Introduction to Public History
Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences

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For Our Children

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Interpreting and Exhibiting History

KEY TERMS	
witnessing objects	material culture
thesis	lineage objects
big idea	place-based storytelling
exhibition title	stakeholders
master label	Standards for Museum Exhibits Dealing
section topic label	with Historical Subjects
case or group label	evaluation
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credit panel	summative evaluation
orientation label	

INTERPRETING AND EXHIBITING HISTORY can take place anywhere. Exhibitions can be permanent and formal, as is the case with displays at museums, or temporary and deliberately informal, as in a pop-up installation. People exhibit history online, in the streets, at historic sites, in museums, and in airports. Interpretations can be extremely serious, for topics such as the Holocaust, or deliberately playful, even bordering on the absurd. Consider the *London Bridge Experience* that begins with a history of London and the bridge, but ends with actors covered in fake blood chasing tourists through darkened, narrow passageways with chainsaws.[1]

Exhibitions can be text-based, as in a typical museum display; 100 percent visual, as in a banner exhibition; or completely audio, as in a podcast. Even though this chapter

discusses interpreting and exhibiting history in museum exhibitions, the range of options for approaching the topic are immense. The chapters that follow will address a broader range of possibilities, but in this chapter we begin with basic principles, using the museum as a starting point. To introduce you to the kinds of interpretation and exhibition choices we will explore in this chapter, we begin with a walkthrough of the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, Chile, a site that faced a challenge of interpreting a painful and controversial period in Chile's recent past.

Chile celebrated its bicentennial in 2010 along with other countries throughout Latin America. The country's proud history of democratic rule and civility had been broken in 1973 when the military violently deposed democratically elected socialist President Salvador Allende. The military dictatorial regime, led by General Augusto Pinochet, inflicted human rights abuses, including the arrest and torture of at least 31,000 Chileans; thousands were murdered and disappeared. Usually, on a significant anniversary, a nation would be expected to celebrate the high points of its past to promote its future. But Chilean President Michelle Bachalet knew her country's recent history would not allow that type of commemoration; she herself had been tortured under the dictatorship, so it was fitting when she inaugurated the bicentennial year by dedicating a museum designed to preserve the memory of human rights atrocities committed under the dictatorship that ruled the country from 1973 through 1990.[2]

The Museum of Memory and Human Rights, or *Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos*, opened January 10, 2010. Designed by Brazilian architect Mario Figueroa, the museum stands three stories tall over a recessed courtyard, flanked by a reflecting pond and surrounded by a thin screen of oxidized copper. The use of copper is deliberate, as it is the most important natural resource of Chile. The block-like geometric shape of the building hovers over the path that visitors use to enter the museum one story below the street level. Along the main ramp that descends under the museum, the entire text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights hangs from the wall in bronze lettering.

When visitors enter the museum, they encounter a collage arranged in the shape of a map of the world. The individual pictures depict human rights abuses from around the globe. Below the map stand thirty plaques, representing truth commissions from Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, including two that investigated the abuses under Pinochet in Chile.[3] If there is one message that is clear to all who enter the museum, it is that Chile is not alone. Other countries have not only suffered terrible human rights tragedies, but they have also faced their pasts. The museum's story may not be unique in the world, but it is a story that is shared by Chileans throughout the country. On the floor next to the truth commission exhibit lies a map of Chile showing the location and description of 160 memorials that preserve the memory of human rights abuses under Pinochet. Another map of Chile in the museum lobby shows the other places where the history of the military dictatorship is interpreted and/or memorialized through art installations or memorials to specific individuals, specific groups, or sites of imprisonment or torture.

The permanent exhibition, based on the reports of the National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation and the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture, begins on the second floor. Visitors initially encounter evidence of the coup from Septem-
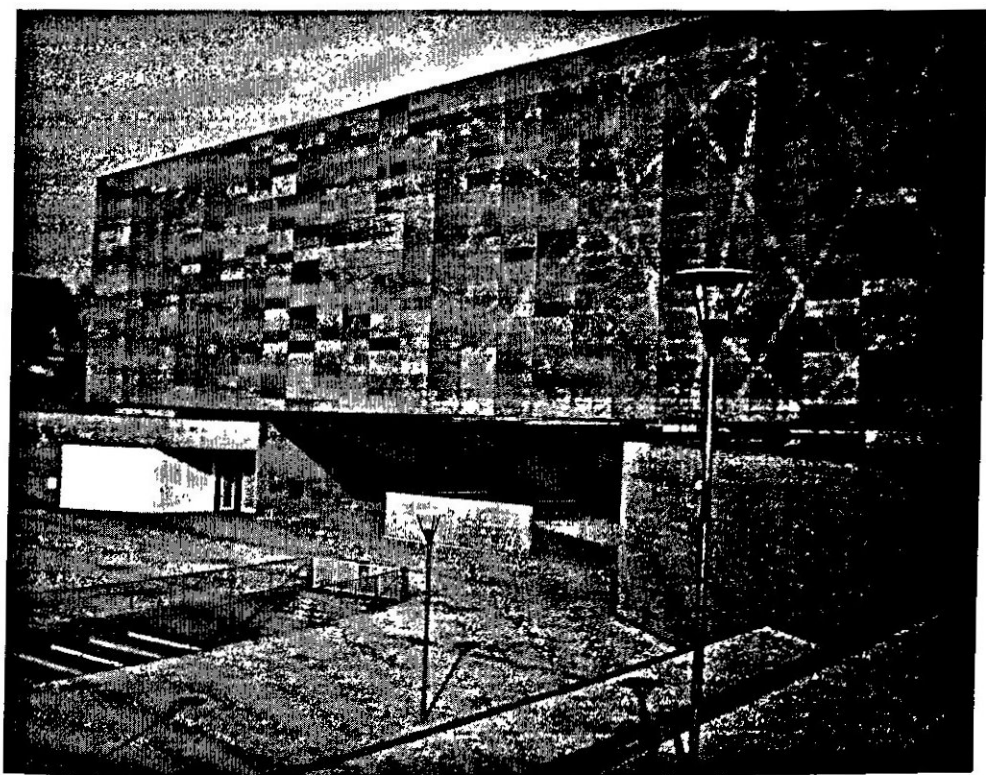
Photograph 5.1.   Exterior of the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, Santiago, Chile, August 2010. Photo by Cherstin M. Lyon.

ber 11, 1973. News reports flash on screens; a short documentary plays, showing scenes of the presidential palace being bombed from the air. Cubes across the floor encase computer terminals where visitors can choose the sources they want to consult in order to learn more about the coup as it unfolded and was reported on around the world.

Turning the corner, the exhibition shows how a junta formed immediately, suspended freedom of speech, and repressed dissidents. The portions of the exhibition that are based on the attempts to crush freedom of speech and the international outcry against the brutal dictatorial repression line the perimeter of the main exhibition, where light streams into the museum through the entirely glass walls, filtered by the skin of copper that envelops the outside of the building.

