

Translating Cultural Production into Exhibition Design: Research + Design + Making

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This innovative research and design/build studio examined how a material culture exhibit for a museum can raise trans-disciplinary questions around history, buildings, objects and people. Using selected objects from a museum collection to construct new narratives, the studio exploited the connection between curation (whose voice is being represented), installation (making through form and materials) and culture (as a reflection of society) .

“The seemingly neutral environment in which works of art are displayed plays a significant role in our experience of art. The museum space often tells us what we should think about a work of art and the artist before we can grasp the significance of the work for ourselves. The wall text, the lighting, and the overall design of the space can tell us more about the society of the curator and the exhibition designer than any cultural information that we may be getting about the art.”

—Fred Wilson

INTRODUCTION

In collaboration with the Chipstone Foundation, a local decorative arts foundation that does not have a permanent bricks and mortar museum space, the students in this studio divided into three groups to design and build exhibitions to house three different objects from the collection. Conversations with curators, artists, craftsmen, exhibition designers, and architects strengthened the students’ interrogation into the history, genealogy and context of the selected artifacts. The collaborative conversations generated the following questions: what do specific objects or materials reveal about their cultures and what does an exhibit about the artifacts reveal about past, present and future cultures? How has the interpretation of an artifact changed over time and by different disciplines? These questions as well as ones of authority, relevance, authorship and ownership all surfaced as part of the material culture research.

The studio was organized to challenge a preconceived idea that the museum and exhibit are neutral conditions in which to place artifacts. Fred Wilson’s exhibition *Mixed Metaphors* at the Seattle Art Museum in 1993, which transformed the permanent collection by

layering complexity of new meanings to reveal the biases inherent in museum exhibition, was employed in the studio in a similar fashion – as a way to disrupt the artifacts and contexts in an effort to elucidate conditions of tension between existing methods of display and new ones. This provoked innovative, yet didactic readings of the object.

Various forms of research were not only translated into design ideas (as is typical in the architectural studio) but those ideas then had to be transformed into a full-scale exhibition with all of the latent risks and rewards of making. In addition, students channeled Fred Wilson’s suggestions of disruption into an idea that the exhibition needed an active element to better understand the artifact – somehow requiring human engagement to fully participate in the designed experience. In some instances, the interaction required bending or climbing to view an object while in another instance the infrastructure of the exhibit moved in response to pushing or pulling on various ropes.

FRAMEWORK

The Chipstone Foundation preserves and interprets the collection of early American furniture, historical prints, and seventeenth and eighteenth century British pottery accumulated by Polly and Stanley Stone. Although the Stones have passed the Foundation treats the collection as a living collection – one in which contemporary pieces of decorative arts are used to draw out connections between cultural objects from different time periods. The Chipstone Foundation promotes the creation of innovative exhibitions in partnership with local museums, digital projects and education programming to amplify their impact in material culture with the public.

To introduce architecture students to terminology and nomenclature commonly used in the material culture discipline, chief curators of the Foundation led a series of conversations entitled ‘object lab’ which used the following prompts:

Describe what you see (this covers the obvious - it’s a ceramic head; a table; a plate)

Describe the physical appearance (observations are made about materials and construction)



Figure 1: Object Lab session with Chipstone curators and UWM students.

Describe the context of the item (what are the associative qualities or symbols, for instance, is the material exotic, hard to find? Costly? Regional? What are the implications of having such a material?)

Classify and arrange the object (this translates into architectural terminology as typology research, focusing on the similarities and differences within an overarching meta category)

Interpret and synthesize (what part of contemporary life does this object relate to and for the architecture students how does this cultural object research begin to define ideas about exhibition? What is the narrative of the object to that can generate exhibition ideas? What's the thesis?)

The 'object lab' sessions were meant to extract from the students a series of interpretations and re-interpretations of the objects such that the obvious and often initial reactions to an object evolve into a clearer understanding of how a particular object relates to a broader context of social, cultural and political conditions. Like the artist and curator Fred Wilson, the Chipstone promoted a disruption of normative curatorial practices. In an effort to help the students 'loosen up' about preconceived expectations about the museum, objects and curation, and to engage a second pedagogical agenda of the studio about embodied experiences and movement, the semester began with two warm up assignments.

WARM UP

[The first project, a 10-day charette, required individual students to design a wearable device that controls vision. The device had to attach to the body and extend more than 8". It had to be 3-dimensional and must not use any traditional methods of attaching to the face (meaning it cannot be a modified pair of glasses). These individual projects, while allowing the students to establish a baseline for later group work, revealed various experiments with viewing and making at full scale. One question posed at the end of the project was: What level of craftsmanship was to be expected from non-experts when operating at full scale?

