

**DESIGN
CHALLENGE**

Living and Dying in the British Museum

For a fine example of unrequited love in interpretation, check out the "Living and Dying" gallery at the British Museum in London. Unfortunately for the museum, it's not the example the curators intended to share, but for an interpretive designer it's priceless.

Some parts of this exhibit touch upon natural and cultural processes, but nothing serves to pull it all together to make those processes the primary focus. The gallery comes so close, it's tantalizing. It flirts with process, but the marriage is never consummated. One has to wonder if it was the museum that thwarted this outcome or the exhibit designers who couldn't bring themselves to go all the way?

The exhibit opens with an entryway panel containing the following introduction:

"This gallery explores how people everywhere deal with the tough realities of life and death. These challenges are shared by all, but strategies to deal with them vary from place to place, people to people. The central installation by Pharmacopoeia, entitled "Cradle to Grave," looks at an approach to health and well-being, describing the medical history of a typical man and woman in Britain today. The surrounding displays investigate people's reliance or relationships – with each other, the animal world, ancestors and the land and sea – to maintain well-being. The wall displays look at how people try to avert life's ordinary dangers, and respond to sickness and trouble when they happen. These different approaches arise from the diverse ways people understand the world."

Not a bad start. Although there's no gateway and no defining message to pull you in, as an interpretive designer, you perk up at the possibilities. They are talking processes

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here. However, their primary challenge surfaces immediately. A long, low horizontal case that runs through the middle of the gallery contains a fine-meshed, almost gauze-like net with a representation of the 14,000 pills woven into it that are prescribed for the average Brit today during his or her life. This great swath of drugs is bordered with scattered personal photos and memorabilia, plus some of the medical apparatus these average representatives encountered in the process of living and dying in the UK.

In turn, this central case is surrounded by large vertical cases full of colorful eye-catching objects and photos of people in other places around the world. A flat image of a globe in each of these cases highlights the place represented, while actual head shots of people who live there are mounted on the surrounding glass. These cases represent people "Relating to Animals" (North American Arctic), "Sustaining each Other" (New Zealand Maori), "Relating to Ancestors" (Ghana), and "Living with the Land and Sea" (Solomon Islands).

Behind them another series of wall cases breaks this down further for other people and places with exhibits on such topics as, "Protecting Crops and Livelihood," "Promoting Fertility of Marriage," "Communicating with Spirits," and "Performing Cures."

The whole is a tour de force of the hierarchical breakdown and placement of informative text, although much of it may be too subtle graphically to be of use for most visitors. And just when it seems there's something new going on here, the thematic surfaces with all its inherent flaws producing a lack of rigor in the exhibit's overall composition and execution.

The underlying assumption for the central exhibit seems to be that the typical Brit today relies primarily on drugs for well-being since there is no connection to the animal world, ancestors, or the land and sea portrayed in the examples of other peoples. Even the relationships with each other in this central display seem to play a minor role in the relationships these individuals have to pills and medical apparatus.

As an aside, the central display seems rather bleak compared with the colorful and vibrant lives of the peoples of the world surrounding it. One has to wonder if this juxtaposition was the accidental result when curators tried to mesh these unrelated exhibits together, or an unintended consequence originating in how people actually see their lives in the UK.

Although eye-catching and well-lit, the entire gallery cries out for some connections, both mental and physical. And when the introduction states that these different approaches arise from the diverse ways people understand the world, there's no suggestion for how the typical man and woman in Britain today understands the world and thus have developed the relationship with modern medicine being illustrated. Perhaps the central case should be retitled, "Relating with Manufactured Health," thus tying it in with the surrounding displays on "Relating to Animals," "Sustaining each Other," etc.

On the back wall of the gallery there's a photographic and poetic montage that hints at what might have been. It contains the following statement:

"People everywhere experience trouble, sorrow, need and sickness and develop skills and knowledge in response to these adversities."

