

the global multi-disciplinary art school

by patrick argent, MCSD

Kingston-upon-Hull may not be instantly synonymous with the world of international design, but for more than half a century the East Yorkshire city has been home to one of the foremost courses in British design education. Respected worldwide within the industry, the Museum & Exhibition Design Department of the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside, has an unrivalled reputation for training designers in this, one of the most highly demanding of the creative professions.

A combination of almost historical default and pure chance saw the modest beginnings of what was to become Exhibition Design studies, emerge in the aftermath of WW2 at Hull School of Art during October 1947.

Thus, the UK's very first course of its kind evolved virtually exclusively from the occurrence of a certain Eric Gardiner enquiring at the Anlaby Road College as to a course in exhibition design. The role of delivering such a programme of study was given, logically at the time, to the sculpture and woodcarving lecturer Reginald Landers.

With the subsequent arrival of other students, and fuelled by the interest in the impending 1951 Festival of Britain, it was recognised by the college authorities that not only was there a genuine educational demand, but crucially that employment opportunities existed for graduates of such a course.

Developing steadily over the years, and strengthened by the consistent annual success of ex-students gaining employment, the proof of sustained demand for such a specialised design curriculum became clearly evident.

Offering initially an NDD qualification, the course received SIAD approval in 1963, and has maintained ever since, strong professional and prominent links with the Society. Former president Robert Wetmore, PPCSD, acted as an SIAD examiner to the course, and became a close friend of the college over many years, and more recently, Neal Potter, FCSD, the eminent museum designer and chair of CSD Exhibitions Group, is currently the departments' Visiting Professor.

Course leader and senior lecturer, Richard McConnell, explains his passion for the design specialisation he has taught at Hull for over thirty years:



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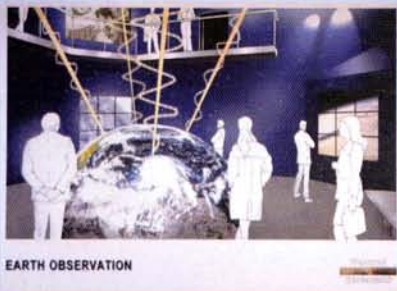


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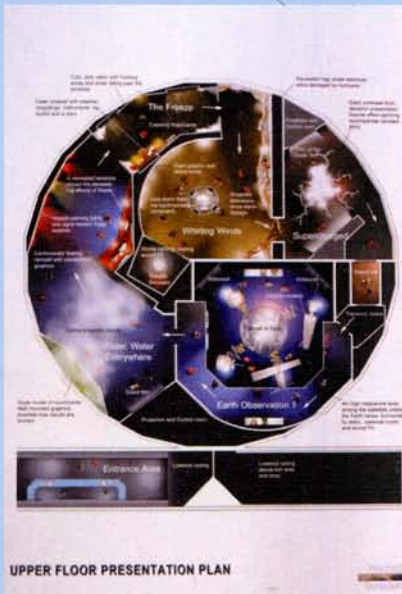
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1 Course tutor Dr. Geoff Matthews with an experimental interactive exhibit on stereoscopic vision, designed by Barry Asquith, BA Hons Museum & Exhibition Design finalist 1999.

2/3 Trade show exhibit for Compaq Network Systems, designed by Martyn Whitehouse, BA Hons Museum & Exhibition Design finalist 1999.

4/5/6 'Weather Experience' visitor centre exhibition, designed by Lee Appleton, BA Hons Museum & Exhibition Design finalist 1999.

“Exhibition design is the ultimate in multi-disciplinary design”, he says, “it is the one discipline that includes all the others and is the most dynamic and exciting of all, because you are in control of so many elements, you can do anything to build the total experience. There is nothing that money can buy that you can't put in an exhibition.

“There is only one crime that an exhibition designer can commit – and that is to be boring”!

McConnell (brother of Pentagram principal John) joined the staff in 1969 and expected to stay for just a few months. However, he soon realised that at Hull this was no ordinary educational facility, and that the courses' contribution to the future of professional exhibition design was special.

“It gradually became evident that we were doing something extraordinary and exceptional that really was worth preserving”, he adds.