The second project, a two-week charette in which the students were grouped based on alignments of project type, required small groups of students to create an exhibition of a nondescript red ball inside the architecture building. Building on the successes of the first project and at the same time modulating behaviors and techniques based on failures, the students expanded conceptual ideas from each individual viewing device while negotiating for the first time a team setting. Having to consider context and issues of display repositioned the students as not only the designers and creators of the exhibition but also the curators – what interpretation was to be provided about each of the projects.

In the quest to exhibit a single object several questions resonated from the review: projects that instrumentalized the red ball in creating the exhibit were stronger and clearer. That is, projects where the red ball and no other object of shape or color could be on display provided the strongest narrative for the object. Even though the projects were created inside a school of architecture typical museum engagement rules were honored. Audiences were tentative about touching or engaging with the pieces. Given that the students employed wall text to describe the four projects, audiences may have seen this as an imposing authority or at least a form of seriousness about the displays, thus there was a more tentative interaction than originally anticipated. Due to the nature of user interactions, the issue of time and its relationship to movement became a topic to consider.

While the first project operated at the scale of the body, the second operated at the scale of furniture, the third project, constructed in spaces at the Chipstone Foundation estate, operated at the scale of the room. In essence the same project was executed three times over the semester at different relational scales but all using real materials at full-scale. The studio operated in contrast to Robin Evans' statement from *Architecture and its Image: Four Centuries of Architectural Representation: Works from the Collection of the Canadian Centre for Architecture* that "Architects do not make buildings; they make drawings of buildings." In this case nothing the students made or fabricated was a representation. The exhibitions were not models and did not represent something else. Their construction at full scale meant that the evaluation of the exhibits was not based on conjecture or explanation but based on the full implications of the experiences in those spaces.

SITE

The site of third project for the studio was the Carriage House on the estate of the Chipstone Foundation. The Georgina Revival mansion houses Polly and Stanley's entire collection when not being sourced to various local museums. To disrupt common practices of viewing objects the Chipstone used the estate's carriage house as a teaching center. As part of this educational programming, four rooms in the carriage house were dedicated to educating students about material culture objects in a new context. The 70's room, inspired by wood paneling left over from the final caretakers of the property, envelops visitors in design themes from that time period. Objects from

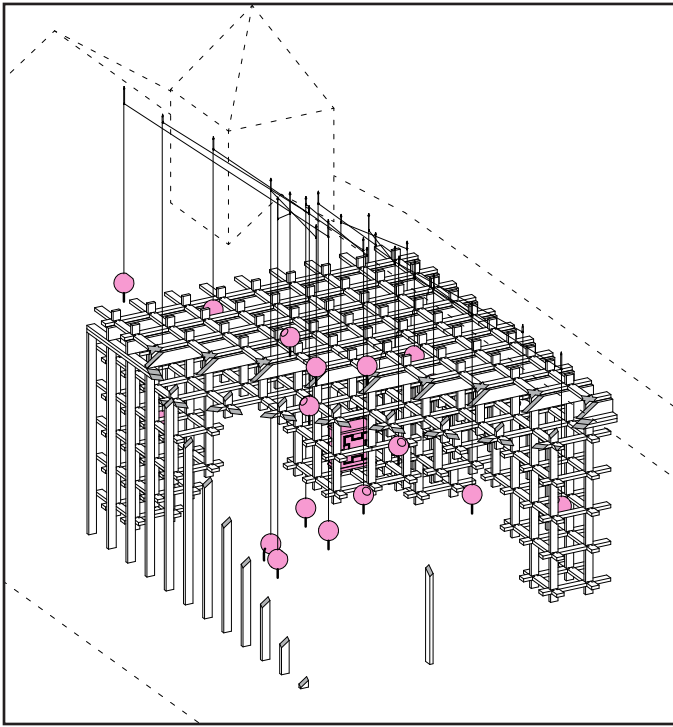


Figure 2: 16th century spice cabinet exhibition axonometric diagram.

the collection were literally carried over to the carriage house from the estate house and juxtaposed against the context of this room. Recalling the lessons from the object lab sessions, objects placed in here were discussed relative to differences and similarities between the objects and their own individual contexts. Visitors could see lineages and evolutions of design ideas that were not limited by the historic or the contemporary. Three additional rooms, commissioned by local artists (Study for a Character by Shana McCaw and Brent Budsberg, Study by Ashley Morgan, and Architectonic – Installation III by Tim Stoelting), sat adjacent to the 70's room as additional opportunities to juxtapose Chipstone objects in new contexts. The rooms provoke the question: how does context affect how we see historical objects?

