

Book Review

Freda Matassa, *Organizing Exhibitions. A handbook for museums, libraries and archives*, London:Facet Publishing, 2014, paperback pp. xxviii+302.

I was very interested in reviewing Freda Matassa's *Organizing Exhibitions*; as a long time museum curator with a reasonable amount of exhibition experience (both planning and installing), the prospect of an all-encompassing guide was intriguing. Indeed, the title proclaims, the book is a 'handbook' for exhibition planning and organisation and there is a claim that it explains 'everything an exhibition organizer needs to know' (p.xvii).

The book is aimed at museums, libraries and archives, but as Matassa states in the preface: 'any suitable space can be used to display cultural objects' (p.xvii). There is a neat summary of the elements making up an exhibition and what is required to produce one. It is apparent from the opening pages of the book that the term 'exhibitions' is taken in this case to mean temporary exhibitions and the idea of longer term installations, such as major museum/gallery exhibition projects are not within the scope of this book.

Who is *Organizing Exhibitions* aimed at? The back cover description recommends this book for museum staff, librarians and archivists, as well as cultural heritage students, private collectors and 'anyone who needs practical guidance on organizing exhibitions'.

Matassa takes established project management models and adapts them to a cultural heritage context and this is a welcome addition to the extant literature, demonstrating how general principles can be mapped on to exhibition projects. Essentially, exhibitions are like any other project – they involve planning, budgets, people, risk, outcomes/products, etc, and therefore can be separated into organizational stages, to make the creation of a full range of exhibitions in a variety of venues achievable and successful. The approach in this book follows this basic structure; the 'Top Tips' in the introduction are essentially good project management practice.

The book is clearly designed as a reference point; it is divided into two parts, the first and main one being 'A step-by-step guide to organizing exhibitions'. The second part is a 'Directory' where further information on specific aspects of the process is given more attention. The first section is divided into ten chapters, arranged chronologically from initial 'Idea' and 'Planning' to 'Closure' and 'Legacy'. Exhibition project management is set out in five clear and straight forward stages or phases (pp.24-25). Although these are not necessarily presented as being as in-depth as some of the commercial professional training systems, Matassa does emphasize the need for planning and communication. There is also some consideration of risk, which is an increasingly important factor in exhibition planning.

Overall, *Organizing Exhibitions* is systematically set out. Headings and sub-headings make the process navigable and allow a selective 'dip in' approach to the book; the Checklist at the end of each chapter is an invaluable summary of key points. Also, the signposting for practical aspects of exhibition planning is good; each chapter has a reference list and this directs the reader towards further reading and detail. Reference to specific sections of the Directory are made; for example, under 'Safety', the reader is told to 'See Hazardous materials, p. 262' (p.119). I did find, however, that the way different sections were demarcated (using of bold, bold underlined, normal and italics) could be confusing, as under the heading of 'Loans and Lenders' and the sub-heading of 'Objects', where discussion of objects from the organization's own collections is included (p.39).

The coverage is comprehensive and a number of aspects of exhibition organization and planning which are not always considered, such as sustainability, copyright and emergency

planning, are covered. The adaptability and selectivity of the book is evident and a useful quality, as details such as due diligence and air freighting can be skipped if not applicable. However, I did feel at times that it was too generalized; statements such as 'No two organizations or exhibitions are the same' (p.25) seem a little too obvious.

There are helpful templates, tables, examples and references for documentation, eg. National Museums Liverpool Method Statement for moving objects (Fig. 4.2, pp.90-92). Many of the photographs and some figures however, such as the timeline from Dallas Museum of Art (p.29) are reproduced on such a small scale that their usefulness is questionable (with the timeline, there is no explanation given of the 'milestones').

It becomes apparent as you progress through the organizational stages that the author is most comfortable and knowledgeable when dealing with large institutions (usually based in major cities), international loans and partners, and art-based collections. Matassa is less confident and detailed when addressing issues around 'science' collections and their display (these are only mentioned when dealing with large objects), or small Archaeological or Social History objects which need to be mounted within display cases. The elements of 'Exhibition Design' (p.49) are likewise given a superficial treatment, being reduced to practical considerations, such as building work and environment.

Whilst reading through this book, I had to remind myself on a number of occasions that it is about organizing exhibitions rather than the curation of them, and here I use the term in its full museum sense. There is, consequently, a lack of detail and signposting for the concepts and practice of exhibition design and interpretive methods and media. Only publications by Klobe (2012) and Sixsmith (1999) are cited as reference points for these concepts and best practice in exhibition design and interpretation; in addition, designers are described as contractors, belying the importance of the relationship between them and the museum team for a successful exhibition. In recent years, there have been a number of studies of interpretation and museum/galleries spaces as an integral part of visitor engagement within an exhibition (MacLeod, 2005); these are not included. Statements such as: 'If the exhibition tells a story, this should be a chronological display ...' (p.49) suggests a lack of understanding of the scope and potential of exhibitions, narratives and objects.

However, my main concern with *Organizing Exhibitions* is that whilst Matassa touches on audiences, at times she shows a misunderstanding of this broad and diverse element of exhibition creation – people are, after all, why we put 'stuff' on display in the first place. An essential component of exhibition design is accessibility – not merely physical, but intellectual access. At one point, the author states that 'a tour in British sign language' was for 'visually impaired visitors.' (p.163). The section entitled 'Visitors with Special Needs' focuses on physical disabilities; there is no mention of, for example, neurodiversity conditions such as Dyslexia, indeed the 'black ink on a white background' suggested for optimum readability (p.133) would cause visual stress to visitors with a range of conditions (<http://www.musedcn.org.uk/>). There is also a lack of signposting; whilst the Equality Act and the Association for Gallery Education are cited, guidelines such as those published by the Smithsonian on accessible exhibition and publication design (Smithsonian 2001, n.d.) are absent.

Overall, this is a book which will prove useful to those planning exhibitions for the first time, mainly in a museum or gallery situation; and for museum studies students who need a quick reference for project planning and management as part of their course. I myself found information here useful for both loans in and out for exhibitions. However, despite the cross-referencing and Directory, the novice exhibition organizer may be overwhelmed by the amount of information. Finally, I am left with the conviction that to create and install a fully accessible, engaging and entertaining exhibition, one would do well to read wider.

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References

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