That exceptional quality within the course has helped to sustain its existence over the decades, during which it has

survived re-organisation by re-location to various buildings situated across the city; been subject to no less than six previous educational institution name changes: Hull School of Art, Hull Regional College of Art, Hull College of Higher Education, Humberside College of Higher Education, Humberside Polytechnic, and the University of Humberside, and by offering numerous qualifications: NDD, SIAD, DATEC, BTEC, ND and HND.

Today, as a BA (Hons) programme and a Masters Degree, it is part of the Hull

School of Architecture within the University of Lincolnshire & Humberside, based in George Street.

One of the major achievements throughout its 52 years has been a consistent and enviable

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reputation for placing some 80% of its students in professional design employment, and since 1947 details of the careers of every student have been faithfully recorded in what is called simply 'the red book.' This unique tome was begun by Reginald Landers, continued by retired course leader Keith Clark (a former design assistant of

exhibition design guru James Gardner) and is presently administered by McConnell.

Among the many fascinating statistics to emerge from this book is the number of ex-students who, having become parents, have subsequently been followed into the course by their own children in later years.

Structured around mainly studio-based projects, and with particular emphasis on traditional skills, as well as computer-aided, the inter-disciplinary approach of the course involves a diverse range of studies. The syllabus covers, through project briefs, the areas of model-making, lighting, graphics, construction, and illustration in conjunction with a strong narrative, story-telling approach that integrates 2D, 3D and time-based elements

This is to prepare graduates entering the various fields of interpretation and communications-based spatial design, including that of museums and galleries, commercial exhibitions, TV and theatre sets, theme parks, retail interiors, interpretative exhibits and visitor centres.

Interestingly (and unusually for a 3 year BA Hons), one student each year is selected to undertake a six-week

placement at Euro Disney in Paris working with the famous 'imagineers'.

"Unlike other design courses, which tend to be broken up into years, we are more individualistic," adds McConnell. "Each tutor teaches all years – we team teach – and it is much healthier because there is collective responsibility. We all have a serious interest in the work of each student right the way through the course.

"We gave up the final year thesis some time ago. Instead students are asked to produce a 7,000-word final year rationale directly connected to the major project. It is seen as a vital aspect of design professionalism.

"It is important that students are able to understand their own ideas; know why they had the idea and why it is appropriate to the given project.

You have to grip people

Exhibition design is content-driven and the ideas approach is so important: Where is the story? Where is the information? And how do you get it across?

"You have to grip people".

Adding his own thoughts, Dr. Geoff Matthews, senior lecturer and leader of the Masters Programme in exhibition

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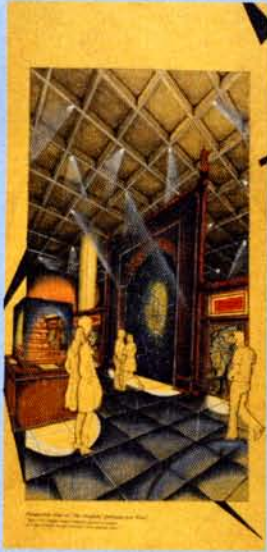


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7 Stage set for theatre adaptation on Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein' designed by Lee Appleton, BA Hons Museum & Exhibition Design finalist 1999.

8/9 Concept and set design for theatre production of 'Oliver!' designed by Clare Teo, BA Hons Museum & Exhibition Design finalist 1999.

10/11 'Mugul Art' museum exhibition designed by Crystal Chu, BA Hons Museum & Exhibition Design finalist 1999.

12/13 'National Railway Museum, York' social history gallery. Designed by Joanne, BA Hons Museum & Exhibition Design finalist 1996.



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design says: "It has always worried me that most design knowledge dies with the designer. We get our students to write about what they do, and how they do it. That's a start, but part of being a professional is continuing to contribute to the body of knowledge – one reason why a CSD committed to professionalism is so important.

"I won't be happy until there is a library full of illustrated books written by museum and exhibition designers. Part of our job is to help make this happen".

Museum design was introduced to the Hull curriculum in 1980, prompted by such exciting developments within the profession as the blockbuster Tutankhamun Exhibition at the British Museum in 1972, and 'The Story of the Earth' exhibition at the Geological Museum. Not only were professional designers asked to create a new type of communications-based exhibition, but the professionalisation of curatorship and developing conservation standards, saw new demands placed on designers to deal seriously with the security and conservation of museum

collections (especially in the design of 'permanent' exhibitions).

