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EXPLORING THE TEACHING OF EXHIBITION DESIGN AND CURATORIAL STUDIES

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Exploring the teaching of exhibition design and curatorial studies

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In Latin meaning, the original word "curare" means "take care". Respond to this, a curator in a contemporary setting is a manager or overseer. Traditionally, a curator or keeper of a cultural heritage institution (e.g., gallery, museum, library or archive) is a content specialist responsible for an institution's collections and involved with the interpretation of heritage material. The object of a traditional curator's concern necessarily involves tangible objects of some sort, whether it be artwork, collectibles, historic items or scientific collections. More recently, the curator's job description for the art exhibition has expanded to a new territory: Exhibition design and participants experience maker.

Curator, in a developing country like China, is a very emerging concept. Nevertheless, with millions of art exhibition every year in most of major cities, such as Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong, this vivid market is looking for someone who has the vision to set up every elements for the exhibition. Besides the themes, the fund-raising and the artists, there are some critical elements which could support the success of a exhibition, which is exhibition design.

In a traditional education, curators are taught mainly in category of art history and sociology, while exhibition designer are taught in the world of commercial design. Those two ones seem not have too much in common, but when a art exhibition come, they will have to throw themselves to the world of each other. Therefore, as a exhibition designer, a curator as well as an educator, I explored the world of exhibition design and curatorial studies when I am invited as one of the curator team of 2013 Shanghai Design Exhibition (also named "Shanghai design Biennale" unofficially). And I arranged and taught a exhibition design workshop which provides five different concepts for the exhibition design of 2013 shanghai design exhibition.

1. New method to define exhibition design for an art exhibition

First of all, I have to confess that I was quite anxious that I haven't got the list of the all art works when I officially start the workshop. What I only have in my hand by that time, is the confirmed themes of each parts, the curators were still searching for the artists and works to presenting their ideas. Also Interestingly, this workshop recruited students from five countries, United states, New Zealand, Korea, Thailand and t art and design schools throughout different parts of China. So in that case, I started this workshop with a serial of "Chaos drawings", and this practice break the ice and also let students to leave their different background behind. Chaos drawing needs a large piece of paper and set students stand at the each side of the paper. The students keep rotating the paper to next side and draw over the previous one, so all the pattern on the paper is created by various people, which brings a new way to look at a pattern and inspiration to find some shape that you get used to. Then the students were asked to take 10 different patterns from those drawings and develop them into 30 different 2D drawings.

Following this, a 3D model practice was set up. Each of the students was required to use the cardboard to build 20 simple shape models, and put them together.

The second part of design was processed into a real spatial design. We set up a prototype space, and divide students into 6 groups, and give 3 different key words according to the selected themes. The three key words are "connection, Balance, Force", which represents the theme of "Abstract and concrete", "the city of night time" and "the city of counter light". However, when those words given firstly, students doesn't connect with the real theme of the exhibition and it actually benefit a lot because there are no limits for the inspiration.

Then, students selected any model in the material library to fill in the prototype space to express the feeling of each themed word. And in this part, some of students were confused by too much ideas coming up which other are getting hard to build a spatial feeling with a word. However, for this round, each group of student provided an unrealistic spatial installation while they actually have no idea what kind of exhibition they were designing for. Furthermore, a few elements such as the amount of display stools were added into the whole design process, and the themes of each exhibition that relates to the key word were revealed. After this period, a so-called "real design process" starts, at meanwhile, each group has their spatial design model already in their hand, what they need to do, is to improve rather than to recreate.

2. The student's works in the workshop

The whole project goes smoothly and all the six groups come up with six exhibition design and some souvenir design, which we called as "take-away experience".

The first group provides the design for "the city of night". This theme connected with the key word "Balance". The group provided an inspiration of "Mobius Strip", since they believe the continuous movement of this shape could perfectly illustrate the balance of the nighttime and daytime. Therefore in this part, a lot of meshed metal of mobius strip has been applied in the decoration of the ceiling. The design of display stool also highlighted itself: the light inside the stool flashes in accordance with the same frequency of heart beats, which respond the audience's feeling and the nature of quietness at night. Besides, the take -away experience is also interesting, it use jigsaw as the shape for the card with QR code, so audience could scan the QR card and get more information on line, also, the Jigsaw souvenir bring the attraction for audience to come back again and collect more.

Another group brings an exhibition design project for "Abstract and concrete" exhibition. In this exhibition, the curator presents the experimental work of professional designers and the real design work that created by amateurs who never get a chance to go to design school. Therefore, in this workshop, I gave a key word "connection" to the group; try to let the team to explore the bridge between professionals and amateurs. In this case, students gave an amazing structure of ceiling to deliver the idea of "connection". And the design of design stool also shows different look when you see it from different angle, which is the best expression of "Abstract and concrete".

The last idea is about "the city of counter light". As known, the development of the cities in China is amazingly speedy. While we are facing the force of change, we also need to look back and see the past. This exhibition shows the comparison between the old part and the new part of the city. And the key word is "force". This group of students bring a very strong architectural form into the whole space, the tri-angle shape separation wall bring the people a feeling of the expansion of the city.

3.Conclusion

It was very interesting experience for me to teach an exhibition design class with an unusual topic and students with different background. Different from giving the goals and target before start, the process is to give the lead to students step by step, when they gets to the level, they noticed they are already at the destination and fulfill the goals of design project.

