

Exhibit Makeovers

A Do-It-Yourself Workbook for Small Museums



*Second
Edition*

Alice Parman, Ann Craig, Lyle Murphy, Liz White and Lauren Willis

Exhibit Makeovers

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY BOOK SERIES

SERIES EDITOR

Russell Lewis,
Chicago History Museum

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

Anne W. Ackerson, Leading by Design
William Bomar, University of Alabama Museums
Jessica Dorman, The Historic New Orleans Collection
W. Eric Emerson, South Carolina Department of Archives and History
Tim Grove, National Air and Space Museum
Laura Koloski, Pew Center for Arts & Heritage
Jane Lindsey, Juneau-Douglas City Museum
Ann E. McCleary, University of West Georgia
Laurie Ossman, Preservation Society of Newport County
Sarah Pharaon, International Coalition of Sites of Conscience
Laura Roberts, Roberts Consulting
Sandra Smith, Heinz History Center
Kimberly Springle, Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives
Will Ticknor, New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs
William S. Walker, Cooperstown Graduate Program, SUNY Oneonta

STAFF

Bob Beatty, AASLH
Charles Harmon, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers

ABOUT THE SERIES

The American Association for State and Local History Book Series addresses issues critical to the field of state and local history through interpretive, intellectual, scholarly, and educational texts. To submit a proposal or manuscript to the series, please request proposal guidelines from AASLH headquarters: AASLH Editorial Board, 2021 21st Ave. S., Suite 320, Nashville, Tennessee 37212. Telephone: (615) 320-3203. Website: www.aaslh.org.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) is a national history membership association headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee. AASLH provides leadership and support for its members who preserve and interpret state and local history in order to make the past more meaningful to all Americans. AASLH members are leaders in preserving, researching, and interpreting traces of the American past to connect the people, thoughts, and events of yesterday with the creative memories and abiding concerns of people, communities, and our nation today. In addition to sponsorship of this book series, AASLH publishes *History News* magazine, a newsletter, technical leaflets and reports, and other materials; confers prizes and awards in recognition of outstanding achievement in the field; supports a broad education program and other activities designed to help members work more effectively; and advocates on behalf of the discipline of history. To join AASLH, go to www.aaslh.org or contact Membership Services, AASLH, 2021 21st Ave. S., Suite 320, Nashville, TN 37212.

Exhibit Makeovers

A Do-It-Yourself Workbook for Small Museums

Second Edition

ALICE PARMAN, ANN CRAIG, LYLE MURPHY,
LIZ WHITE, AND LAUREN WILLIS

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Rowman & Littlefield

A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706

www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

Copyright © 2017 by Rowman & Littlefield

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.


British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

ISBN: 978-1-4422-7865-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN: 978-1-4422-7866-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN: 978-1-4422-7867-7 (electronic)

 The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Preface	vii
1 Exhibit Makeovers	ix
PART I: STARTING SMALL	
2 Plan a Single-Case Exhibit Makeover	3
3 Design and Install Your Single-Case Exhibit Makeover	19
PART II: STRENGTHENING SKILLS: AN EXHIBIT GALLERY MAKEOVER	
4 Expand Your Creative Team	31
5 Plan an Exhibit Gallery Makeover	35
6 Design an Exhibit Gallery Makeover	53
7 Fabricate and Install Exhibits	69
PART III: INVOLVING YOUR COMMUNITY	
8 Do a Small Museum Makeover	79
9 Make the Most of Your Makeover	93
Appendix A: Resources and Further Reading	99
Appendix B: What Is Your Museum's Purpose?	105
Appendix C: Strategic Planning: An Agenda That Works	113
Subject Index	117
Worksheets Index	119
About the Authors	121

Preface

New . . . and Improved!

SINCE *EXHIBIT MAKEOVERS* WAS FIRST PUBLISHED IN 2008, museums have become more visitor-centered. Staff and volunteers are more conversant with online resources and social media. Principles of universal design are increasingly applied to exhibitions and graphics. Exhibit planners don't just think about content; after consulting potential visitors, they determine desired outcomes and evaluate exhibit effectiveness using these criteria. A stream of new materials, software, tools, and methods are transforming the process of designing, fabricating, and installing exhibitions.