The light that illuminates the outer edge of the exhibition contrasts sharply with the darkness of the interior. The exhibits in this darker area show how more than 31,000 Chileans and foreign nationals were detained, often in secret locations, tortured, and in some instances killed; much to the horror of family members, some were disappeared in clandestine graves or disposed of in other nefarious ways. The walls of the interior section are painted black, the lighting is low, and visitors get a sense of the secrecy and shame that shrouds this portion of the national story. Only one large artifact makes the torture tangible. One metal bed frame with a large cell battery and electrical cords are a visible reminder of the barbaric torture techniques ostensibly used to gather information from the military's victims.
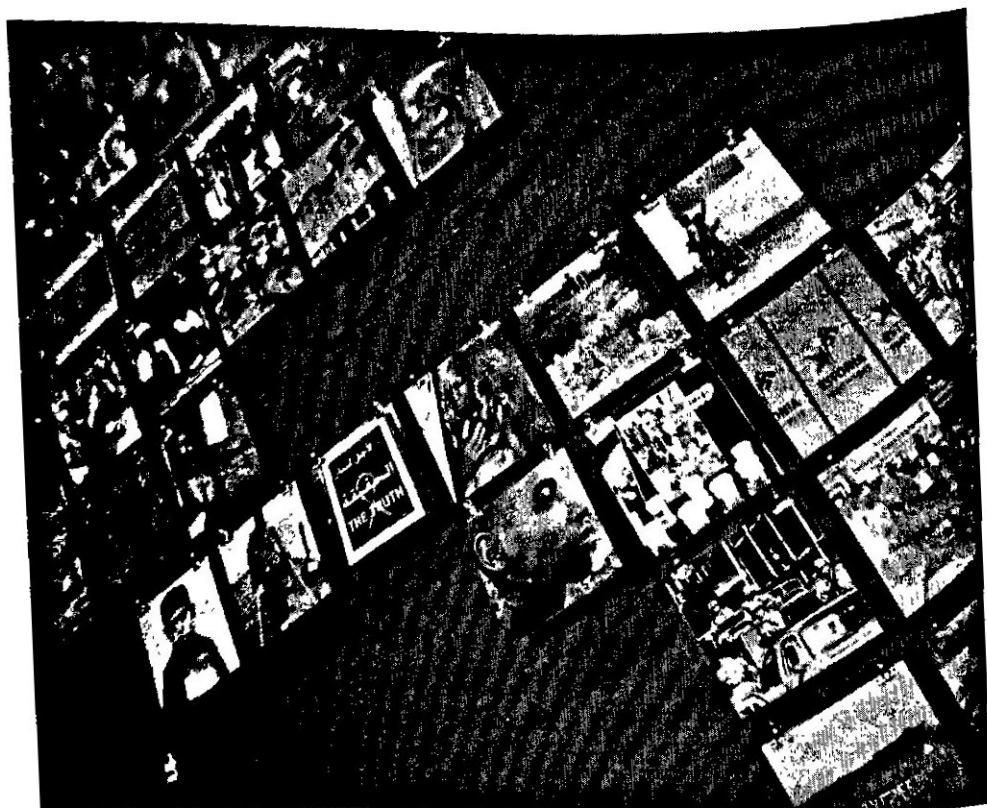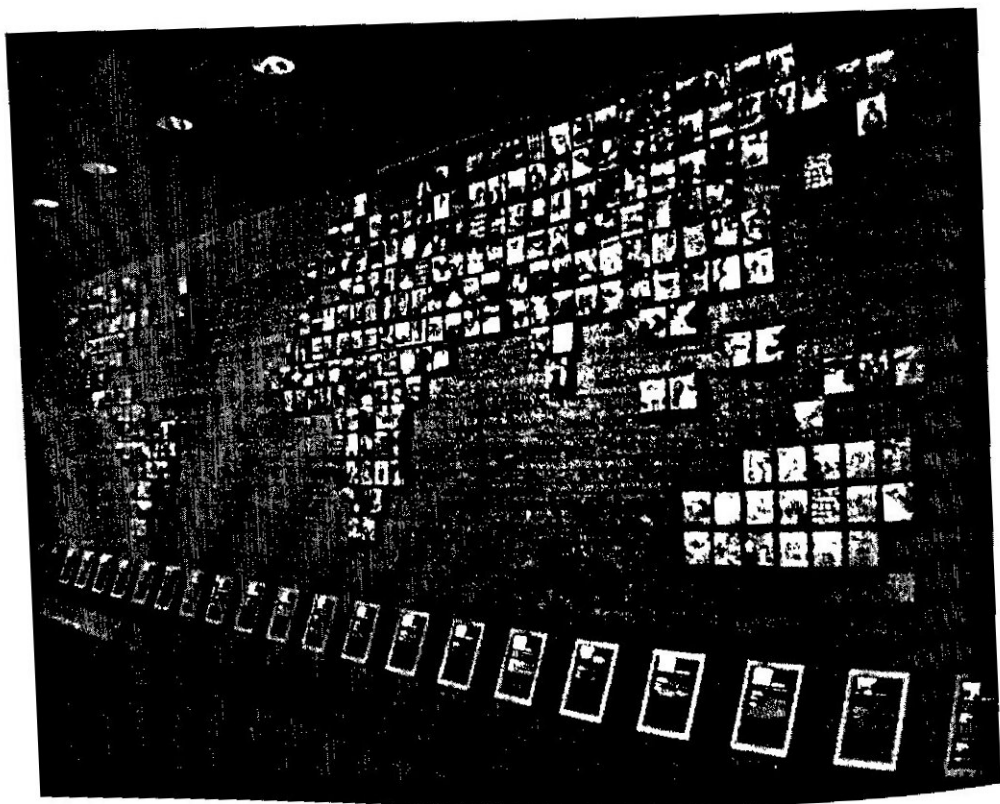
Photographs 5.2 and 5.3. World maps and truth commissions from around the world with closeup of individual pictures that compose the world map collage. Photos by Cherstin M. Lyon.
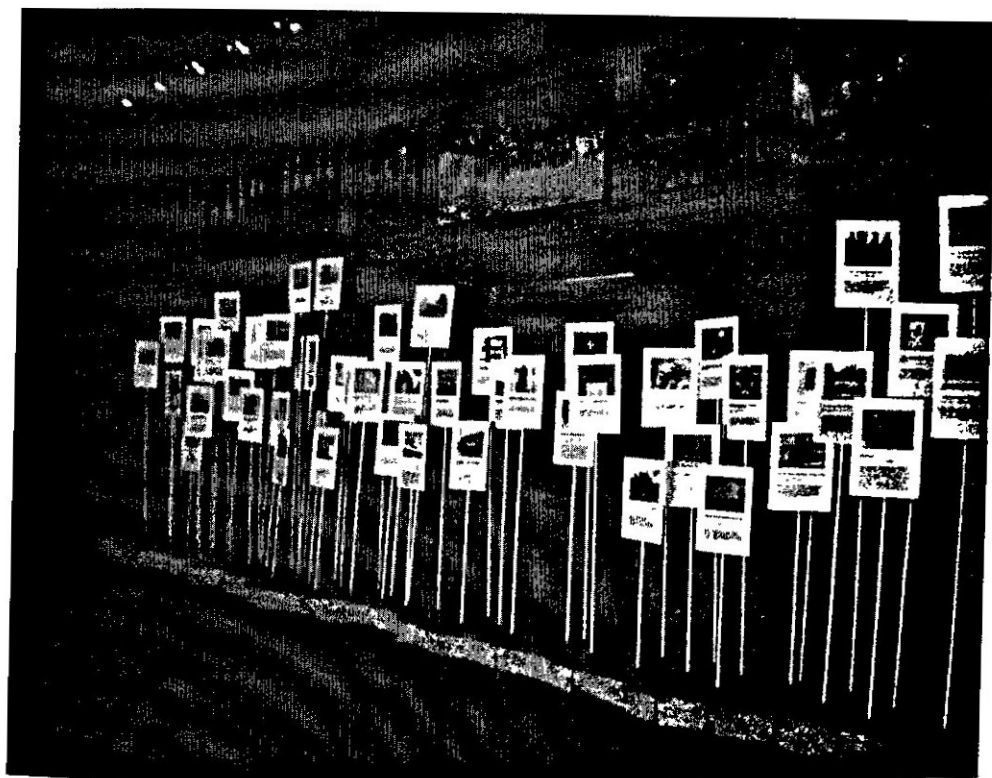
Photograph 5.4.   Map of Chile showing other memorial sites. Photo by Cherstin M. Lyon.

Throughout the museum, visitors can linger at flat panel interactive computer screens to investigate a subject further, examine artifacts and documents, or leaf through binders of documents that reveal how widespread the torture centers were throughout the country. It would be difficult for any single visitor to exhaust the research possibilities in the permanent exhibition alone.

There are two portions of the exhibition that stand out and are designed to be more affective or reflective in nature. On the second floor, after visitors have learned of the coup, the repressive regime, the torture and disappearance of civilians, and global efforts to break the silence and end the human rights atrocities, visitors come to a glass cube that extends like an observation deck overlooking the main floor. It is positioned directly across from the wall of more than a thousand pictures of individuals who were imprisoned, tortured, and then disappeared. The small room is surrounded by lights made to look like candles. Entering into the room for a moment of silent reflection is a powerful experience. The faces on the wall remind visitors of the unfinished nature of the story. Outside the museum, below the courtyard is an art installation by Alfredo Jaar, *La geometria de la conciencia* (*The Geometry of Conscience*), in which visitors enter a single room where silhouettes of generic faces stare back; the reflection of the visitors and the silhouettes are extended into infinity with the aid of mirrored sidewalls. The experience lasts three minutes, beginning with one minute of light in which visitors can see the silhouettes and themselves reflected together, one minute of absolute darkness, and a final minute like the first in light. The symbolic use of light and dark used in the museum carries over into this affective experience.
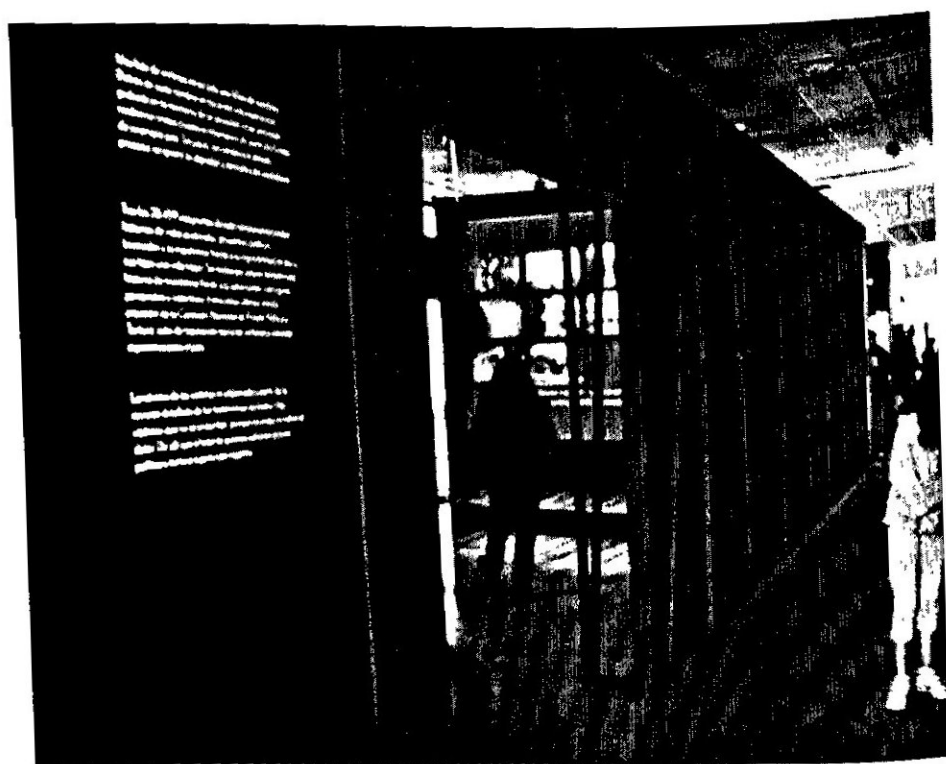
Photographs 5.5 and 5.6.   Light pours into the museum through the clear glass exterior walls, filtered through the thin copper sheath that surrounds the exterior of the building to illuminate the portions of the exhibition that interpret efforts to end the human rights atrocities committed by the military. The interior uses the darkness of black walls to accentuate the secrecy in which the military carried out the disappearances and torture of zens. Photos by Cherstin M. Lyon.

