UWE R. BRÜCKNER

TO RACE STORIES HEROES
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Competition in progress, KTM – World of KTM, Mattighofen, Austria, 2015

UWE R. BRÜCKNER FOUNDED ATELIER BRÜCKNER TOGETHER WITH HIS WIFE SHIRIN FRANGOUL-BRÜCKNER TWENTY YEARS AGO AND HAS SINCE REVOLUTIONIZED THE ART OF NARRATIVE DESIGN IN ARCHITECTURE. HIS CREATIVE VISION OVERTAKES SPACES FOR BOTH CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND BRANDS.
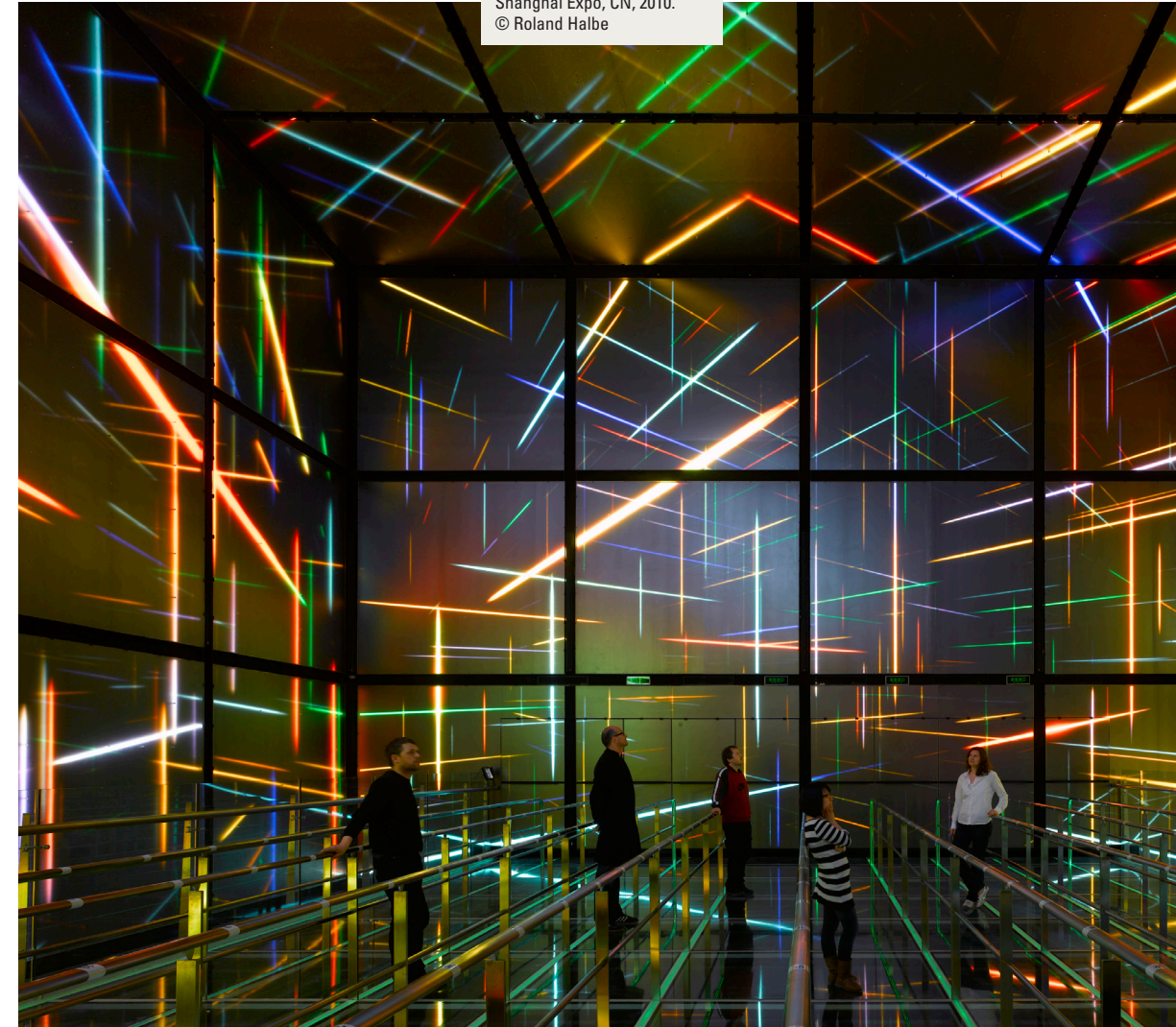
UWE R. BRÜCKNER