In tune with these developments, this second edition includes principles and step-by-step instructions for building visitor studies and evaluation into exhibit planning and design; making your exhibits accessible, engaging, and flexible; and using techniques of project management to ensure good communication and effective use of time and resources. Examples from real-life exhibit development at an accredited museum illustrate expanded sections on interpretive text writing, exhibit and graphic design software, mount-making, interactives, prototyping, thoughtful use of technology, marketing with social media, and more. You'll find suggestions for networking with colleagues at museums close to home, regionally, and nationally. Throughout, references are not just updated; they are drawn from diverse new sources including blogs, downloadable pdfs, and websites, as well as recommended print books and periodicals.

MEET THE AUTHORS

Let us start by introducing ourselves to you. Alice Parman has worked in and around museums since 1972. After sixteen years as a museum educator and director, she worked as planner/writer for an exhibit design firm with a national clientele. Alice has been an independent interpretive planning consultant since 2003. She coauthored the first edition of *Exhibit Makeovers* (2008) with Jeffrey Jane Flowers.

This second edition is coauthored with the exhibits team of the Museum of Natural and Cultural History at the University of Oregon. Ann Craig, Lyle Murphy,

Liz White, and Lauren Willis work together to plan, design, build, install, and evaluate exhibits large and small, on a wide variety of topics.

Along the way, it has been our good fortune to be involved—as visitors, planners, designers, or volunteers—with high-quality, popular exhibits that were planned, designed, and mounted for a few thousand or a few *hundred* dollars—or even less.

We've noticed that the most successful exhibits grow out of thoughtful planning, energetic execution, and a spirit of openness and collaboration. We're convinced that these factors are far more important than the size of your budget or the extent of your exhibit design experience.

In that spirit, we offer this updated version of *Exhibit Makeovers* as a resource for affordable, do-it-yourself exhibit development. You'll find fresh content, expanded skill-building opportunities, and new graphics and templates to help you master the exhibit development process. Worksheets—the heart of *Exhibit Makeovers*—can be found at the end of each chapter for ready reference.

WHAT'S AN EXHIBIT MAKEOVER?

As shown in television shows and magazine articles, a makeover starts with something that exists: a face, a room, a house, a garden. A cosmetic makeover is far less invasive and expensive than Botox injections. A home makeover is simpler and less costly than new construction.

An exhibit makeover is a do-it-yourself method for improving an existing exhibit. A makeover of a single exhibit case helps you learn the fundamentals. Then you may feel ready to tackle an exhibit gallery makeover. Eventually, you might take on a makeover of the whole museum!

WHAT'S THE PAYOFF FOR A SMALL MUSEUM?

Exhibit Makeovers is written for board members, staff, and volunteers in small museums. By “small,” we mean museums with limited funding and few or no paid staff members.

Despite the small size of their budget and staff, small museums may have large collections. Their mission may encompass a sizeable region or a substantial field or discipline.

Your museum may house exhibit cases full of tools or dolls, and rooms packed with farm implements or vehicles, and storerooms of eclectic objects, photos, and documents from your region. Where do you start? How do you begin the makeover process? And with your scarce resources and multiple responsibilities, why should you consider taking time to do an exhibit makeover?

Perhaps you're tired of looking at the "same old same old" and want to shake up your exhibits by the equivalent of rearranging the living room furniture.

Maybe your audience and volunteer base is growing older and sparser. You have a sneaking suspicion that unless your museum reaches out to newcomers and young families, eventually it will fade away from neglect.

Has a tourism or downtown redevelopment agency approached your museum to partner in a citywide renewal effort? Or has a community group asked your museum to tell their story? Perhaps a friend of the museum has offered to contribute funds for exhibit development.

Whatever your motivation for transforming your exhibits, a makeover offers significant benefits. The exhibit makeover process is dynamic, interesting, and fun. It can energize the creativity and vitality of board and staff. It can help your museum attract new volunteers, involve community members, and become a more valued and viable part of your community.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

Exhibit Makeovers is a hands-on introduction to three stages of makeovers focused on a single-case exhibit, an exhibit gallery, and finally the whole museum. Along the way you'll develop new skills and build a record of your exhibit development progress in a series of worksheets.