Photograph 5.7. Standing in this small room, visitors can reflect on the victims who were disappeared and spend a few minutes looking at the wall of photographs. Photo by Cherstin M. Lyon.

Exhibiting History

Every element of the *Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos* (Museum of Memory and Human Rights) is the result of deliberate and thoughtful choices made by a diverse team of professionals who designed it to convey specific messages to visitors. The use of light and darkness is particularly profound. The human rights atrocities are interpreted in areas set aside and marked by darkness, but even here, visitors encounter elements of human resiliency, such as dolls or other relics prisoners created with found objects while held in captivity. The light reveals efforts of Chileans and the international community to resist rules restricting access to information and efforts to bring evidence of human rights abuses to the public and to end the violence. The exhibition uses spatial organization, lighting, flow, color, video, and auditory elements to provoke a multisensory intellectual and emotional response. Interpreting and exhibiting history—like collecting—can reveal attitudes, beliefs, and ways of understanding our relationship with history.

The survey respondents in *The Presence of the Past* reported a strong draw to the collections of material culture in museums and at historic sites as a way to experience and understand the past. As Thelen and Rosenzweig reported, "the people who talked with us trusted history museums and historic sites because they transported visitors straight back to the times when people had used the artifacts on display or occupied the places where 'history'

had been made." These visitors wanted to interact with **witnessing objects**: those objects that were there during the events and the times that the exhibition explains. Thelen and Rosenzweig found that by "approaching artifacts and sites on their own terms, visitors could cut through all the intervening stories, step around all the agendas that had been advanced in the meantime, and feel that they were experiencing a moment from the past almost as it had been originally experienced." The survey respondents rated museums as the most trustworthy of the places where they encountered history. This attitude toward witnessing objects underlines the responsibility of public historians—and all professionals who develop exhibits—to maintain this trust and to provide opportunities for the unmediated interaction between visitor and historical artifacts.[4]

Since most exhibitions have a specific educational goal, exhibits will provide more than these unmediated experiences. Principles for sound informal education should apply as museums develop their educational goals and plans for an exhibit. Adults and children should be invited to think through the interpretive process and to engage in a problem-posing model for education. As they plan exhibits and engagement strategies, public historians should focus on the involvement of the public: visitors of all ages and levels of ability should have the opportunity to engage with the display and interpretation at their own pace, following their own levels of interest. Despite the vast changes in the ways public historians have approached exhibits over time, both structurally and thematically, there are certain principles that apply to almost any well-constructed exhibition. Artifacts and images constitute the core components of most exhibits, and interpretive panels provide written context and meaning for them.

The "Big Idea"

Developing the content of an exhibition shares many elements with the core work of the historian described in chapter 2. In a public history setting, the institution may provide the public historian with a topic: "urban slavery in antebellum Columbia, South Carolina" or "the history of food production and consumption in post-1950 America." With that topic in mind, the public historian begins to do history: she reads the secondary literature and develops a research question. In a large institution, the historian is most likely working in collaboration with other staff members of the museum even at this early stage, while in a smaller setting he may be working alone. The analysis of primary sources enables the historian to develop a **thesis**, the main argument that will shape the narrative and that answers the research question. For example, in an exhibit about the development of factories in nineteenth-century America, the research question might have been, "Why were so many workers injured in late nineteenth-century American factories?" The thesis might be that "factories were not well regulated during this period, which put workers at significant risk." In academic research and writing, historians always seek to develop a new and innovative thesis; publishing journal articles and books usually requires an original contribution to the field. In exhibit development, however, historians do not always develop an original thesis—they may use the original work of other scholars to build a

narrative with the unique set of documents and artifacts housed by their institution. This debt to the work of other historians is another way in which public historians work more collaboratively than traditional historians.

In exhibit design, the thesis you have developed—the argument you are making about the topic of the exhibit—is often referred to as the **big idea**, a written statement of what the exhibit will be about. While historians develop the thesis on their own, the exhibit team collaborates to develop the big idea. As Beverly Serrell has described it, the big idea is "one complete noncompound, active sentence that identifies a subject, an action (the verb), and a consequence ('so what?'). . . . A big idea is big because it has fundamental meaningfulness that is important to human nature. It is not trivial."[5]

What Does a Big Idea Look Like?
From Beverly Serrell's *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*

Examples of big ideas that contain a clear subject, an active verb, and a "so what?" follow. As you read each one, what picture do you get in your mind of what you will see, do, and find out about in an exhibition with this big idea?

- Most of what we know about the universe comes from messages we read in light.
- A healthy swamp—an example of a threatened ecosystem—provides many surprising benefits to humans.
- Forensic scientists look for evidence of crimes against wildlife in order to enforce wildlife laws.
- The conditions for life on Earth in extreme environments help define the ways we search for life on other planets.
- Art depicting the California gold rush promoted a skewed romanticized vision of one of the nineteenth century's most important events.

As you can see in the examples above, the subject can be stated in one word (*swamps, scientists*) with adjectives (*healthy, forensic*), or more than one word (*most of what we know about the universe, the conditions for life on Earth, art depicting the California gold rush*).

The next three examples do not conform to the Serrell rigors of a big idea statement (subject-verb-so what?) but they do function just like a big idea in that they define or describe the content of the exhibition. By reading the title or the statement, you know what the exhibition will be about.

- *Manufacturing a Miracle: Brooklyn and the Story of Penicillin*
- Sharks are not what you think.
- What is it about dogs that strongly connects them to humans?

All of the examples above show the difference between a topic and a big idea. Topics—such as sharks, penicillin, forensic scientists, or Western art—are incomplete thoughts, whereas a big idea tells you *what about* sharks, *what about* forensic scientists, or *what kinds* of art.

Some people confuse topics, outputs, or objectives with big ideas. Topics and objectives will not help keep the exhibition focused.

These examples are *not* big ideas:

- This exhibit is about the settlement of the western United States.
- This exhibit will present the complex historical and scientific information surrounding the questionable authenticity of sculpture.
- Visitors will learn about molecular structure, chemical reactions, and the scientific process of analyzing unknown substances.
- Visitors will develop a sense of wonder about nature by exploring the secret world of animals.

The above are not big ideas because they don't say what the subject of the exhibition is or tell you what is going on. If "visitors" or "the exhibit" is the subject, you haven't got a big idea yet. If the visitors are doing something, it's probably an objective. If the exhibit is doing something, it's probably an output.[6]

Developing the "big idea" is not a simple process, but it is critical to exhibition development. The exhibition team should meet and seek to develop the big idea—have lots of butcher block paper or whiteboard space available—and they should not expect to accomplish this easily in one hour or even in one meeting. Including everyone on the team in developing the big idea makes the process more complex initially as many voices and agendas seek agreement, but involving all the stakeholders will translate into significant commitment to the project from everyone. Once established, the big idea should guide the work of the entire team throughout the rest of the process.

After analyzing the sources of the artifacts and documents, making sense of the content, and developing the "big idea," the exhibit team must determine the goals of the exhibition. Should the exhibit recover lost voices? Reclaim a past that has been lost to historical amnesia? Correct a wrong? Interpret a historical space? Celebrate an anniversary? An exhibit cannot simply present a collection of stories, as cabinets of curiosities once did; it must be laid out and interpreted in a way that honors historical thinking. It should not fall into the category that some would place all history, complaining that it is "just one damned thing after another," without a clear sense of why any of it matters in the first place. Here, the framework Nikki Mandell and Bobbie Malone developed, discussed in chapter 2, can be invaluable. Their categories of historical analysis—Cause and Effect, Change and Continuity, Turning Points, Using the Past, and Through Their Eyes—can be effectively deployed in exhibit development.