Entry Hall, GS Caltex Pavilion,
Yeosu Expo, KOR, 2012.
© Nils Clauss

Magic Box, State Grid Pavilion,
Shanghai Expo, CN, 2010.
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**HERE WE TALK ABOUT
HIS CREATIVE JOURNEY AND
THE FUNDAMENTAL PILLARS
OF GOOD SCENOGRAPHY.**

Epilogue, German Watch
Museum, Glashütte, DE, 2008.
© Wolfgang Günzel

You studied architecture and worked as an architect, then dabbled in stage design before embarking on your scenography adventure. Can you think back at how this journey began?

…or to draw inspiration.

Prologue, MEG – Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève, Geneva, CH, 2014.
© Daniel Stauch

HE SAID: "I THINK YOU SHOULD GO OUT AND COLLECT SOME OTHER EXPERIENCES."

I started as an ordinary architecture student in 1978 at the Technical University in Munich and I was trained as a classical architect, as an executive designer and a detailer. In 1984 I joined the office of Professor Sampo Widmann, with whom I was very lucky to develop innovative structural designs based on wood frame constructions. It was a small but very experimental office.

Then I took a year off and became a professional skipper on a 15-meter sailboat in the Eastern Mediterranean. My boss who introduced me to the owner of the boat initiated this. He said: "I think you should go out and collect some other experiences." Sampo Widmann was one of the members of the protest movement in Germany in the 1960s. A real liberal hippie who thought that an office was not the right place to live and die.

"United in Diversity", Parlamentarium – Visitor Centre of European Parliament, Brussels, BE, 2011.
© Rainer Rehfeld

Interactive map of Southwest of Germany during Napoleon's reign, House of History, Stuttgart, DE, 2002.
© Daniel Stauch

Lamella of shale, smac –
State Museum of Archaeology,
Chemnitz, DE, 2014.
© Michael Jungblut

Yes, and therefore he sent me out. After I came back to Munich in 1988, he "lent" me to another office in Stuttgart for one year, called Atelier Lohrer and this office was famous in the 1980s for its innovative philosophy designing exhibitions. Knut Lohrer was one of the protagonists who changed the exhibition environment in museums. He was one of the first ones who spoke about storytelling in museums and used graphic design and new media to tell that story.

After a year and a half, I stopped to work at Atelier Lohrer and returned to fulltime studies, now for stage design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart.

40 m long illuminated showcase with 1,000 objects from 800 years, smac – State Museum of Archaeology, Chemnitz, DE, 2014.
© Michael Jungblut

"…LISTEN YOU DON'T WANT TO WASTE YOUR TALENT DYING IN AN ARCHITECTURE OFFICE, YOU HAVE TO DO SOMETHING ELSE ."

Prologue, That's Opera, Brussels, BE, 2008.
© A. T. Schaefer

And then chose to encourage it instead of seeing it as competition.

They promoted me.

Eventually, this led me to study classical stage design between 1988 and 1992 with Professor Jürgen Rose. He is 80 and still around working as a stage designer. He was one of the big five, as we called them, in Europe. The big five stage designers mainly working for operas, which incidentally became my favourite subject. It really made me happy. I felt like I had found my "destination". This was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, because it combined space, architecture, performance and storytelling.

THERE ISN'T JUST ONE POSSIBLE CONCEPT BUT MANY.

This was something you felt that you needed to explore after working with Lohrer?

Actually, it wasn't only me. It was also Knut, who had become my second mentor, and my flatmate at the time. Both said: "… listen you don't want to waste your talent dying in an architecture office, you have to do something else."

So it was already obvious that your creative calling went beyond executing architectural projects?

This was my great luck in life that there were always people behind me who saw talents, options and advantages that I could not see myself.

I was always fascinated by complex challenges, and opera for me is the most complex kind of artistry that you can work in. It brings together everything. There is storytelling, acting, singing, music, and composition.

