

Levels of expectation

Match the level of engagement in the orientation phase of the visitor experience with that in the exhibitions

Incremental structures

How is the interaction or engagement in the threshold space related to what has come before and will come afterwards in the visitor's experience of the museum.