An exhibition team may choose to focus on only one of the categories for historical thinking as the primary goal, but using more than one category can help you build a powerful exhibition, too, as long as you remember that it cannot do everything. For example, let's go back to that exhibition about nineteenth-century American factories. Organizers might focus only on the category of cause and effect to help visitors understand the lack of regulation during this period, but the team could also choose to intersperse text panels and objects that help visitors see the factory "through the eyes" of its workers and their experiences. A final panel could consider lessons from this period that continue to be relevant in the political and economic sectors of our society today as Americans continue to "use the past" in shaping the present day. These categories of historical anal-

ysis make visible for the historian and the exhibition team the different ways they are engaging with the information; when clearly explained and understood, they can go a long way toward unifying the work of the entire team. As the exhibition develops, the public historian must choose artifacts, not for their aesthetic appeal or sentimental value, but because they contribute to the "big idea" and to an understanding of the historical categories of inquiry being used.

Developing the Big Idea at the *Voices of Lombard Street* Exhibit

In the *Voices of Lombard Street*, exhibit organizers at the Jewish Museum of Maryland developed their big idea by asking a cause-and-effect question: "What happened to Lombard Street?" A closer examination of their process shows how their institution developed an exhibit so complex and comprehensive that it has become part of their permanent exhibition. East Lombard had been central to Baltimore's Jewish community during most of the twentieth century. Baltimoreans remembered the fresh produce stands spilling onto bustling sidewalks, chickens hanging in kosher butcher shops, and families walking along it to nearby synagogues. They also remembered fires and looting that took place on the street during the urban disturbances that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Today many visitors see the vacant lots and the one remaining Jewish deli along the street and often jump to the conclusion of cause and effect: most of the area must have

Photograph 5.8.   Vacant lots line Baltimore's Lombard Street in 2016. Photo by Elizabeth Nix.

been burned down during the violence of 1968. However, historian Deborah Weiner pulled together primary documents—photographs, oral histories, and newspaper clippings—to prove a different thesis. Although one business on the street burned to the ground during the unrest, the other businesses survived, taking out ads in the *Baltimore Sun* reminding customers that "We are open and ready to serve you."[7] A newspaper article a year after the disturbances called Lombard Street, "a tiny unchanged island, noisy and odorous, of ancient, old world foods, customs and conversations . . . a milling, pushing gaggle of shoppers talking to storekeepers in half a dozen languages over the noise of blaring automobile horns and squawking chickens."[8] Weiner used secondary sources like Thomas Sugrue's *Origin of the Urban Crisis* to place the experience of this particular shopping district into the context of American retail trends in the 1970s. She learned that a number of Jewish businesses closed after the 1960s because the parents had run the business to pay for schooling for their children. Their educated children did not want to take over a small business, so when the parents reached retirement age, they simply closed up shop. This generational change marked a turning point in Jewish history.

After reviewing the secondary literature, Weiner went back to the primary sources and discovered a street repair project that dealt the most lasting blow to the community. The City of Baltimore shut down Lombard Street in 1976 for resurfacing. Photographs show

Photograph 5.9. Roadwork shut down Lombard Street in 1976. Photo Courtesy University of Maryland Libraries.

the road was impassable. Customers could not park for months, and the sidewalks were barely walkable. Government records indicate the project took longer than expected. An oral history underlines the impact of the project: "The way the city's busted up the street here, it looks like there's been a war and we've been bombed out."[9] City directories provide proof that by the end of 1978, twelve of twenty-eight stores had closed, and by 2015, only Attman's Delicatessen remained. Using primary and secondary sources, exhibit organizers developed the big idea of cause and effect: The 1968 unrest did not cause the demise of Lombard Street. Then they used artifacts and exhibit organization to walk their visitors through their evidence. Along the way, visitors learned about change and continuity in the shopping practices of Baltimore's Jewish community and experienced the history of the street through the eyes of past residents.

Writing Interpretive Text

After the secondary literature has been read, the primary sources analyzed, the goals of the exhibition are clear, the main historical category determined, and the big idea developed, the writing phase begins in earnest. Although we delimit them here for ease of explanation, these phases can and should overlap; historians are often in the writing phase from the very beginning of a project, keeping notes and ideas along the way, as well as developing potential big ideas to test against the secondary and primary sources very early on. Writing the interpretive content is a time-consuming but rewarding experience. You must take the complex and often intricate findings you developed in doing the primary and secondary source research for the project and create compelling and brief presentations of those ideas that provide context to artifacts, images, and documents.[10]

Developing the written content that will go into an exhibition means deciding on the information that will be presented at every level—from the title down to the captions that accompany individual artifacts. Exhibitions should include both an **exhibition title panel** and a **master label**. The exhibition title panel contains the title of the exhibition and should clearly state its topic and scope. For example, a popular exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History is entitled, *Food: Transforming the American Table, 1950–2000*. The master label, which is the first thing that visitors will view as they enter the exhibit, should make it clear what the exhibit will cover. The master label often includes the exhibit's big idea, either exactly as the exhibit team developed it or in a form made more readable and understandable by visitors. Master labels should be 125 words or fewer. For example, that same Smithsonian exhibition's master label reads in part, "Between 1950–2000, new technologies and cultural changes transformed how and what we eat."

Within the exhibition, artifacts and images are grouped into sections. Visitors to the Food exhibit encounter sections that discuss "Shortcuts for Home Cooks," and "Snack Time," each with introductory text called the **section topic label**. These labels, which should run between seventy-five to one hundred words, introduce the visitor to the information presented within the section. An even smaller selection of objects can be grouped together in a **case or group label** of fifty to seventy-five words. The case or group label may be the only descriptive identification that these objects receive. In other words, there may not be

labels interpreting each individual object, only the necessary information to identify the artifact, called the **object identification**. The object identification should include information that will explain to a visitor what the object is, who made it, and what it is made out of, as well as the object's accession number, which locates it within the museum's collection. If one object is of particular interest or adds an essential component to the big idea, it merits a **descriptive caption**, of twenty-five to fifty words each, in addition to the object identification.

The **interpretive labels** described above are not the only kind of information that should be made available to visitors to an exhibition. There should be several other types of text panels: **funder list, credit panel**, and **orientation label**. The funder list identifies and provides an opportunity for the institution to thank the organizations and individuals who provided financial support. It also assists visitors in evaluating the perspective offered by the exhibition. An exhibition on the historical significance of oil in the United States would likely look quite different if funded by an oil company versus an environmental activist group. The credit panel is also key to helping visitors understand the broader context of an exhibition. It has not been standard practice to include a credit panel at history museums. This may be in part because of the collaborative nature of exhibition development, but as historians embrace the idea that historical writing is an interpretation that is always filtered through the perspective of the historian, it should become more common for visitors to be able to see who the members of the exhibition team were and in what ways each person contributed to the exhibition's development. The orientation panel will help visitors understand the layout of the exhibition and give them the opportunity to focus in on certain areas that most interest them. In a large exhibition, this material can be helpfully repeated in a handout or smartphone app.

Writing the words for an exhibition represents a major accomplishment, but displaying those words is not as simple as selecting "print" from your computer. Designing interpretive panels requires careful attention to font, font size, and the color of both the letters and the background in order to increase the likelihood that visitors will actually read the interpretive labels. Certain practices make type easier for the eye to see, focus in on, and read. There may be times when you wish to break out of these guidelines, but do so sparingly, and only after considering whether it is worth the reduced readability of the labels.

It is preferable to use dark typeface on a light background. Capitalization should appear as it would in standard writing. Mixed capital and lowercase letter sentences are easier to read than sentences in all caps or all lowercase. Each line of an interpretive panel should aim for sixty or fewer characters (and characters means each element that occupies space in the line—letters, punctuations, and spaces), with ragged right margins. Finally, serif fonts—serifs are the projections that embellish letters in certain fonts, including this one—are preferred for readability over those fonts without serifs (called sans serif fonts). Compare, for example, the Times New Roman font (serif) with the Arial (sans serif) on your own computer.