THIS WAS WHAT I WANTED TO DO FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE, BECAUSE IT COMBINED SPACE, ARCHITECTURE, PERFORMANCE AND STORYTELLING.

Walkable orchestra pit, That's Opera, Brussels, BE, 2008.
© A. T. Schaefer

What draws you to this idea of storytelling?

It was after studying Shakespeare, Wagner and Puccini. I learned to read partituras (music scores) and to digest what a piece of paper can provoke in our minds. Not many people can read a music score, maybe 1 % of the population. Since then, I have used this instrument to orchestrate our designs. It became one of my specialities and the speciality of ATELIER BRÜCKNER.

From early on, I liked this multi-disciplinary approach, because I was used to it. I worked in the theatre world for eight years, did a few stage designs by myself and I was always included in larger teams that were recruited from different disciplines and different nations. That's a common denominator across all operas in the world. You won't find more than 50% locals, the rest come from elsewhere.

We didn't consciously start this at our office, but from the beginning we were a multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural office.

Yes, that's something I wanted to talk about. Atelier often has the connotation of a small working bureau, but actually you are an enterprise of 70 plus people, all specialized in different disciplines and with a range of skill sets.

Meanwhile, we are 108 permanent staff members and are as such one of the largest studios of this kind in the world. We employ people from 27 nations and 15 different disciplines. We develop design concepts that sort of embrace any kind of discipline for a holistic scenographical approach.

This diversity of cultures, ideas and backgrounds allows you to have a more

interesting product in the end. On the other hand, since you work on projects all over the world, it gives you a better understanding of how these nations work culturally.

Yes, definitely that does play a major role. We do need to rely on people who come from that original cultural background otherwise it would just be a sort of condescending European arrogance to think that we could just export our kind of design to any other country in the world. I think that's very dangerous. I could give you many examples where that sort of mentality hasn't worked. I cannot go to China and tell the Chinese how they should feel.

When you initiate a project, how do you integrate all these voices into the conception of a project? What are the different stages? Can you walk us through the process?

The process is very simple. The first step is a careful analysis. We have our own research team, even if there are professional curators and scientists available, we still, additionally, employ experts from outside to help us verify the ideas of the curators or to find niches or alternatives.

The second phase is conceptualizing. I call it from "concept to conception". There isn't just one possible concept but many. There are also detailed and particular concepts for light, sound, media, storytelling and so on. All of these various ideas are brought together at the end of the day, to be summed up into one conception. So the next step is to synthesize, to bring all this data and alternative proposals together into what we call concentration. The first step is the narrative step, the plot or the script if you will. Finally, composing, which is our speciality, bringing everything together, all the aspects and

protagonists are brought together and illustrated in the form of a partitura. It starts with a prologue or even a pre-prologue and it ends with an epilogue or what we call an "after final".

You have over a 100 people working with you but the decision making process of how you boil it down to the essence of what you want to present is then done by you, or as a team?

We are now five partners, so at the end of the day one of the five partners takes the responsibility, but we have a very flat hierarchy. There is not one boss on top as a conductor who tells the people what to do. It is always a process. Very often I play the role of a provocateur, so my responsibility is to challenge the team.

You play devil's advocate?

Exactly. I am involved from the earliest beginning and I take on several different roles that the team cannot embody. For example, at the beginning I play the role of an external curator, later I play the role of a journalist and ask them nasty questions, because according to Einstein, only smart questions provoke smart answers.

Finally, I take another role, which is that of a protagonist who presents the project to the client. As someone who has the most experience here – I have been in business for almost 35 years and we celebrated our 20th anniversary in 2017 – I can draw on past experiences during a presentation. I am also the one who is representing what the team has achieved and I stand behind it.

By mediatecture dynamised
automobiles, BMW Museum,
Munich, DE, 2008.
© Marcus Meyer

ideas into words. I am listening to what the
curators are telling the team, to the requirements
they address to us, and analyzing and listening
to the architecture, the existing space that
should host the exhibition, and then I sketch it.
So for a project like the BMW Museum (Munich,
DE, 2008), I drew more than 600 sketches. And
these sketches are both an analysis and also
a prognosis for the concept to come. Parts of the
project turned out literally like the sketches and
some go through complete alterations.

