

Dissecting Infrastructure - the spatial and digital interconnections between heritage and future

I am both practitioner and design researcher: I am a founding partner in the studio Duncan McCauley, a studio for museum planning and exhibition design, and am also completing a PhD at the University of Leicester's School of Museum Studies. The studio is a place for creating, where the creative processes include thinking across borders towards spatial, social, and temporal qualities of the experiences of the visitor. My research is practice-centred, meaning that design practice is also research. Participative processes, together with the museum exhibition team, focus on the visitor experience centrally both in the design and in the related research. For example, my study of roleplaying workshop activities developed to predict visitor experiences and requirements inform how roleplaying as imagined visitors can be a valuable tool for the design process. Mapping the expectations, emotions, and requirements of imagined individual visitors enables a deeper engagement with the visitor experience at an early stage in the design process. This has enabled me to draw the visitor, beyond the scope of normal practice, into the design process.

My PhD research interests have two main approaches initiated through a belief that an exhibition visit is both narrative and embodied. A conceptual understanding of narrative supports comparisons from other narrative media for the design of events over time. An exhibition visit is embodied as visitors move through space and use their bodily senses to make meaning. My analysis of visitor research at a completed exhibition project reveals insights into real people's experiences of narrative. This knowledge feeds back into design practice and strengthens theoretical arguments regarding the perception of narrative in exhibitions.

I am interested in working towards a precise dialogue around narrative in museums, defining the use of terminologies that can be applied to the design process and to create results that reach through to the visitor's experience in the finished exhibition. The practical results will be a creative design toolbox which communicates potential approaches to integrate narrative in the design process that can also be experienced by the visitor in the finished exhibition.

The infrastructures of all museums enable a visiting experience that is both narrative and embodied, requiring an interaction with all of the visitor's senses. On entering an exhibition a museum visitor is both occupying a world created through objects, text, images, media, or art works and they are simultaneously occupying space and engaging with other people. This parallel occupation of a narrative museum world and the world of the visitor is where the designed world meets a potentially contradictory every-day world. Dissecting, identifying, reflecting, and reassembling—both in theory and practice—leads to a deeper understanding of the potential of narrative for design that can be experienced through the navigable real-world of the visitor.