“Presenting our Collections: Ideals, Ideas and Practice”

The Palazzo Strozzi as a laboratory for museum display

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www.bradburne.org
Who is James Bradburne?
‘There is no theory that is not part of an autobiography’
Paul Valéry (1924)

Graphic designer, exhibition maker, architect (1979 - 89)
Curator (inter alia) Rudolph II and Prague (1997) Belvedere
Director General, mak.frankfurt (1999 - 2003)
Director, Next Generation foundation (2003 - 2006)
Director General, Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, Florence
The role of the museum

“The museum has to function as an institution for the prevention of blindness in order to make works work... Works work when, by stimulating inquisitive looking, sharpening perception, raising visual intelligence, they participate in... the making and re-making of our worlds”

The argument

- the highest quality cultural events are planned well in advance by experienced professionals following international best practice

- exhibitions are made like films - with large teams of exceptionally competent professionals

- as exhibitions should create new knowledge, curators are fundamental to the exhibition

- however, other professionals are also indispensable to ensure the maximum value is created by the whole exhibition experience

- due to its autonomous governance and public-private support, from 2006 - 2014 the Palazzo Strozzi’s exhibitions have served as a laboratory for how museums can create new value with their collections
The Palazzo Strozzi experiment
2006 - 2014
What is Palazzo Strozzi now?

• a masterpiece of Renaissance architecture at the heart of Florence
• Florence’s largest temporary exhibition space, plus a centre for contemporary art
• an urban ‘piazza’ with cafe, shop, concerts
• the city’s laboratory - using every exhibition to explore how to create new value for museums with collections
Palazzo Strozzi is also...

- an experiment in innovative governance - a laboratory for best practice
- a cultural experiment with two goals 1) to bring international quality cultural events to Florence and 2) to give the Palazzo back to the city as a vital cultural destination
- the governance project is about autonomy
- the cultural project is about ‘visible listening’
The Palazzo Strozzi Mission

1] to bring international cultural events to Florence (*think global*)

2] to open the entire Palazzo to Florence and those who love it (*act local*)

*Why stay longer? Why come back? Why live here?*
DECLINING DEMOCRACY
Palazzo Strozzi is a laboratory for learning how to create new value with culture - Making every exhibition is like making a new museum
“Failure is what makes Silicon Valley's success to hard to replicate. Would-be competitors only see, and try to copy, the Valley's success.”

[…] to succeed you need an ecology of fearless players […] unafraid to risk all by helping with often flakey and unpredictable start-ups.

Paul Saffo, 2014
Why we make exhibitions

The Palazzo Strozzi creates all its own exhibitions. The three criteria the Palazzo Strozzi uses to decide what exhibitions it puts in its programme:

1) to create new knowledge

2) to restore works of art

3) to transform visitors

The goal is not to create ‘blockbusters’, but to cover 25-35% of the exhibition’s costs with earned revenue (ticket sales, catalogue royalties, events etc.)

If the exhibition does not fulfil these three basic criteria, it is not considered for the programme

Other factors include alternating between Florence’s heritage and material not in the city’s collections; cultural diplomacy; collaboration
This means ...

1) using world-class curators to create **new knowledge**

2) **restoring art works** to justify temporary exhibitions

3) **Transforming visitors** by having a coherent educational strategy - which we call **visible listening**
The goal of a museum installation

1) to encourage visitors to **look longer**

2) to create the context in which to **see more**

**The goal of all museum installations is to enhance visitor engagement with the objects in the museum’s care**
The research agenda at Palazzo Strozzi

The goal of all the Palazzo Strozzi’s experiments is to *increase engagement with the works of art* - in terms of time spent with the works in the exhibition, discussions about them and further activities afterward outside the exhibition.

How can we achieve greater engagement?

1. by making exhibitions more accessible
2. by including new voices in the exhibition
3. by enhancing affective learning
4. by including new audiences
5. by changing ‘user-languages’
The label: the heart of the museum mission

“An efficient educational museum may be described as a collection of labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen.”

George Brown-Goode, 1888

A label is the sum of all the intentional acts on the part of the museum to create meaning.
1. Opening our collections - how can we make exhibitions accessible?

Women in Power
(fall 2008)
Bronzino
(fall 2010)
Americans in Florence
(spring/summer 2012)
Pontormo & Rosso Fiorentino
(spring/summer 2014)
Dear Dr. Bradburne,

I am an American art historian and live part of every year in Rome. Yesterday my husband and I made our annual excursion to Florence specifically to see the exhibition at the Palazzo Strozzi. I am writing to congratulate you and your staff on your ambitious and stimulating exhibition topics and presentation of the material over the past several years. Yesterday at the Pontormo/ Rosso exhibition I especially enjoyed the clear outline of your adventurous exhibition goals and the large and legible labels placed at good viewing height. I have seldom experienced such a well thought-out and beautifully presented show.

Thank you to you and to your staff. I think that you are setting new standards for what an exhibition can and should be.

Best regards,

Elizabeth DeRosa, Ph.D.
2. Looking longer and seeing more- how can we invite new voices into the museum?
There were three paintings of Bathers in the Fabbri collection painted between the end of the 1870s and 1885. It was one of Cézanne’s favourite subjects treated in more than 140 watercolours, drawings and oil paintings. He showed an early interest in nude studies but his figures were far removed from anatomical precision: they were distorted and depicted with thick brushstrokes and strongly contrasting colours. At the same time Cézanne worked on setting his nudes in landscapes.

Well, Cézanne sure does like green! He has used beautiful shades of green so that even if we spend hours looking at this work we shall never get tired of that luscious colour he has chosen. These five bathers seem to be bathing in a wood that shows they all get along except one of them (on the right) who seems to be crying. This could be a reference to Cézanne’s first steps into entering the impressionist circle and being an outsider at first then entering their circle.