A project goes through various stages.
The House of History (Stuttgart, DE, 2002) is a
good example. For some of the semantic areas
I sketched about 12 alternatives and in the end
we came back to the first or second proposal.
It's a process.

Ok, so if you are creating a project for a competition where you are trying to woo a jury, what questions do you ask yourself?

I have a standard set of questions I go through
and I insist on repeating them very often. One is:
"What can this do?", "What can we improve?",
"Do we need this or not?", very often you are
faced with requirements without any idea why
the curators want to have it. It sometimes
lacks logic, or is not inspiring. At times it is very
personal – an individual need or desire.
So it is helpful to understand the background.
The other very important question is a philosoph-
ical question. Maybe it's worth talking about the
back-story. It is more a demand than a question:
"Start thinking from the end first." It means
a change of perspective. I learned this from
Shakespeare, Wagner and Puccini. Shakespeare
had determined everything in his dramas.
I adopted this, so I ask the team and the curators:
"What do you want to read after the opening,
after the inauguration in the newspaper?"

The idea is to understand what kind of effect they want the exhibition to have?

Exactly. What kind of achievements? You
wouldn't believe it, but it is one of the biggest
challenges that you can address to a curator,
because they are only thinking about the
development and hoping that all of the objects
and content is displayed, no matter how much
space you have. They do not really anticipate
the reflection of what it is they want to achieve.

"WHAT CAN THIS DO?"
"WHAT CAN WE IMPROVE?"
"DO WE NEED THIS OR NOT?"

When you embark on this journey to create a 360° exhibition experience what is the starting point?

Well, it depends if it is a competition, where we
are running through our own process or if it is
later when we collaborate with a curator.

Before we are only working with and within the
team, later we work with the curators.

Once we win a competition we can embark on
the next step of elaborating the concept for the
exhibition or installation. Then, I take on the role
of a listener. My speciality is that I can sketch

Do you find that often there are certain pitfalls or clichés that curators fall into?

Of course. It always differs. With many of the curators and directors I have developed friendships over the years and we sometimes hire them as consultants. There is a community of reliable and experienced people but sometimes you have to fight against them. In the end, it's simple, whatever questions you failed to raise

Navigational Instruments, The National Maritim Museum, Amsterdam, NL, 2011.
© Michael Jungblut

during the process will come up through the journalists or the critics.

The other idea is that you should never work against the space, because you will lose. Exhibitions come and go, architecture stays.

There are no rules, but there are conditions. The difference between an exhibition, cinema or theatre, is that in an exhibition you can walk

around the story, whereas in the cinema or theatre you are fixed to your chair and you are not supposed to walk around and question what the design offers.

In an exhibition the audience is the challenging factor because you never know how they will behave.

Exhibition visitors are a broad cross section of society. What are the challenges in creating work that appeals to different generations, and is there a common denominator?

I think there are certain common denominators that you can rely on no matter which generation is the target group. All the things that are marked by iconic images, great gestures, these affect all target groups. Maybe they will remember it differently but one and the same installation is valid for all of these audiences. By using attractions, whether analog or digital, you can draw people even to theoretical or complex themes and awaken their interest, suck them in and give them a feeling that they are a part of it. Then all of a sudden they will be engaged in content they would have never found interesting.

Puccini once said "give me a laundry list and I will put it into music." which means that even for the most unattractive thing you can compose the most attractive scenery. This is what we can do, but not by neglecting or overlaying objects and content but instead through synchronicity, and symbiosis to create attractive experiences out of the source itself.

