

Exhibiting Waste in a Museum

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The initial conceptual decision of the exhibition authors was to address the topic of re-use in archaeology from the viewpoint of manufacturing processes and physical properties of distinct groups of materials. Furthermore, these historical practices were to be reflected upon in relation to our uneasiness and reluctance to embrace the value of by-products of contemporary society. Having these main theses as key elements of the exhibition set-up brief was more than a sufficient reason to enter the project. This double shift of focus; firstly of reducing the exhibits to mere raw materials, and secondly of attempting to relate the exhibits with the contemporary waste of almost no value was used as the immediate foundation of the visual and narrative structure of the exhibition set-up.

The pronounced and deliberate contrast between the valuable artefacts displayed in a representative space for temporary exhibitions and the present-day separations of material produced by the process of recycling was used to construct the entire space. Based on a sequence of very simple design decisions, the final set-up is sparse and highly reduced, focusing on elevating and emphasizing the exhibition concept and achieving the desired narrative and didactic levels of the presentation.

Exhibition rooms were treated by a continuous envelope of recycled fabric with the intention of perceptually displacing the space of the exhibit out of the demanding historical interior setting of the museum proper and thus focusing the attention of the visitors towards the centrally arranged individual exhibits.

All archaeological exhibits, introductory descriptions, and labels of individual artefacts were presented through a series of permutations of one single wooden element: either serving as a rudimentary display case, a simple base for exhibits or, finally, as a vertical surface for the main textual content. These simple exhibiting elements were then arranged as narrative frames for sequences comprised of archaeological fragments, textual annotations and graphical illustrations of various processes of re-use. These elements were then organised using the principle of artistic compositions by assigning equal value to all of them. This enabled the suspension of use of individual labels and served as a means to further stress the intent of the authors to communicate the basic principles and meanings of individual topics as effectively and as directly as possible.

The next constituent elements of the set-up were cubed bales of selected resources from the recycling plant that were transported directly to the museum. Arranged in regular grids, they were used as the main bases for the exhibits. The delicate and visually reduced display cases were thus confronted by the roughness and unsightly appearance of these bases used in the form as they were found. This literal gesture of displaying waste in a museum or placing 'priceless' artefacts upon 'worthless' bases was a direct response to the request of the authors to make the set-up itself a constituent discursive element of the exhibition. At the same time, the uniform arrangement of refined display cases as covers of the cubes enabled their 'taming' as necessitated by the formal context of the museum, avoiding the grotesque and banal appearance of this gesture that would be detrimental to the presentation of artefacts.

The topic of adaptive re-use of space, in contrast, was presented through the introduction of an over-sized photographic blow-up of one of the key examples of this practice, drawing the visitor more nearly to the real scale of this construction, clearly counterpointing the filigree scale of the rest of the exhibits.

Completing the research into the potential of the literal use of the concept of recycling in the graphic and spatial design of the exhibition set-up, the main posters were produced as a series of re-used posters from various previous exhibitions that were covered with layers of additionally printed information about this exhibition.

Realised within a modest budget, but through a process of a continuous and constructive dialogue of everyone involved that was instrumental in achieving a complementary relation of the content to the design of its presentation, we hope that the set-up was able to provoke a different kind of insight from the visitors, contributing experientially to their consideration of this important topic.

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