Each questionnaire, checklist, and brainstorming exercise is designed with a single overriding goal in mind: to help you view your museum and your exhibits through visitors' eyes. This is the key that will unlock your museum's potential as a community resource. Take cues from your local public library, YMCA or YWCA, or community center. To attract and successfully serve a broad community audience, these institutions always put the visitor first.

Exhibit Makeovers takes you step-by-step through the exhibit makeover process. Each step calls for creativity, thoughtfulness, and an open mind. You may feel that parts of the process don't apply to you; yet we encourage you to give each planning worksheet a try. Each worksheet builds upon the previous worksheets in a step-by-step process that leads to a successful exhibit.

Detailed instructions and open-ended worksheets help you create an exhibit project that's tailor-made for your museum. Worksheets are found at the end of each chapter; you may reproduce any of them for use in an exhibit makeover project. Use this workbook in whatever ways best fit your institution, community, and planning team.

The exhibit makeover process is challenging and absorbing. It requires a serious commitment of time and energy. The effort is well worth it. The result—renewed exhibits that awaken interest and excitement among your visitors—should be deeply rewarding to all participants. Let's get started!

Exhibit Makeovers

YOU'RE READY TO GET GOING ON YOUR EXHIBIT makeover, but where to begin? This chapter will guide you through the initial steps of any exhibit makeover.

THE EXHIBIT MAKEOVER CREW

Recruit board members, staff, or volunteers to work on your makeover project. Three people is a workable number for a single-case exhibit makeover (see chapter 2 for details). For an exhibit gallery makeover, build an Exhibit Makeover Crew of ten to twelve (more in chapter 4). For a museum-wide makeover, divide your crew into subgroups and involve people from the entire community (see chapter 8).

LAY THE GROUNDWORK

Whether your exhibit makeover is focused on a single case, a gallery, or the entire museum, three touchstones will guide your creative efforts: your museum's mission, the main messages you want to convey, and the amount of money you want to spend.

Your museum's educational purpose is expressed in the mission statement. The exhibit's main messages should be congruent with the museum's mission and rooted in scholarship and community knowledge. Financial responsibility, reflected in a target budget for your exhibit makeover, is an important part of the museum's commitment to preservation.

The Mission: Be Clear about Your Purpose

An exhibit makeover is not the institutional equivalent of plastic surgery. Museums that stray too far from their origins may tend to overbuild and overspend. Instead, the exhibit makeover should be a thoughtful, organic process that helps you build on your strengths, put your best foot forward, and plan for gradual change based on your museum's identity and values.

Your museum's mission summarizes why your museum exists and identifies the people you serve. It reflects your distinct identity and purpose. Write your mission boldly and beautifully on a large sheet of paper or poster board and refer to it throughout your

exhibit makeover process. The museum's mission will be a fixed star to guide you through your planning journey.

Do you sense that your mission may be outdated or incomplete? See appendix B for a step-by-step guide to examining and revising your museum's mission.

Main Messages: What Do Visitors Take Home?

In defining the purpose of a museum exhibit, internationally known museum planner Barry Lord emphasizes two key qualities of an effective exhibit: *meaning* and *authenticity*.

"The purpose of a museum exhibition is to transform some aspect of the visitor's interests, attitudes, or values affectively, due to the visitor's discovery of some level of meaning in the objects or content on display—a discovery that is stimulated and sustained by the visitor's confidence in the perceived authenticity of that content."¹

Whether your exhibit makeover begins with a single case, a gallery, or the whole museum, it's vital to decide on the take-home messages that you want all visitors to understand and remember.

Take-home messages don't necessarily appear anywhere in your exhibits, though you may decide to display them boldly, as in figure 1.1. They are the moral, the summing-up, and the memory that visitors take home and apply to their own lives. Like your museum's mission, take-home messages will guide you as you develop the storyline, research the content, get feedback from potential visitors, create the exhibit design, and build and install the finished product.