I'll give you an example. We did an exhibition on 200 years of Italian opera. All scores, compositions, most of it paper with some photographs. What youngster would go to an exhibition like this? It's boring. They can't read it. Most of them

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN EXHIBITION, CINEMA OR THEATRE, IS THAT IN AN EXHIBITION YOU CAN WALK AROUND THE STORY
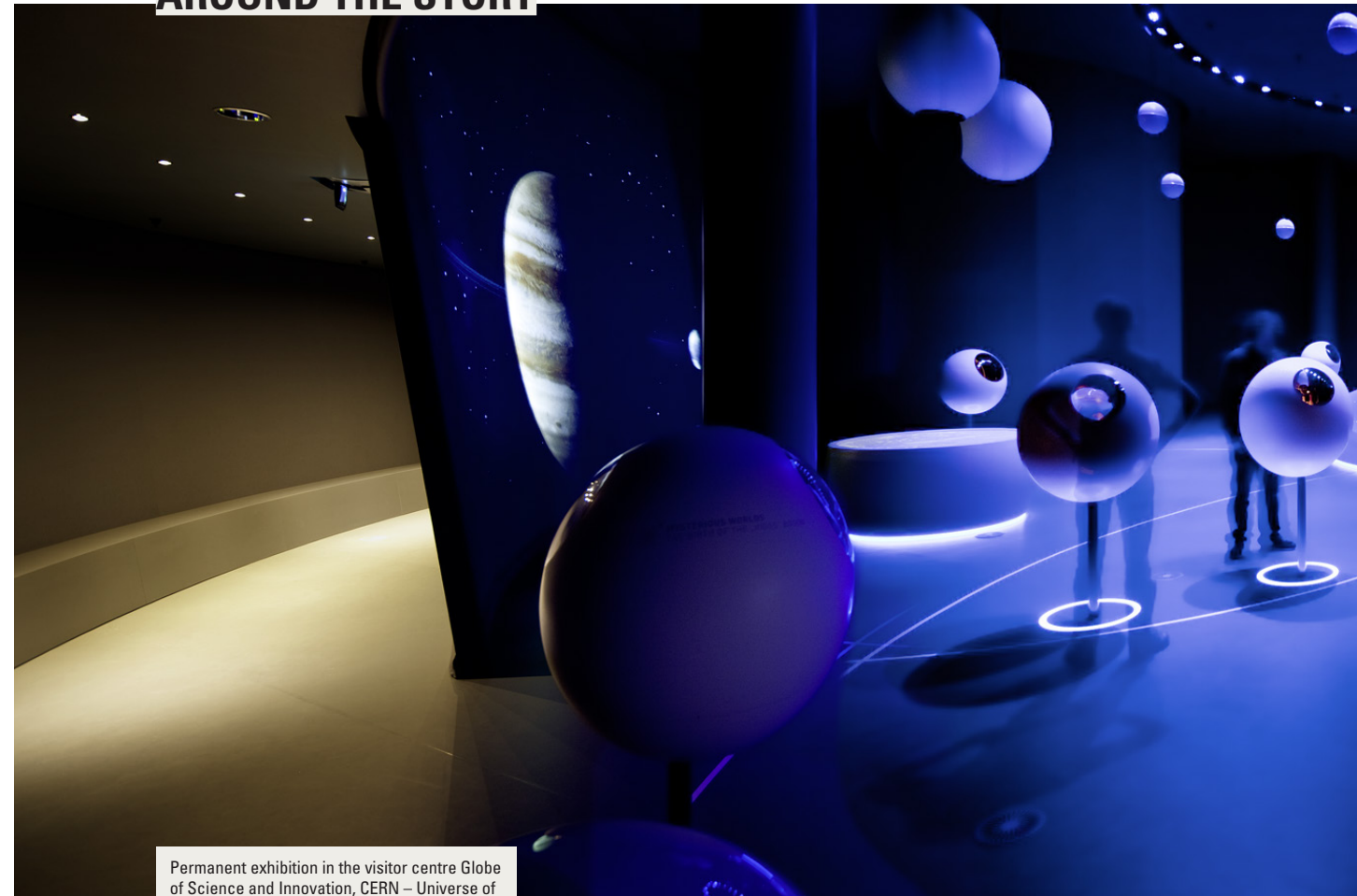
Permanent exhibition in the visitor centre Globe of Science and Innovation, CERN – Universe of Particles, Geneva, CH, 2010.
© Michael Jungblut

WHEREAS IN THE CINEMA OR THEATRE YOU ARE FIXED TO YOUR CHAIR AND YOU ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO WALK AROUND AND QUESTION WHAT THE DESIGN OFFERS.

are not musicians. It's just dead paper. The challenge was to let this paper create sound. That became our goal for this exhibition.