Sarah Bartlett, senior exhibit developer for Split Rock Studios, reminds her clients when they hire her to design their exhibitions that there are some practical things she keeps in mind when writing interpretive text. It is important to remember that the rules for good interpretive text writing are different from the rules for writing a paper in your college courses. The audience reading the text will likely be standing up, distracted by other visitors, and experiencing a variety of visual and auditory stimuli. Visitors are not seated in a com-

fortable chair in a quiet room as they might be while reading a book. Visitors are also not compelled to read. This is an informal setting, and if one of the goals of the exhibition is to educate the audience, the visitor will need *to want* to engage in reading the text. Visitors will make the decision to read or not read the text of the exhibition within a matter of seconds. If you want to keep your visitor's attention, and engage your visitor in reading the text that you and your team have so carefully prepared, you will have to keep the interpretive text brief and engaging. Many exhibition designers have started using questions as titles to draw the reader in closer, and to encourage them to read on past the headlines. Alternatively, if a visitor prefers a quicker experience, the panel titles or headlines should provide enough information so that a visitor can still grasp the big idea. Having the big idea accessible right away, and an interesting and visually stimulating array of objects and artifacts, should generate enough interest that the visitor will slow down and read further. Finally, it is better to provide too little information with tips for those who are interested to learn more than to overwhelm your visitors with too much detail. Visitor studies at all types of museums have shown that the more overwhelming the text of an exhibition is, the more likely visitors are to refuse to read any of it at all.

The audio guide presents one solution for multiple problems: visitors not wanting to read the exhibition text, having both children and adults of different reading levels, and guests who speak diverse languages. The audio guide can offer guests the flexibility of listening to the interpretation at their own pace, in their own language, in a style geared toward adult interests or an approach suited for children. Audio guides also offer the visitor the ability to get detailed information about any part of the exhibition whether they can get up close or not. An especially popular site or exhibition may draw crowds, making reading difficult. Even in audio form, though, the principles of good exhibition writing should apply. Audio guides are first written scripts after all. Visitors will still reach a saturation point if too much detail is included, or if the audio guide asks them to stand in one place for too long.

An audio guide is an effort to make exhibits accessible to a wide range of visitors. This additional sensory experience might enhance the visit for a sighted person but would be essential to people who are blind. Audio guides also provide a logical plan that allows people who may not be able to use a map on a brochure to successfully navigate the exhibit. As you plan an exhibit, build in opportunities for your visitors to engage all the senses. Some museums implant motion-sensors in the walls that trigger speakers, allowing visitors to hear actors reading primary documents, shipboard sounds, or street noises as they walk through an exhibit. Other museums commission three-dimensional models of maps or artwork, so people with low vision can engage with what is otherwise an incomprehensible two-dimensional object. As you plan your wall labels and exhibit cases, consider people who use wheelchairs. Make sure they can see the text you have worked so hard to create. The Smithsonian has developed a comprehensive guide for accessible exhibit design that is available online.[11] As you design exhibits, remember that compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act is not only the law, but accessible features often make the museum experience more appealing to all visitors. A ramp may help a father pushing a stroller, as well as a person with limited mobility. When we accommodate all ranges of abilities, public historians build multiple levels of content and a variety of experiences into exhibitions.

Whether one is interpreting a display textually, in an audio guide, or with live interpretation, it is important to provide layers and choices to visitors. Everyone should be able to grasp the big idea and understand the purpose of the exhibition regardless of how much detail they desire or how much time they have allowed to spend with the exhibition. Visitors are humans with other things going on in their lives. They may tire quickly due to physical limitations, or they may be enjoying a holiday with family or friends and your exhibition may not be the first or the last thing they will see in one day. Going back to our grounding in the theories of informal education and the liberating effects of engaging the public in problem-posing education, one of the goals that differentiates academic history from public history is that we want to inspire visitors and the public more broadly to learn more on their own: to be curious even after they leave the exhibition, to ask questions, and to engage in the historical process.

Interpreting Material Culture

At the core of many public history exhibits is **material culture**. These objects from specific times and places are some of the most powerful tools that museums and historic sites possess to communicate stories about the past. At the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC, visitors crane their necks upward to see Charles Lindbergh's plane, *Spirit of St. Louis*, and the Apollo 11 command module, *Columbia*, among many others famous pieces of aviation history. Standing in the den of the much more modest Frances Willard House in Evanston, Illinois, visitors can picture the suffragist and temperance activist hard at work at the desk, surrounded by her extensive collection of books. These things—from an extraordinary spacecraft to an unremarkable desk and chair—make up what we call a society's material culture.

The material culture associated with famous events and people in American history are often compelling objects of interest to current-day museum goers. This interest is fueled by material culture's role as **lineage objects** that connect us to famous people from the nation's past or as witnesses to past events, called witnessing objects. Lineage objects are items of material culture that bring visitors closer to the famous men and women whose lives interest them. Frances Willard's desk, for example—or even more intimately, a pair of her earrings on display at the house—connect visitors to her daily life and routines.

When an object is collected because it was present at an important event, it becomes a tangible link to an important moment in American history. Being in the presence of witnessing objects enables modern day Americans to feel connected to these highpoints in the historical timeline. Henry Ford, the automaker whose product forever changed the American landscape, assembled in Dearborn, Michigan, an unusual collection of authentic preindustrial buildings and replicas of landmarks of American history, like Independence Hall. Most controversially, he acquired actual buildings that had played a role in America's business history like Thomas Edison's laboratory and the Wright brothers' shop. Ford removed these buildings from their original sites and assembled a collection in Greenfield Village, which opened in 1933. Over the course of the twentieth century, the museum continued to use Ford's criteria as they expanded their collection, acquiring large objects

Photograph 5.10. Material culture as "witness": President Barack Obama on the bus Rosa Parks rode that sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, on exhibit in *With Liberty and Justice For All*, at the Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan. Official White House Photo by Pete Souza, April 18, 2012.

that played significant roles in American history. In April 2012, when President Obama visited the Henry Ford Museum, he took the opportunity to sit on the bus where Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, the event that sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–1956. Seated on the bus, peering out one of its windows, President Obama physically occupied the space and could imagine seeing through the eyes of leaders and participants in America's civil rights movement.

For several generations, a gap existed between museum collections and professional historians. Early historians concentrated largely on politics, war, and economics, using written primary sources, mostly created by elites who had the time and resources to create this documentary record. With the rise of social history in the 1960s, historians began to uncover the stories of women and non-elites whose lives had to be explored by other means because they did not usually leave as rich a documentary record as the wealthy men did. Material culture began to play a much more significant role in the work of later generations of scholars. Historians who study material culture undertake creative and interdisciplinary work as they engage with historic archaeologists, curators and museum collections, and written sources that help us understand material culture (including probate records, store accounts, and catalogs).[12]

The ability of material culture to connect visitors to the lives of those who left little evidence in the written record has led museums to seek out new kinds of objects. Collections of everyday items can serve as valuable repositories of information about the

lives of the ordinary men, women, and children who inhabited the past. In advance of the opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, Lonnie Bunch, the museum's director, sought out material evidence from the middle passage—that horrific journey across the Atlantic that brought more than 12.5 million captive Africans to North and South America.[13] What he ultimately found was the wreck of the *São José Paquete de Africa*, headed to Brazil, which had sunk in December 1794 off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa. The men, women, and children who perished when the *São José* sank, estimated to be more than 200 lives lost in this single tragedy, had been forgotten until the ship's discovery in 2010. Despite the thousands of slave ship voyages, this wreckage was the first ever recovered from a ship that sank while carrying captive Africans to the Americas. What this find brings together is a material remnant frozen in time at a moment when it was a tool of the slave trade. The museum will display the iron ballasts that weighed down the ship for its voyage because human cargo was lighter than other material goods ships like these carried. This ship stands as a witness to that particular moment—to this particular piece of history. As such, as Lonnie Bunch tells it, the exhibition of the material remains of the *São José* will be displayed in a reverential "memorial space."[14]

But to stop there—to let objects only speak for themselves as witnesses to important moments in the American past or as lineage objects—greatly limits the interpretive potential of material culture. Even the objects most associated with famous events and people often began life as unremarkable material things. Of the objects we have already considered, we can also ask: Who made them? What kind of employment practices did these laborers work under? What does, for example, the Willard desk, placed in her home, tell us about notions of privacy or the gendered nature of work during her lifetime? What did these objects mean to the people who owned and used them? In what ways did these objects shape individual and collective identity? Material culture objects are embedded in multiple contexts—their production, their use, and their "afterlife" as objects of display—from which we can learn a great deal more than simply knowing about their association with past events and people.[15]

To more completely understand material culture, you must study the object itself, as well as interrogate a wide variety of other sources. These additional sources—documents, oral histories, other material goods—allow us to develop a more complete picture of the many meanings of material culture. Without these other avenues of information and understanding, the complex past meanings of the material world would remain largely obscured.