Don't skip this step! If you don't choose your take-home messages, they will choose you. Without clear, conscious take-home messages, your exhibit runs the risk of being confusing, frustrating, incomprehensible, or even insulting to visitors. Some might conclude, "This museum makes me feel stupid" or "History is boring" or "A five-year-old could make better art than this."

Visitors who arrive at such conclusions are unlikely to make a return trip to your museum. Even worse,

Take-Home Messages

THE HEART OF THE STORY

*As you wander Oregon: Where Past is Present—
look for these key ideas interwoven through the exhibit:*

- Native peoples have a deep and continuing presence in Oregon.
- People and the environment are closely connected in a two-way relationship.
- Oregon's Native peoples are diverse and dynamic. Many Tribal groups with different cultural practices and histories call Oregon home.
- The Museum of Natural and Cultural History plays a major role in interpreting human experience and environmental change—past, present, and future.

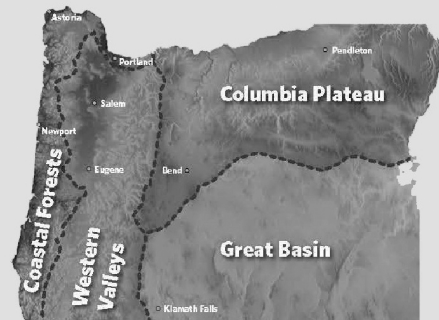


Figure 1.1.

they may be turned off to museums permanently. Don't reinforce stereotypes of snooty, exclusive museums. Resolve to engage a representative cross-section of your community by interpreting a dynamic set of take-home messages.

Take as much time as you need to create your take-home messages. It's best to develop them deliberately, through brainstorming and discussion.

EXAMPLES OF TAKE-HOME MESSAGES. Every artistic/intellectual creation (exhibit, novel, painting, film, album, performance, and the like) communicates a few big ideas to most audience members. In a museum setting, take-home messages often fall into one of three main categories:

THE STORY. What do you want visitors to understand and remember about the exhibit storyline?

Unangan people developed one of the most successful and sophisticated adaptations to a maritime environment in human history. (Museum of the Aleutians)

BRAINSTORMING: WHY AND HOW

Brainstorming is a great way to capture everyone's creative ideas. In response to a question, people throw out ideas. There is no criticism or discussion during brainstorming.

One person serves as facilitator, listening attentively and writing verbatim notes.

- Capture ideas on a big newsprint pad mounted on an easel so everyone can see.
- Make sure people speak one at a time so each idea can be recorded.
- Give everyone a chance to speak.
- Ensure that no one dominates or criticizes.

It's amazing that this working railroad was preserved intact. No wonder it's a National Historic Landmark! (Nevada Northern Railroad Museum)

Some issues that were controversial during the quest for statehood remain unresolved today. (*Facing Statehood* exhibit, Willamette Heritage Center)

Native Americans have a deep and continuing presence in Oregon. (*Oregon—Where Past Is Present*, Museum of Natural and Cultural History)

THE MUSEUM. How do you want visitors to feel about your museum after viewing the exhibit makeover project?

Visitors will feel that the museum is relevant to them, and that their voices can be heard. (Museum of the Aleutians)

Everyone was really friendly and helpful. (Nevada Northern Railroad Museum)

The Indiana Historical Society is a fun place. I want to come back! (Indiana Historical Society)

PERSONAL MEANING. How do you want visitors to personally connect to the exhibit makeover project?

I was transported back in time. (Nevada Northern Railroad Museum)

I am part of history. (Oregon Military Museum)

My choices and actions help determine the future of Oregon and the Earth (*Explore Oregon*, Museum of Natural and Cultural History)

EDUCATIONAL GOALS. Among your take-home messages, it's helpful to identify those that contain educational goals. Educational goals articulate clear learning outcomes that can be tested. Some examples:

Visitors will understand that Oregon's geology is dynamic; traces of the past are visible in the landscape, but active geologic processes are also observable. (*The Roadside Geology of Oregon*, Museum of Natural and Cultural History)

We expect that as a result of time spent in the exhibit, visitors will connect and compare past conditions with everyday realities. (*A Community on the Move*, Oregon Black Pioneers/Oregon Historical Society)

Strive for an enthusiastic consensus about your take-home messages. Make them specific, yet noble

and inspiring. Exhibits focused on take-home messages are intended to influence visitors' understanding, attitudes, and behavior. Brainstorm potential take-home messages for your exhibit makeover. Then brainstorm possible attitudinal and behavioral shifts you might aim for with your exhibit makeover. Work together to choose the three or four most important take-home messages.