In addition to these four rooms the Chipstone provides three additional spaces for new object exhibitions created by the studio. These rooms include a small-unused kitchen (80 ft²), an attic with a wood framed room inside (120 ft²), and the basement, which is larger than the other rooms but also more ambiguous as to where the exhibition could be located. The rooms are not ideal for viewing or displaying objects but offers an important challenge about the influence of context on the exhibition. Room constraints were quickly realized as assets to the project development (from a conceptual perspective, construction one, as well as financial.)

EXHIBITION DESIGN EXAMPLES:

Object - 16th century spice cabinet

One exhibition space, known as the spice room, transformed the existing exposed wood frame walls into a maze of wood joints and studs. This field condition provided a new infrastructure for a

series of plastic globes lined with dry spices to hang from the ceiling. A knotted rope penetrated a single hole in the top of each globe to keep them afloat. The ropes and pulley system, tucked into the space between the existing framework and the open roof rafters, allowed for the globes to be pulled and pushed. Each globe was tied to another globe resulting in the transformation of the space when one end of the rope was engaged. Inside the globe rested the whole version of the spice, intensifying the smell of the spice. Salt, a common spice, covered the ground in an effort to engage walking in an embodied experience in the space. The 16th century spice rack, the object of display, was elevated and protected in a wood framed space (another room within a room).

The design ideas were inspired by the history and construction techniques of the spice cabinet as well as ideas about privacy and the protection of precious or expensive objects. Spices at the time of the cabinet construction were locked in small wooden boxes with drawers, hinged doors, and secret compartments. They were often stored in private spaces including bedrooms. Questions about trade, politics and colonialism surfaced during the discussion prompting a critique of examples of excess found in the treatment of the floor surface with salt. Accolades were given for engaging audience members in a multi-sensory experience of the room. By providing a series of smells in the space, the exhibition draws on associated memories from audience members.

Object(s): 5 WWI porcelain souvenirs

This exhibition, housed in the smallest space in the carriage house, reinvented an existing kitchen into a faceted landscape of painted plywood sheets. Audiences dipped, ducked, stretched and climbed onto and below these surfaces to see the five objects. The darkened room, lit only by the fixtures near the porcelain souvenirs, heightened a scalelessness of the room that was only visible when the objects were in view. The dark surfaces and dark shadows created disoriented visitors.

Inspiration for the project originated in World War I warfare research, specifically trench warfare, and the movements made by soldiers in the trenches (i.e. crawling, sitting, ducking, standing). The exhibition abstracted trench conditions and the movement required to navigate them into a series of tessellated surfaces. To view the artifacts, visitors were forced to move in similar ways as the soldiers who fought in the trenches during WWI.

Although the scale of the souvenirs hint at toy-like objects, the subject matter and porcelain material ascribe a more formal meaning onto the artifacts. In addition, reviewers of the exhibition asked whether the exhibition challenged what constituted appropriate forms of commemoration.

In the end, the design/build studio interrogated disciplinary issues by questioning normative curatorial conventions, employing innovative materials, and rethinking temporal aspects of experience, place and objects including site-specificity. But more importantly there was a translation of cultural production as a beginning point



Figure 3: Salt covers the floor while spice shrouded globes hang from moveable ropes.

for architectural design. The objects from the Chipstone Foundation acted as generators of conceptual ideas while the exhibitions prompted audiences with questions about the objects. What do specific objects reveal about their cultures and what does an exhibit about the artifacts reveal about past, present and future cultures? How has the interpretation of an artifact changed over time and by different disciplines? Architects traditionally respond to issues of site, context, history, type and program amongst other frameworks for design. Amongst this list, the Chipstone objects stand in as a program framework or as a point of departure for the exhibition concepts. The object was not only the generator of form but it was on display in the each exhibit. Therefore, the students generate conceptual ideas from the objects; translate those ideas into physical experiences while creating architecture that offers new means and methods of understanding the original object. These didactic lessons are summarized in Fred Wilson's quote: "I never, I might add, know what the outcome will be before I create this or any installation. If I did, why bother? I want to be illuminated too."

REFERENCES

1. Patterson Sims and Fred Wilson, *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1993).



Figure 4: Faceted plywood panels in the exhibition space for WWI porcelain souvenirs.