We scanned various copies of these scores and projected them on a wall, then indicated with a red line at what point we were and underlined which instruments were on and off. Everybody, every amateur could read the score. The result was that the youngsters blocked this interactive station the whole day, because all of the sudden they were able to follow the partitura. This to me is good scenography: being able to recruit a new perspective out of the source itself. I didn't change or manipulate anything. All of it was real. The design was elaborated out of the source.

When designing this sort of Gesamtkunstwerk that is aimed at the viewers five senses, how much of your ideas rely on an intellectual response or engagement? Or do you endeavour to appeal more to the emotional side of the visitor? Is the latter what really elevates the experience for the visitor and the true recipe for success?

Both are important. It is easy to overload people but it is not so easy to overwhelm them. If you flood them with information, or objects, or content, or with media, if you overdose it, then people reject it. If it's too much, an instinct inside of us says, ok I am overloaded. So you start to be picky or disoriented or you lose interest.

However, if you intrigue your audience in a way that they think it is made for them, I call this positive awareness, if you provoke awareness, if I as a spectator feel that I am the addressee, then I am able and willing to be involved in things that I did not imagine I could cope with on an intellectual level, because it becomes fascinating and intriguing.

So you want them to actively participate intellectually and not just consume?

Exactly, involvement instead of consumption. With the right tools it is possible to convey cryptic or sophisticated messages to an "ordinary" audience.

You know, I am a stage designer, an architect, an artist so I had no idea about metaphysics when we started working on the project for CERN (Geneva, CH, 2010).

It took me a lot of lunches and dinners and bottles of wine to get an idea what the scientists were talking about. I had to bring them down to a level as if I was their young son or nephew to grasp their explanations. I really had no clue. No understanding about the matter.

After I sort of intravenously invaded the scientist like a molecule in their veins, their system of thinking, it became easy. When I asked them to give me an example, they couldn't convince me via a formula, but they convinced me through exemplary graphs…so graphic design. In the end we used their graphs to make something visible that is definitely not visible. We used this as a spatial image for the entire exhibition. Kids love coming to CERN because it is so exciting. What we try to do is to give access to complicated themes through simple approaches on an intellectual level.

My daughter when she was 16 said to me, "listen Daddy why should I go to the museum when I can withdraw all the information on the internet 24 hours a day." Smart question, why should you. My answer was, if the museum provides a space or a site where your physical presence is necessary to have or to get a unique experience that cannot be shared via the Internet, then you would go to the museum.

Champagner Room, Expedition Titanic, Hamburger Speicherstadt, DE, 1997.
© Uwe Ditz

In reality this means that if any museum wants to stay relevant then they can no longer adopt a traditional model.

At least they cannot tell their stories using traditional narratives. New narratives are necessary.

Ok, but what are the tools for it? A lot of times museums probably assume that they don't have the budget to do that. If you say that it does not have to necessarily cost a lot of money, then are there a few key elements that one should be mindful of to make an exhibition relevant?

To be honest it is not primarily a question of budget. We have also completed projects on low budgets, the lowest one being about 100 000 Euros. The largest was around 60 million. But they are all achieved via the same design philosophy – "form follows content", derived from Sullivan's "form follows function". Sometimes you have to decide because even a highly analogue concept can be as attractive as a highly media equipped one. Schloss Dyck (Jüchen, DE, 2003) is an old castle close to Düsseldorf where we had very little money, but the most visited space there became the reading room. In the centre showcase is the diary of the Earl of Dyck who brought from England the English Public garden philosophy. It is highly sophisticated. What we did was to scan the entire diary and cover all of the walls around the showcase with the pages. The effect was that the visitors just came in and started reading. Our prognosis was that they would stay for maybe seven minutes in that room – but actually a lot of visitors stayed for over half an hour.

The extreme opposite, in terms of budget, was the first cubic cinema in the world that we designed for the Expo 2010 in Shanghai, located in the State Grid Pavilion. A 15 m3 cube where

the inside was fully equipped with LEDs. More than 30 million LEDs. All the facets of the cube were made up of screens. The entire narrative was hovering, running, flying through space. The whole movie was a three dimensional room of inspiration. Everything was done on the computer but people were so involved in the storytelling that they forgot about the physical limitations.