In direct response the course at Hull offers the only such qualification in Europe.

Refreshingly, a tour of the department reveals rows of drawing boards – something not often

seen in modern day design education.

"We must have one of the last remaining traditional design courses in the country," adds McConnell, "but we do use CAD as well – we are not opposed to progress! However, the benefit of working on a drawing board is that it forces students to look and analyse. Drawing is fundamental, especially when trying to convince a client that an idea is worth spending money on. Designers need to be able to communicate their ideas through drawing.

"Importantly, we have students who have a real enthusiasm for what they do. They have a broad outlook, a level of intelligence and 'old-fashioned' drawing skills. This shows that they look at things, and have an interest in the world about them. In my experience, the best design

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students are those who have an interest in everything – the broadest church imaginable. Every designer should be prepared to design an exhibition about the history of the Roman Empire, just as much as the Lifecycle of the Flea! And what's more, they should express as much enthusiasm for both subjects.

"I remember someone telling me about designing a museum of needle-making in Wolverhampton – not needlework, but needle-making! Now that's what you might call a specialism within a specialism!"

Professional links with the course have been at world-class level. Among the visiting lecturers have been the illustrious 'G', James Gardner during the late 80s, Giles Velarde, former senior designer at the Geological Museum, and more recently prominent international museum designers, John Sunderland, Richard Fowler FCSD, Neal Potter FCSD, Sam Marshall, the noted motor exhibition stand designer, David Gosling, head of design at Event

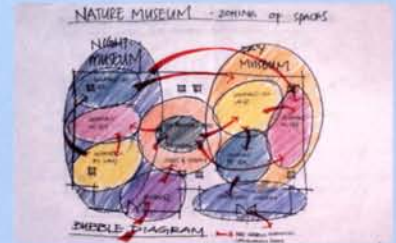
Communications, Bob Baxter and Professor Derek Walker, who was architect and lead designer for the Royal Armouries in Leeds.

"The course seems to have been around me throughout my career as a museum designer", says Richard Fowler. "I remember groups of visiting students gathering round my drawing board at the British Museum in the 1970s; workplacement students spending weeks at the National Museum of Photography;

employing some of the best ones at my studio in the 90s, and going to Hull to assess students' work. This unique and successful course should be cherished and cared for by us all".

One of the major factors at Hull is the continuity amongst the teaching staff and the fact that there has never been a rapid turnover. In addition, the presence of lecturers Mike Oakenfull and CSD member Pam Locker, both of whom continue in practice, bring invaluable professional and project experience to bear on their contribution as

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14/15 'Wild Eyes' museum
16/17 exhibition on animal vision,
designed by Clare Teo,
BA Hons Museum & Exhibition
Design finalist 1999.

18/19 'Fierce Skies' meteorological
centre exhibition on weather
extremes. Designed by
Jonathan Wetherall, BA Hons
Museum & Exhibition Design
finalist 1999.

20 Studio set design for BBC
comedy sketch show 'The Real
McCoy'. Designed by Alison
Stapley, BA Hons Museum &
Exhibition Design finalist 1996.

teachers. Oakenfull was designer of the award-winning Hartlepool Heritage Quay, and lead designer of the recently opened Scottish Mining Museum, a project on which Pam Locker also worked.

Neal Potter, FCSD adds: "Against all the odds, dedicated tutors have ensured that this has not been a 'here-today, gone-tomorrow' course. They have produced a 'global family' of exhibition designers. In fact, you can go to any exhibition in any part of the world and announce over the PA system that there will be a 'Humberside reunion' and you will have an instant party"!

For over five decades, Hull's specialist exhibition programme has provided targeted vocational studies in preparation for a specific form of professional design practice. During this period, that practice has been ever-changing – developing as a result of the enormous technological advances that have occurred. Accordingly, the course has adapted to those advances in communications and technology systems, and like the industry, always with a view to further developments in the future.

For exhibition design, that future may offer possibilities previously quite unimaginable.

Perceived from the perspective of knowledge and technology today, exhibitions will increasingly become multi-sensory experiences.

Indeed, the prospect of 'going to the Feelies' in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* may not be far away. ●

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