Historical archaeologist Paul Mullins has studied historically African American neighborhoods in Indianapolis, Indiana, where a frequently recovered item is the foil milk cap, an item used to close glass milk bottles in the early decades of the twentieth century. At first, researchers had set these aside because they appeared to reveal little more than the fact that the occupants of these homes drank milk. But as Mullins recounts, an elder of Indianapolis' African American community later told them how the city's Riverside Amusement Park, open only to whites, allowed African Americans admission one day each year. These foil milk caps were the required admission token, and African Americans in the city called it "Milk Cap Day." In the context of this oral testimony, these almost ephemeral pieces of material culture took on new layers of meaning for the residents in
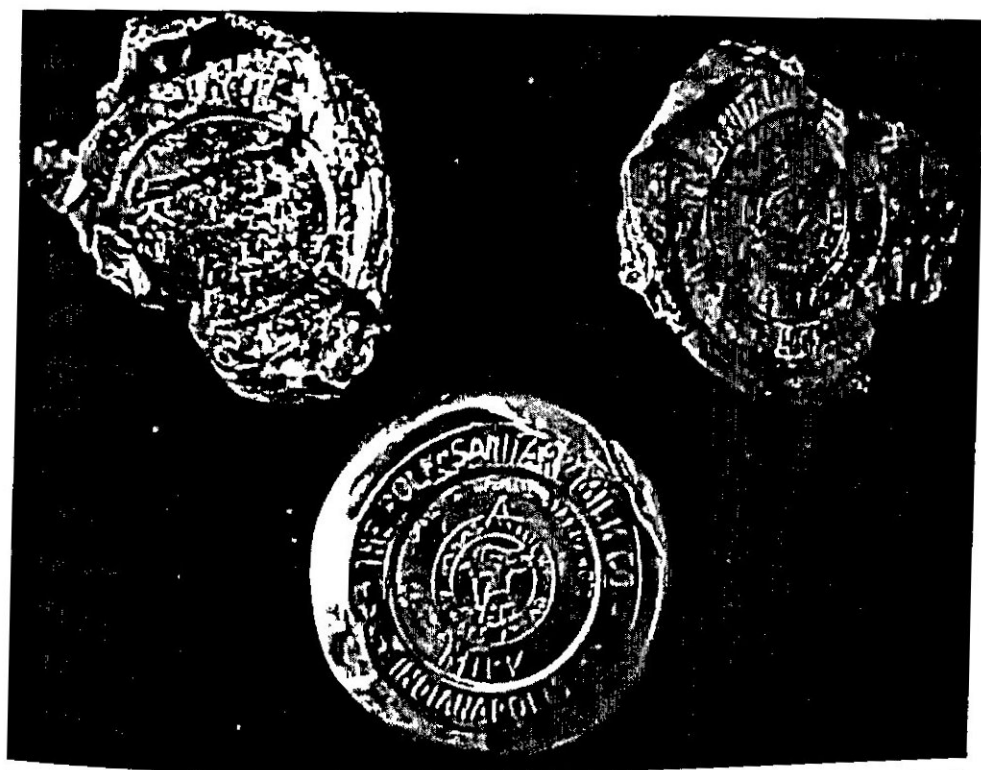
Photograph 5.11. Early Twentieth Century Polk's Dairy Milk Caps (Indianapolis, Indiana). Photo courtesy of Paul Mullins.

whose yards they were recovered archaeologically and provided new interpretive possibilities in a museum exhibit today.[16]

The example of the Indianapolis foil milk caps shows how objects of the material world reflect the larger historical processes in which they are embedded, in this case racism and segregation in the mid-twentieth-century United States. Many scholars who study material culture argue that material culture objects do more than simply reflect these historical processes; they can also shape them. The home of a late nineteenth-century elite white American family, with its lavish material culture, for example, not only showcased their status, but it also helped to create it. That same family could not have claimed the same level of elite status had they lived in a small, plain cottage. Current-day museum goers can be challenged to think about how material culture reflected and shaped human identity in the past and at the same time be given opportunities to make connections to their own relationships with the material world.

Interpreting and Exhibiting History in the Digital Age

The digital revolution has had an impact on exhibit design. Many museums and historic sites offer companion websites where visitors can review exhibit materials and often dig deeper into certain elements. Some museums have added Quick Response (QR) codes to

artifact displays that visitors can scan with their phones for more in-depth information. The Museum of disABILITY History has a brick and mortar presence in Buffalo, New York, but thousands of people also visit its virtual museum. This online exhibition allows users to explore artifacts in the museum's holdings from any computer and makes the museum experience accessible to people of all levels of ability.[17] Public history institutions can use a robust social media presence to provide information and engage in dialogue with visitors.

Digital technologies—especially smartphones—also enable displays to move outside the walls of a museum or the landscape of a historic site and can add a layer of interpretive content to a community, a city, or an entire state. There are many tools available for public historians who wish to engage in this kind of work. Historypin is a free, web-based tool that allows members to create map-based historical collections.[18] The collections include photographs, video, and audio clips, as well as text. Each piece of visual or audio material is called a "pin" and is pinned to the map. One Historypin project is "Mapping Emotions in Victorian London," which used crowdsourcing—in which volunteers contribute information to a project—to map the emotions described in works of fiction at specific locations throughout London.

Another such project, developed by public historians at the Center for Digital + Public History at Cleveland State University, is Curatescape, a mobile publishing platform for iOS and Android that enables projects to build branded, place-specific historical and cultural tours. Curatescape is built using the Omeka content management system.[19] Curatescape interprets places using geo-located tours comprised of a combination of archival and present-day images and film, text, oral history, and expert testimony. Cultural and historical organizations, as well as academic programs, license Curatescape for their projects. Curatescape provides the structure for the app and website and then each organization or program that licenses Curatescape "fills" the structure with information, photographs, videos, and audio files. One of the most compelling advantages of telling historical stories on a platform like Curatescape is the ease with which information can not only be entered and made available but also changed in light of new information or in response to user feedback. This represents a significant difference to physical exhibit displays, which often cannot be updated for many years because of institutional budget constraints.

Curatescape's name combines the words "curate" and "landscape," which are both key features of the product. Curation brings users good historical scholarship, written in compelling, user-friendly text, and engages them with audio and visual data as well. When a user selects a particular story at one of the Curatescape projects, what he or she encounters is a well-told narrative about a specific place rather than the all-too familiar, and often overwhelming, "data dump" of information that the internet commonly returns when one does a search on a specific historical actor, place, or event. Equally important is the project's emphasis on the landscape. Curatescape presents information structured around "tours" and "stories." Every Curatescape project offers users several tours to choose from, usually developed around a specific theme (e.g., music history and venues, sports, and arts and culture are some examples from Cleveland Historical) or a specific geographic area (e.g., Cuyahoga Valley and Coventry Village, also on Cleveland Historical). Each tour is comprised of individual stories that are linked to a specific map coordinate. The geo-location feature means that when Curatescape is being used on a smartphone, the app makes available on its map

both the location of all of the sites for which there are stories and also the location of the user. The app connects to Google maps if the user wants to know how to get from his or her current location to one of the sites. By connecting every story to a specific geographic location, Curatescape continually reminds users of the importance of place in telling stories about the past. Rather than presenting historical information primarily as a set of ideas or through the biographies of principal actors, **place-based storytelling** emphasizes the significance of where the past unfolded and the importance of those places in our remembering of past events. Because Curatescape projects do not leave any kind of physical mark on the landscape, they also can provide information about places that are not normally open to the public, as well as sites that no longer physically exist. Curatescape engages public historians with new questions as the possibility for locations to interpret expands: What is the responsibility of public historians to inform and/or ask permission of places not normally open to the public or of sites that now exist on top of an older site being interpreted before including them in a Curatescape project? What kind of sites might not want to be advertised in such a way?

Developing technologies present challenges and opportunities for public historians. Increasingly visitors want to use their phones to interact with the museum environment or to discover history in the landscape around them. Public historians should recognize the ways that technology can build on visitor choice to deliver historical interpretation in real time to a curious and receptive public.

Collaborations and Stakeholders

Exhibits have a collaborative nature because institutions need to reach out beyond their walls—beyond their staff—to work with stakeholders in developing exhibitions. Public historians must identify who the potential stakeholders will be for an exhibit and engage with these groups from the very beginning. This collaborative work focuses on the process by which the exhibit is developed and understands that this process can be just as important as the final product in developing and maintaining meaningful relationships with stakeholders. **Stakeholders** are the communities or individuals (or, sometimes, their descendants) being represented by an exhibit. Other stakeholders might include an exhibit's funders, board members of the institution producing the exhibit, or politicians involved in the project. Disparate groups of stakeholders and museum staff may experience conflict as they work to develop the exhibit. Here public historians are well served by reflective practice, which will equip them over the course of their careers to learn from these experiences and to incorporate what they have learned into future projects.