Record your take-home messages and educational goals on worksheet 1.1.

The Target Budget: What Is Our Price Range?

Figure 1.2 shows typical exhibit elements in different configurations. This diagnostic tool will help you determine what elements are important to you. Your choices will be based on the space, timeline, and target budget for your exhibit makeover project.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The Exhibit Makeover Crew has reaffirmed your museum's mission, established a clear set of take-home messages, and determined your target budget for the project. You're ready to focus on a specific makeover project.

The rest of the book will guide you through this process. Part 1, "Starting Small" (chapters 2 and 3), is devoted to a single-case exhibit makeover. Part 2, "Strengthening Skills" (chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7), focuses on a gallery-level exhibit makeover. Part 3, "Involving Your Community" (chapters 8 and 9), expands the exhibit makeover process to encompass your entire small museum.

NOTE

1. Barry Lord, "The Purpose of Museum Exhibitions," in Barry Lord and Maria Piacente, eds., *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions*, 2nd edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 12.

Exhibit Elements

Decide your project scope while keeping your target budget in mind. If you opt for minimal cost, look for affordable ways to improve your exhibit quality, such as in-kind donations of services and materials.

1. Casework and furniture

What cases and furniture will be used for the project?

- Reuse existing cases and furniture \$
- Custom panels or pedestals \$\$
- Acrylic cases, dioramas, mannequins \$\$\$

2. Interpretive content

How will interpretive content be displayed?

- Small, in-house printing \$
- Large, mounted text panels, layered content with room for discovery \$\$
- Digital content \$\$\$

4. Audio and video

Is there opportunity for audio and video content?

- Audio or video produced in-house. Playback using computer and screen \$\$
- Outsource to professionals. Playback using commercial devices. \$\$\$

3. Tactile elements

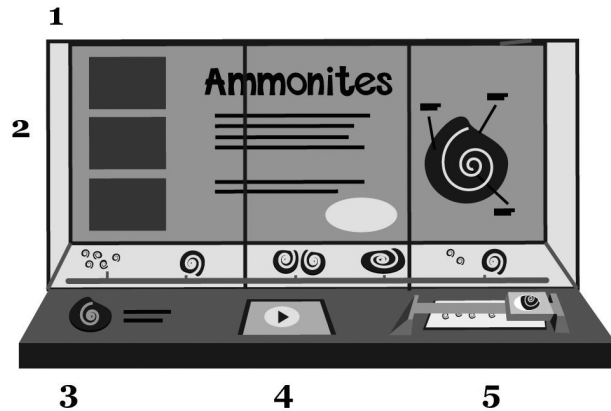
Is there opportunity for touchable material?

- Touch boxes \$
- Material samples \$\$
- Casts or reproductions \$\$\$

5. Interactives

Is there opportunity for interaction?

- Response boards \$
- Lift-boards, sliding panels, matching games, hands-on techniques \$\$
- Digital content and games \$\$\$



Don't forget to consider ongoing maintenance in the costs of exhibit elements:

- Who will update or troubleshoot technology, and how?
- Do you have a staff member or volunteer who can maintain heavily used interactives?

Figure 1.2.

Take-Home Messages for _____ *(name of the exhibit makeover project)*

We expect that most visitors will leave with 3 or 4 take-home messages in mind:

- Message(s) about the story

After visitors see _____ *(name of the exhibit makeover project)* they will understand/
think/feel . . .

- Message(s) about the museum

After visitors see _____ *(name of the exhibit makeover project)* they will think/feel
the museum is . . .

- Message(s) about me, the visitor

After visitors see _____ *(name of the exhibit makeover project)* they will feel person-
ally connected to . . .

After you've completed the take-home messages, go back through them with the team and mark those mes-
sages that include educational goals. List them below.

Educational Goals:

-
-
-