This must be a cool, breezy day in spring, I think this because the sky is grey and the people are trying to dry off quickly. I think this is a depressing painting because most of the people are frowning.

Why other voices?
Cézanne in Florence
(spring/summer 2007)
ControModa
(fall 2007)

Remarkable advancements in textile technology have altered or diminished the authority of traditional construction techniques. Heat, instead of labor-intensive hand-pleating techniques, was used on thermoplastic fibers to create pleats, gathers, and tucks; new technology thus encouraged a radical expansion of the vocabulary of form and the design of the garment as a whole.

Some designers explored new approaches to traditional methods of construction, reinterpreting time-honored techniques such as lace making. By featuring synthetic ornamentation, by combining incongruous materials, or by integrating traditional materials and practices with innovative ideas, designers assaulted conventional notions of luxury and elegance. The dictates of what was "suitable" or "appropriate" were sabotaged.

New textiles for fashion and interiors include three-dimensional structures designed by computer with sculpted surfaces that replace the traditional techniques of embroidery and beading. Topographical surfaces are achieved with such processes as chemical blistering, spatters and laminates of metallic particles, heat molding and treating, and various complex novelty weaves. With rapidly evolving technology, the potential for textile development will continue to change the look and perception of fashion.
At the Court of the Emperors
(spring 2008)
At the Court of the Emperors
(spring 2008)

FIORE DI LOTO
LOTUS OFFERING

Dinastia Tang (618-907), 874 circa
Argento
Tang dynasty (618–907), c. 874
Silver

Il fiore fa parte di una coppia offerta alla reliquia del Buddha, collocata nella sala più nascosta del reliquiario sotterraneo di Famen. Il loto, simbolo di purezza, è associato agli insegnamenti del Buddha, e spesso veniva offerto dai fedeli.

This magnificent flower is one of a pair, offered to the Buddha’s relic and placed in the innermost chamber of the Famen underground reliquary. The lotus, usually associated to the teachings of the Buddha, is a symbol of purity and was therefore often offered by his followers.

Che profumo pensi che abbia?
Gli imperatori Tang amavano i fiori, anche di metallo! Ritenuto uno dei fiori più eleganti, il loto è anche un simbolo buddhista della purezza.

How do you think this flower smells?
The Tang Emperors loved flowers – even in metal! In addition to being very elegant, the lotus is also a fundamental Buddhist symbol representing purity.
Money & Beauty
(fall 2011)
The Thirties
(fall 2012)
3. Feeling more - how can we enhance affective learning?
How to keep the family together in the exhibition - a ‘suitcase’ with activities for different levels of interest
Russian Avant-garde, Siberia and the East
(fall 2013)
De Chirico, Max Ernst, Magritte, Balthus
(spring/summer 2010)
De Chirico, Max Ernst, Magritte, Balthus
(spring/summer 2010)
De Chirico, Max Ernst, Magritte, Balthus
(spring/summer 2010)
Art & Illusions
(fall 2009)
Springtime of the Renaissance
(spring 2013)
4. Using new languages - how can we attract new audiences?
Installation Tape Florence
Every 2nd Thursday open ‘till 11pm with live DJ sets
Americans in Florence
(spring/summer 2012)

K E V I N  H U I Z E N G A

Alla Prima
We paint from models everyday, 8:30 - 12 and 1 - 4. Then we draw in the evenings from 7 - 9. We have no rules - each one is interested enough in his studies to belate and keep at his work.

The poet comes to see us as often as he can - generally twice or 3 times a week - sometimes not so often, but then when he has a day he will paint half a dog or all dog for us.

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**CARICATURIST**

Canal scene w/ washerwomen - Duvenek Selt post in here?

**TRATTORIA** - lure p. 49?
- Bride wall w/ caricatures? How hung?
De Chirico, Max Ernst, Magritte, Balthus
(spring/summer 2010)

Unpublished stage designs by De Chirico
With many voices - programmes for Alzheimer’s patients

Springtime of the Renaissance
(spring 2013)
I made a train that was leaving from Rome, and after having travelled for days and months arrived at the land of the Cyclops, because it was an amphibious train. A child was playing with a ball and cried ‘help!’; but he tripped and fell, but he was unhurt, and the train could continue on its way to China. A small village was passed by unnoticed .. but the train still couldn’t arrive as it had used up all its steam, but there were some trees nearby which could be cut down and used to reach the destination. At least there was an axe on board, otherwise the trees couldn’t have been cut down ...
Kamishibai street theatre
Kamishibai street theatre
5. How can we take advantage of new ‘user-languages’?
What is a ‘user language’?

What is a user-language? Simply an invitation to the reader to take on a rôle - listener, observer, detective. The difference between this:

“Glass - born of fire and sand [...]”

and this:

“One of these glasses is a fake”

- Textual authority
- Observation
- Variables
- Problems
- Games

Changing user-language can result in large changes of behavior

*Interactivity is in the mind, not the hands*
User-language of problems

Painting Light

(summer 2008)
User-language of problems

**Painting Light**

*summer 2008*
PAINTING LIGHT (2008)

FAMILY 'PICNIC BASKET' + IMPRESSIONIST MURDER MYSTERY

User-language of problems
Painting Light
(summer 2008)
User-language of problems

Women in Power
(fall 2008)
User-language of games

Money & Beauty

(fall 2011)
And of course, we have to create powerful installations.
Bronzino
(fall 2010)
Picasso, Miró, Dalí

(spring 2011)
Russian Avant-garde, Siberia and the East
(fall 2013)
... and use new technologies
In the museum media displaces...
A screen-based experience could be anywhere ...
Media should be used where the experience remains located, and cannot be displaced.
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Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Italy
// Questions?
Thank you!