There are numerous examples available in print (and many more that will never be printed) of public history professionals experiencing conflicts with their stakeholders.[20] Sometimes these conflicts can be resolved through careful listening, thoughtful negotiations, and a little give and take. Sometimes the conflicts require higher levels of mediation. Unfortunately, there are times when it seems the conflicts are irreconcilable. Those that are not handled well before they grow into major disagreements have killed projects and threatened funding of either exhibitions or entire institutions. One of the most well-known examples is the controversial,

planned *Enola Gay* exhibition at the Smithsonian. World War II veterans challenged the staff of the Smithsonian and historians about the text that would accompany the refurbished plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, questioning especially the estimated number of lives that would have been saved by preempting an invasion. The Smithsonian eventually retreated from presenting an interpretive exhibition at all and in a label simply presented the fact that this witnessing artifact had dropped an atomic bomb. But in 2003, historians once again protested the exhibit plan, this time for not providing any historical interpretation at all.[21] They pointed to the **Standards for Museum Exhibits Dealing with Historical Subjects** that had been adopted by an impressive coalition of organizations representing historians and public historians: the Society for History in the Federal Government Executive Council; the National Council on Public History Executive Council; the Organization of American Historians' Executive Council; the American Historical Association Council; and the Medical Museums Association. The historic nature of the Enola Gay, they argued, must be interpreted, even if it is exhibited in an air and space museum setting.

Despite the high-profile nature of the Enola Gay controversy, and the fact that most museums will not attract the attention of the national press or Congress, every institution has a set of stakeholders they need to consider when planning their interpretation. Early consultation will save endless headaches and costly delays later in the project. This effort might include local political leaders if the project or museum receives any type of state or federal grants, board members if their reputations are public in nature and if they play a role in approving budgetary expenses, local community members who will either visit the exhibition or who will react badly if their needs are not considered, or individuals whose lives or the stories of their relatives may be the subject of the exhibition. Each set of stakeholders will likely have different basic values and priorities as they approach any given topic. Yet the best public history professionals adeptly address the most pressing concerns of these complex and sometimes contradictory opinions to produce an end product that will appeal to multiple, diverse audiences. Rather than thinking of stakeholders as potential roadblocks, we can embrace their diverse perspectives as an opportunity to make our work more relevant to a greater number of people.

Reflective Practice through Evaluation

The best way to prevent disasters in relations with stakeholders is to follow a process for evaluation that involves stakeholder input at every stage of the process. How can you be sure that you are not blindsided once you are too far into your interpretation and exhibition planning to effectively respond? Maintain contact with your stakeholders through a strong commitment to frequent and thorough evaluation.

It should be clear now that developing an exhibit requires a great deal of planning and attention to many different kinds of details. Most of the time, this work is done in large part by museum staff. But consultation with potential audiences is critical. Not only should stakeholders be involved in shaping an exhibition at the outset, but both stakeholders and the wider potential audiences should be given the opportunity to assess the strengths and weakness at several points during its development and deployment. This process is known as **evaluation**.

STANDARDS FOR MUSEUM EXHIBITS DEALING
WITH HISTORICAL SUBJECTS (2001)[1]

In a democracy, a knowledge of history forms the context in which citizens make informed decisions. Historical knowledge also provides personal, family, and community links to the past. Historical understandings of other societies assist individuals in identifying commonalities in the human condition and in negotiating the differences that exist in our increasingly pluralistic world.

Museum exhibits play an important role in the transmission of historical knowledge. They are viewed by citizens of diverse ages, interests, and backgrounds, often in family groups. They sometimes celebrate common events, occasionally memorialize tragedies or injustices, and contain an interpretive element, even if it is not readily apparent. The process of selecting themes, photographs, objects, documents, and other components to be included in an exhibit implies interpretive judgments about cause and effect, perspective, significance, and meaning.

Historical exhibits may encourage the informed discussion of their content and the broader issues of historical significance that they raise. Attempts to suppress exhibits or to impose an uncritical point of view, however widely shared, are inimical to open and rational discussion.

In aiming to achieve exhibit goals, historians, museum curators, administrators, and members of museum boards should approach their task mindful of their public trust. To discharge their duties appropriately, they should observe the following standards:

1. Exhibits should be founded on scholarship, marked by intellectual integrity, and subjected to rigorous peer review. Evidence considered in preparing the exhibit may include objects, written documentation, oral histories, images, works of art, music, and folklore.
2. At the outset of the exhibit process, museums should identify stakeholders in any exhibit and may wish to involve their representatives in the planning process.
3. Museums and other institutions funded with public monies should be keenly aware of the diversity within communities and constituencies that they serve.
4. When an exhibit addresses a controversial subject, it should acknowledge the existence of competing points of view. The public should be able to see that history is a changing process of interpretation and reinterpretation, formed through gathering and reviewing evidence, drawing conclusions, and presenting the conclusions in text or exhibit format.
5. Museum administrators should defend exhibits produced according to these standards.

Note

1. "Standards for Museum Exhibits Dealing with Historical Subjects" (2001), available at: https:// www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/statements-and-standards-of-the-pro fession/standards-for-museum-exhibits-dealing-with-historical-subjects. Adopted by the Society for History in the Federal Government Executive Council, January 8, 1997; the National Council on Public History Executive Council, March 30, 2000; the Organization of American Historians Executive Council, April 2, 2000; the American Historical Association Council, January 4, 2001; and the Medical Museums Association, April 19, 2001.

Front-end evaluation happens before exhibit development is very far along; inviting comment while the exhibition is still in the planning and conceptualization stage means that feedback can be used in the design process. Asking for input from stakeholders too late in the planning process can result in costly setbacks or it can give stakeholders the impression that the request for input was insincere. By contrast, effective use of front-end evaluations can promote greater buy-in from community members and stakeholders and an increased likelihood that the exhibition will be well received.

A front-end evaluation allows community members, stakeholders, and content experts to provide input early in the exhibition development stage. The front-end evaluation materials should include a brief overview of the project, and an opportunity for evaluators to shape the exhibition plan. Exhibition organizers can use **focus groups**, surveys, informal consultations, informal interviews, community workshops, existing or previously conducted visitor surveys on similar topics or of comparable exhibitions, and literature reviews. Community workshops are especially valuable if the exhibition team is still looking for interpretive materials such as photographs or objects for display, or if they need community input for ethical interpretation of objects or cultural material. Focus groups allow the team to gather input from specific targeted audiences, such as community members, experts in the content area, advisory board members, donors, or other stakeholders. When it might not be practical to gather for face-to-face meetings or if the numbers are too extensive for individual interviews, surveys can provide meaningful information about potential audience expectations, areas of sensitivity, and issues that will require greater context or background information. No organization can easily absorb the cost of a cancelled exhibition or an angry protest, particularly if early outreach and deliberate civic engagement throughout the process could help raise problems when solutions are easier and less expensive to find.[22]

Formative evaluation happens during exhibition development and provides specific feedback on individual elements such as text, labels, graphics, or layout design. The team can present mock-ups of proposed exhibitions to small groups of potential visitors, community members, or content experts. Groups of fifteen to twenty are optimal for semi-structured interviews or workshop activities that draw out individual or collective responses to the planned exhibition. If they repeat questions in this stage similar to those that they used in the front-end evaluation, exhibition developers can check for improvement through the various stages of planning.

Remedial evaluation is used immediately after an exhibition or program opens to ensure that all parts of the exhibition are working. This form of evaluation allows the team to make refinements that might not have been visible at any other time. If unforeseen problems, questions, or errors arise after the public is invited in, there should be a plan to make changes as quickly as possible. Simple observation of visitor behavior, and feedback through comment books, forms, or surveys can highlight issues. The staff members on site are often the informal collectors of information. They might hear unsolicited responses from visitors or may have to field questions when something is unclear.

Finally, **summative evaluation** occurs near the conclusion of an exhibition or program. It allows the team to evaluate whether the exhibition achieved its goals and to discover whether or not the public was satisfied with the experience. Summative evaluation can ask who was drawn to the exhibition, how they used it, and what their overall

impression was. It can provide feedback for future projects or suggest areas in need of further research. Funders often make summative evaluation a requirement of the grant; boards of trustees want to see it in the annual report. The team can conduct large-scale visitor surveys, structured observations of visitor behaviors in the exhibition (where did they linger, what did they read, which parts did they skip or skim lightly, and what was their overall demeanor), in-depth interviews, peer reviews, and, once again, focus groups or community workshops. Data from comment books, surveys, and visitor feedback forms can also prove useful at this stage.

Notes

1. For more information on the London Bridge Experience, visit: https://www.thelondonbridge experience.com/experience.
2. Portions of the description and analysis of the Chilean Museum of Memory and Human Rights were originally published as: Cherstin M. Lyon, "Museo de Memoria y Derechos Humanos and Parque por la paz Villa Grimaldi." [Museum of Memory and Human Rights and Peace Park at Villa Grimaldi] *Public Historian* 33, no. 2 (2011): 135–144. Reprinted with permission.
3. The two commissions that investigated atrocities under Pinochet were the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, or the "Rettig Commission," May 1990–February 1991; and the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture, or the "Valech Commission," September 2003–June 2005.
4. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 105–106.
5. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 7.
6. Serrell, *Exhibit Labels*, 9–10. Reprinted with permission of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
7. Quoted in Elizabeth Nix and Deborah Weiner, "Pivot in Perception: The Impact of the 1968 Riots on Three Business Districts" in *Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth in an American City*, eds. Jessica I. Elfenbein, Thomas L. Hollowak, and Elizabeth M. Nix (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 186.
8. Quoted in Nix and Weiner, 186.
9. Quoted in Nix and Weiner, 187.
10. This section draws from the work of Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 31–46, and an unpublished guide developed by Katherine C. Grier.
11. Janice Majewski, "Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design," http://access ible.si.edu/pdf/Smithsonian%20Guidelines%20for%20accessible%20design.pdf.
12. Historians may even find themselves trawling eBay, an excellent source of material culture, especially for those working on twentieth- and twenty-first-century projects. For material culture analyses using collections built in part from eBay, see Katherine C. Grier, *Pets in America: A History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006) and Rebecca Shrum, "Selling Mr. Coffee: Design, Gender, and the Branding of a Kitchen Appliance," *Winterthur Portfolio* 46 no. 4 (Winter 2012): 271–298.
13. David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 15 (Map 9).

