

Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries

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Exhibitions are an important way to promote, and provide safe access to, unique and rare documents and books held in archives and libraries. However, there has been a dearth of information about how to go about producing good quality, professional-looking exhibitions in this context. The practice of art galleries and museums can provide some assistance, but exhibitions of documentary heritage have their own distinct challenges, not least because they are not the primary focus of their institutions. This book goes a long way to filling the gap.

I wish it had been available when I first started preparing exhibitions in the early 1980s. This is such a practical and confidence-building guide to the whole business, from the planning stages, through the design process, to practical installation. It distils almost all the experience of my working life. Even the theoretical first chapter (Exhibit Philosophy and Theory) quickly provides arguments that might be useful in justifying a programme to an unsympathetic funding body. 'In short, we exhibit because we want to disseminate knowledge, share excitement, and provide entertainment to an audience. It is a natural extension of the work we do in providing access to rare materials for researchers' (p.9)

The author's enthusiasm is evident throughout. Enjoyment is a key factor in her reasons for exhibiting. She describes the work as a creative outlet, and encourages archivists to 'explore creative choices and artistic expression in a way that may not be possible in other aspects of archival work' (p.11). However, she does not leave her readers feeling inadequate, but provides whole chapters on tools for effective exhibit planning (chapter 4) and labels, design and layout (chapter 6), where very practical advice is provided.

The installation of the exhibition is not the end of the process. There are also chapters on online exhibits, on promotion and marketing, and on the value of public programmes, not to mention on the importance of a thorough evaluation at the end of the process. 'From the real to the virtual' is the title of chapter 7, which is an excellent summary of the fast-changing world of the online exhibit. It covers the reasons for an online presence and offers ideas of how to go about achieving that, but it does not include specific technical information. She explores the increasing potential for not simply replicating the physical exhibition,

but expanding on it, in 'the concept of depth vs. surface' (p.82)

This book is also, and perhaps unexpectedly, an engaging read. I had delightful moments of recognition, as she described some of the challenges as well as the success of exhibition work. One of these was when she discussed the issue of font size, one of my own obsessions. 'A good rule of thumb is to start with an 18-point font and begin testing the results to see if the size works for your circumstances'. My own thoughts entirely!

One of my other moments of empathy was the discussion on who will make this exhibit happen and the value of teamwork. A sole charge archivist or librarian will have no choice, but when there is a team there is much to be gained from collaboration. I have come to see the benefit of a variety of talents and skills in my own situation. So a statement like 'The team approach allows for several sets of eyes to review the project from start to finish, including design, editing, layout, and every other aspect of the work' (p.47) certainly resonates with me.

Like any successful guide, this book also works well as a tool to use for specific questions. Its layout encourages a dip-in mentality, with lists provided in framed boxes, such as 'common tools to build better exhibits' (p.49–51) or 'seven essential elements' on exhibition promotion (p.90–91). In addition, there are very useful sample policies in the main text itself, as well as sample forms, supply lists and bibliographical resources added as Appendices.

There are small case studies distributed throughout the book, as well as three chapter-length discussions of exhibitions written by those involved in putting them together. These naturally have an American focus, although the principles are perfectly applicable to a wider professional audience. Personally, I found the case studies less compelling than the main text, but other readers might find examples more useful than generalisations.

If there is a weakness in this guide it may be in the area of preservation. While the author does carefully refer to preservation standards and provides advice on how to make very basic book supports, I was left with a sense of something missing. Knowing what you don't know is a vital element of preservation awareness, and the possible damage caused by thinking you can easily create your own book supports made me nervous.

My other quibble concerns the illustrations. While there are lots of photographs, they are all in black and white. How much more inspiring the exhibitions would have looked had they been shown in colour!

Presumably, this was a cost consideration, but an unfortunate result is that the exhibitions just don't look very exciting.

However, these are largely minor defects in an otherwise essential book for all archives and special collections. It will be as useful for the sole practitioner with one display case and no budget as for an institution with a well-established exhibition programme. The author teaches exhibit workshops, and her experience shines through. Her hope that 'if this book empowers and inspires you to create drama and dynamism where sometimes little exists, it will have succeeded' is amply justified.

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