In both examples you are really connecting with the viewer. You are sucking them into the story. One of the primary aims of a museum is to be able to engage the visitor, but this engagement can be achieved through different means, maybe by creating flashes of fun, or suspense, to keep them involved. On the other hand there are situations, for example for a Holocaust museum or the exhibition about the Titanic that you created, where the idea is to reach a deeper level, one where the viewer can come close to relating to and really feeling the experience, the sense of loss. Touching the human experience.

I call this "penetrable showcases". You stage objects and contents in a way that people forget about the glass showcase that is around an object, or the space that is around the storytelling. This is an intravenous installation so you become a part of the narrative. To achieve this I started to write down a design philosophy that I called "Creative Structure" it actually dates back to the exhibition "Expedition Titanic" (Hamburg, DE, 1997). It is basically five scenographical parameters.

It always starts with the content. That's the first parameter: what kind of message do we want to convey or what kind of information should we deliver?

The second parameter is always the space. As I mentioned before you should never work against the architecture or the space. It's an underestimated parameter, because many designers assume that it's a given. I think it plays a major role. It's fundamental.

The third is the object itself. Very often it is like an alien imprisoned in the showcase. Very often distanced from the viewer. I try to overcome the distance between the object and the spectator by making it as vivid and as alive that people forget about the glass showcase. In the National Maritime Museum, the Het Scheepvaart Museum (Amsterdam, NL 2011), we created a showcase where we put the figureheads according to place they would have been on the ships; because there are ones that are in the front and ones that are in the back. Usually you would put them in the showcase and then put a static light on them. But created a dynamic lighting, making the spectator feel the passing of time. The people even forgot about the glass of the vitrine and just ran into it.

The fourth parameter is the visitor. Very often in traditional exhibitions, the visitor is an alien, a consumer; he comes, looks at something and then goes away. There is no role dedicated to the visitor. But we always give the visitors a destination or a role.

The fifth parameter is dramaturgy or choreography of space. There is always a starting point and always an end point. So it matters whether you enter the space from the left or the right, from the top or the bottom because you will perceive the installation completely differently. It matters what you see first and last. Like in the movie Pulp Fiction you have three concurrent plots, and sometimes it is confusing but in the end it all comes together and makes sense.

These five parameters are the pillars for any kind of project that we do, no matter how big the project or what the budget is.

The notion of interactivity during a museum visit is largely linked to the digital phenomenon and what the digital landscape allows you to realize. Often times exhibitions can leave you feeling that there wasn't enough actual material so they were using things such as interactive displays as a filler.

There is a very clear policy in our atelier and that is we won't use digital media for its own sake. We are not interested in expressing ourselves and impressing the viewers by using a lot of media. We think of the storytelling and the message first and then decide what kind of media we need. I also believe that it is a question of dosage, like medicine, it either cures you or poisons you. It's either helpful or toxic. None of it has been used for the sake of excitement but rather to connect content with storytelling and spatial conditions. I think there should be a democratic element to it, where the spectator gets to decide how much he wants to consume.

When you exhibited the bell in the Titanic exhibit, you dedicated 200 sqm of space to the object. Why did you feel that that best respected the importance of that object in the context of the story of the Titanic?

The Titanic exhibition (Hamburg, DE, 1997) was the first of its kind. Usually dramaturgy is used in temporary exhibitions and not in permanent exhibitions. We combined all the tools coming from theatre, literature and film. The dramatic structure was based on an Akira Kurosawa film from the late 1960s in black and white. Five protagonists were telling the story of the disaster from their own point of view.

Exposing the bell like that was risky, but it was also striking. The soul of a ship is always the bell. Every ship has a bell. The object was a very strong symbol. We called it the room of myth. Instead of exposing hundreds of small objects, we focused on one strong object and contextualized it by building a strong story around it.

This brings me to something you have said about scenography that it is the "fusion of logic and magic".

Logic stands for function. The exhibition has to work; there can't be chaos because otherwise you cannot perceive the things you are trying to convey. The magical element is the surprise. It's the emotion. It's empathy. There is no poetry without magic.

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