14. Roger Catlin, "Smithsonian to Receive Artifacts from Sunken 18th-Century Slave Ship," *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 31, 2015. http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-insti tution/sunken-18th-century-slave-ship-found-south-africa-180955458/?no-ist.

15. Jennifer L. Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) is a recent example of work that brings these insights together on multiple levels.

16. Paul R. Mullins, "Racializing the Commonplace Landscape: An Archaeology of Urban Renewal Along the Color Line," *World Archaeology* 38, no. 1: 60–71.

17. http://museumofdisability.org/virtual-museum/.

18. Historypin is not available on mobile platforms at the time of this writing.

19. Curatescape was built using Omeka, the standards-based, open-source digital archival tool that is widely used by cultural and historical institutions. Learn more about Omeka at http:// omeka.org/. Projects nationwide use Curatescape. For a current listing, see: http://curatescape .org/projects/. The first Curatescape project was Cleveland Historical, and it still serves as an excellent example of the range of stories and presentation methods Curatescape projects can deploy. http://clevelandhistorical.org. See also: Mark Tebeau's white paper, "Strategies for Mobile Interpretive Projects," available at http://mobilehistorical.curatescape.org/.

20. Maureen McConnell and Honee Hess, "A Controversy Timeline," *Journal of Museum Education* 23, no. 3 (1998): 4–6.

21. Debbie Ann Doyle, "Historians Protest New Enola Gay Exhibit," *Perspectives on History*, December 2003, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-his tory/december-2003/historians-protest-new-enola-gay-exhibit.

22. The National Parks have developed a series of case studies to show what civic engagement looks like in diverse contexts. See: https://www.nps.gov/civic/casestudies/index.html. See also Monica Post, "Fearless Evaluation: Webinar for the National Park Service," March 6–8, 2012, https://www.nps.gov/hfc/services/interp/interpPlanning/FearlessEvaluationManual.pdf.

RESOURCES AND SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Interpreting Material Culture Objects

Choose a common object in today's society to analyze. Material culture scholar Karen Harvey has developed a beginner's approach to this analysis, which includes three steps. The first step is to develop a physical description of the object. If at all possible, get into the same room as one of the objects and, if it is small enough, hold it in your hands. Choosing an object that you can physically interact with is key for beginners. The description should include "what the object is made of, how it was made and (of course) when; production methods and manufacture, materials, size, weight, design, style, decoration and date." The second step is to "place the object in historical context, primarily by referring to other evidence. Here we can explore who owned this (or similar) objects, when, and what they were used for." In this step, the focus is on how the object was used and by whom during a particular time period. In the final step, an even broader view is taken to begin exploring what the object meant in that time period. Placing the object into its "socio-cultural context" enables a deeper understanding of the significance of the object in people's lives.[1] This method could be applied to the Polk Sanitary milk caps discussed in this chapter: the first step would detail what the object was and how it was made; the second step would explore how this milk cap sealed glass bottles and to whom this finished product was distributed; the final step would include the discussion of how this item became significant for the Indianapolis African American community living under segregation. A fourth and final step in this exercise would be to write an interpretive text label for the object, using the guidelines discussed in this chapter. To begin the process of thinking about material culture, the short video "Twenty Questions to Ask an Object," provides a useful starting point: http://www.theasa.net/caucus_material/item/twenty_years_twenty_questions_to_ask_an_object_the_video/.

Reviewing an Exhibition

Visiting an exhibition with a critical lens is one of the best ways to practice what you have learned about the history and best practices in exhibition design. Select a museum or historical site that you would like to visit. Make sure you do plenty of research before you go to ensure that you have a strong grasp of the subject first.

It is important that you understand the intended purpose of the exhibition and the intended audience, as well as the institutional context in which the exhibition was produced. Is this a large museum with a large staff and an adequate budget to carry out an elaborate design and extensive research and pre-exhibition planning with many experts carrying out individual aspects of the planning and installation? Or is this a small museum with a few staff handling most aspects of the design, research, and installation working within rigid budget constraints? These two extremes will certainly result in different exhibitions. Contact

the curator if possible or another high-level employee or director who can answer these questions. Any review of an exhibition should take these matters into consideration if the review is to be fair.

When writing your review, you should first offer an overview of the exhibition theme, subject matter, content, and form, keeping an eye out for factual accuracy, quality of design and display, tone, and use of space, sounds, lighting, and color. Are there any experimental techniques used that affect your experience? Does the exhibition contribute to larger scholarly conversations on the topic? *The Public Historian* recommends that reviewers keep in mind the following questions: What can you do in the exhibit that you cannot do in traditional history presentations? Is the curator enhancing public knowledge and debate on the subject area covered? What might other professionals learn from this effort?

Reviews for professional journals are typically between 1,000 and 1,250 words in length, which is the equivalent of four to five double-spaced pages. Reviews also contain information in the heading that will identify the museum, the exhibition title, the name of the curator and/or historical consultant, the sponsor if there is one, the date of the exhibition, and any other information that would help identify and give credit to those who were responsible for the exhibition. Here are some sample headings for your exhibition reviews:

The Museum of American Political Life. University of Hartford. Edmund B. Sullivan, director and curator; Christine Scriabine, museum historian.

A City Comes of Age: Chicago in the 1890s. Robert Goler, curator; Susan Hirsch, exhibit historian; Sam Bass Warner Jr., consulting historian. Chicago Historical Society, October 25, 1990–July 15, 1991.

Illustrations should be included whenever possible. It is a good idea to ask the museum/institution if they have stock photos of the exhibition they would like you to use to accompany your review. If they do not, make sure you ask permission before taking photographs on your own, and it is usually best practice to take photos without a flash. *The Public Historian* and most other history-specific journals use *The Chicago Manual of Style* for footnotes, spelling, punctuation, and overall format.

Fort Snelling—Which Stories Are Told?

The Minnesota Historical Society operates Fort Snelling, a site on the river in St. Paul that they promote as "a great place to learn about military history from before the Civil War through World War II, fur trade history, slavery in Minnesota, the US-Dakota War of 1862 and much more."[2] A group of public history students at the University of Minnesota became interested in making the traditionally patriotic site part of the Guantanamo Memory Project, which seeks to build public awareness of the history of Guantanamo Bay.[3] The students found an effective parallel to Guantanamo in the US government's use of Fort Snelling during the US-Dakota War of 1862.[4] During this conflict, a number of Dakota men were accused of killing US civilians. Three hundred and three men were sentenced to death, but Abraham Lincoln reduced that number to thirty-nine, and one of those was

released. The remaining thirty-eight prisoners were hanged simultaneously on the day after Christmas in 1862. Their punishment remains the largest mass execution in US history.

After the hangings, the US government relocated 1,600 Dakota men, women, and children who had surrendered to authorities to Fort Snelling, where they spent the winter of 1862–1863. The Dakota reported daily abuse at the hands of the fort soldiers and civilians alike. When measles entered the area, as many as 300 Dakota died. In May 1863, those who survived the winter were relocated to Crow Creek Sioux Reservation.

Currently, the site provides information about the Dakota on a tab on their website. If users click on the tab, they will find no reference to the US-Dakota War. They can find a description of the war in 1862 if they visit the timeline on the site. Inside the fort, six textual panels make reference to the Dakota. Public history students annotated the panels with information about the 1862 conflict, the mass execution, references to the Dakota "concentration camp," and comments about Guantanamo Bay. Their changes disturbed the visitors to the point that the site removed them. In response, the students replaced the annotations with more open-ended questions.[5]

Questions for Discussion:

1. Is Fort Snelling an appropriate site for the Guantanamo Public Memory Project?
2. How should the site interpret the winter of 1862–1863?
3. Should the site use the term "internment camp" or "concentration camp" in its interpretation of that period?

Notes

1. Karen Harvey, *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1–23.
2. http://www.historicfortsnelling.org.
3. http://gitmomemory.org.
4. http://www.historicfortsnelling.org/history/us-dakota-war.
5. Rose Miron, "Sacrificing Comfort for Complexity: Presenting Difficult Narratives in Public History," *Public History Commons*, April 24, 2014, http://publichistorycommons.org/sacrificing-comfort-for-complexity.