

For creators of experiences, personal epiphanies are a cherished goal. We understand how people respond to space, light, material, movement, proportion, color, iconography, detail and even media. But we know that epiphanies are produced only when the synthesis of these elements transcends their individual messaging.

**Design as Interpretation:
Where Narrative
Dissolves into Epiphany**

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You know how a word or an idea can be so overused that it starts to lose all its meaning? Years ago, when I stumbled upon “narrative” as a term to describe the critical organizational and conceptual aspects of the communication and experiences we seek to engender through design, I thought I had uncovered the Holy Grail. Narrative is a critical and extremely useful—and user-friendly—tool in conceiving and designing built experiences, including exhibitions, buildings, public places, environmental graphics, even media and print communication. Through design we impart information—themes and concepts, facts and evidence—and incite cognition and emotion that will result in understanding and meaning-making. This understanding forges a firm and lasting connection between content and people in order to enrich their lives. The link we create to achieve this is the embodiment of that content in the environments, exhibitions, buildings and other communicative mediums that we craft to make meaning manifest. Narrative is a hard-wired human instinct and a sure strategy for reaching your intended receiver through a means that is completely intuitive.

But it is not the solution. Never an end in itself, narrative, a tool in the work of museum-making, is a means of interpretation. We interpret when we explain or conceptualize, translate or explain the meaning or significance of something; when we reveal or disclose. And for human beings this revelation is often best achieved through storytelling.

In this context, narrative is the architecture that both structures and conveys the intended meaning. In narrative, as in interpretation, we select, gather and reassemble information and evidence within the framework of our own ideas. As interpreters, we may receive content in a range of modes, but we attempt to translate and send the synthesized messages out in a coherent, comprehensible language. Narrative provides the choreographic structure that supports a storyline—a series of events that form a meaningful pattern. But can we reach beyond this familiar strategy to actually embody content and meaning?

I have had experiences in places—exhibits, museums, other types of buildings, landscapes—where all of a sudden, or even gradually, understanding washes over me like a warm pleasurable wave. My heart beats faster, and my nerve endings are all firing. The world seems brighter, and life seems a bit clearer. And I go forward with that understanding, which can never be fully extinguished. Assuming I haven't recently ingested illicit substances, been born again or eaten something bad, what's going on?

In his early sculpture, entitled *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*, artist Bruce Nauman presents a spiraling and compelling neon message. Exhibit designers in all types of museums, including children's museums, should want to do that. To look beyond narrative. Beyond the assembling and amalgamating. Beyond the bits of information and the ordering of experience. To a synthesis wherein the individual elements are dissolved, where the sequence gives way. Where revelation produces epiphany.

The Random House Dictionary defines an epiphany as “a sudden, intuitive perception or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something.” It is a point where past experiences come together, the cumulative result of banked information. Successful embodiment produces epiphanies because content, messages, themes and all the variables of the environment in which they are communicated are unified. Simultaneity arises in the mind conceiving of an experience and in the senses living it. Through design, situations can show their authentic inner meanings. And this is when epiphanies occur.

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The challenge, then, is to fill people's senses and minds with content-laden stimuli; to imbue every ingredient of an experience—artifacts, graphics, hands-on mechanical interactives, role play and performance, electronic displays, audio-visual media and Web-based delivery systems, handheld devices and gestural interfaces—with informative suggestions and to trigger vivid yet specific associations. To use our knowledge of how people take in and process information to inform an intuitive narrative.

Linear narratives will not, and should not, go away. Many stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. Chronologies; systematic sequences; cause and effect; series of themes, concepts, sub-concepts and examples remain key ingredients of narrative structures that have their place in the appropriate crafting of specific exhibitions. But through design, narratives can be multi-layered, atemporal, asynchronous, sensorially immersive and diffuse.

Spatial experiences unfold over time, so the receipt of information necessarily occurs in a sequence. But the nature of the information itself does not have to parallel that order. Learning can flow continuously, gradually and from all around. Every aspect of a conceived and built experience holds narrative potential.

Narrative can be used as an open-ended means to connect with people. Shuffle it, layer it, scatter it and embed it in every part of the structure or space, so it will be fully absorbed becoming an integral part of the participant's experience.

We've all been towing the line of narrative design. But narrative is more than storytelling, and design is more than an added-on luxury. All design is interpretation. If an environment can truly embody content and themes, then we can reasonably hope to induce the kinds of revelations in visitors that allow epiphanies to occur. 

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