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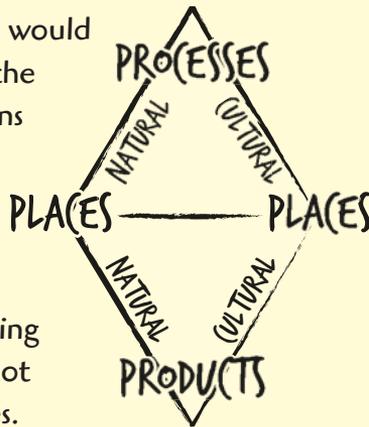


This is where they should have started. Imagine an entryway with the heading “Coping with Adversities,” followed by the question: “What Determines How You Deal with Your Troubles?”

When visitors look at the surrounding cases in terms of the “skills and knowledge” people have developed in various places, they likely think many of them are based on primitive, faulty assumptions, but aren’t the people illustrated in these displays merely following the cultural processes of their place and time just as the modern Britains are doing in the central display? There’s little evidence in the exhibit that the contemporaries represented have developed any particular skills or knowledge -- unless you count making an appointment. So what does this say about our “place” in the world today? That we have none? Or that it is tied to our health service, pharmacy, and hospital? How long will it be before visitors will view such a cultural display and smile at the “primitive” skills and knowledge exhibited there? Of course, none of this is made explicit for the visitor.

This lack of connections between the central pill-laden case representing the typical Brits and the cases surrounding it representing other people and places is so palpable that one can only wonder why this has not been remedied. It wouldn’t take much. Hanging objects above the central case from the lives of the Brits illustrated below would help, as would adding an image of a globe like those found in the other cases. Perhaps different colored and lettered ribbons connected to objects in or above the case representing the Brits could be strung to connect with objects used for the same purpose in other places represented in the surrounding cases. In this way, a visual connection could be suggested between the people, places, products, and

practices in the gallery. And why not have head shots of the two Brits represented hanging above the central case to repeat the pattern established in the other cases? Any of these ideas would help unify this space and assist the visitor in making the connections among the products in the gallery.



Predictably, the objects displayed here are visually interesting and well-lit, but the gallery is not rich when it comes to the senses.

Perhaps dimming the lights slightly in all the main cases, then highlighting (literally) each of the main cases in turn, including ambient sounds of those people and places could be added – five peoples in five places of the world “coping with adversities.” Why can we not make galleries like this warm and inviting, especially when we are exploring something like living and dying?

Or take that statement on the back wall, and put it in front: “People everywhere experience trouble, sorrow, need and sickness and develop skills and knowledge in response to these adversities.” This is a universal process. How do we help people experience it? We pluck the same strands in their webs of meaning and memory and use the resulting vibrations to “catch” other examples, and thus reinforce and extend understanding. Remember, a vibrating web is a more receptive web than a static one. In this situation, the installation on the back wall could be turned into a chalkboard with an invitation for people to add their own comments about how they cope with adversities: “Tell Us How You Deal With Your Troubles.”

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In "Living and Dying" they come tantalizingly close to plucking a process strand in the visitors' webs, but even if they set it vibrating for a few moments there's no connection made to the surrounding exhibit cases of other peoples in other places. Those cases remain separate, exotic, and primitive, instead of authentic examples of the same process playing out in other places.

Processes reveal themselves in the products of a place.

If we go back and take another look at the introductory panel, the seeds of this gallery's downfall are there for all to see. Phrases like "this gallery **explores**," "the central installation **looks at**," "and displays **investigate**" should be marked with interpretive caution signs, for their effect is to relieve the designers of a need for achieving any particular outcomes. And therein lies the primary problem. Someone on the team behind this exhibit was thinking about processes, but the overall thematic approach dominates the outcome and leaves the visitors unfulfilled.

In a Design Challenge we have to be careful not to just apply "band-aids" to such exhibits. When the whole institution has a different approach in mind, and the outcomes intended for a particular exhibit are not clear, the visitor is seriously handicapped. Lest we forget: collectors still dominate the perspective of many places, which leads almost inevitably to a focus on the pieces of a collection rather than their use in illustrating and demonstrating the processes that produced them. Collectors seldom acquire enough pieces to satisfy themselves. Their collections become the mother's milk of their existence, and visitors their enablers. Clearly though, someone in this mishmash of a design was thinking processes, and that's encouraging. One shudders to think of the perfect result had this marriage been consummated.

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