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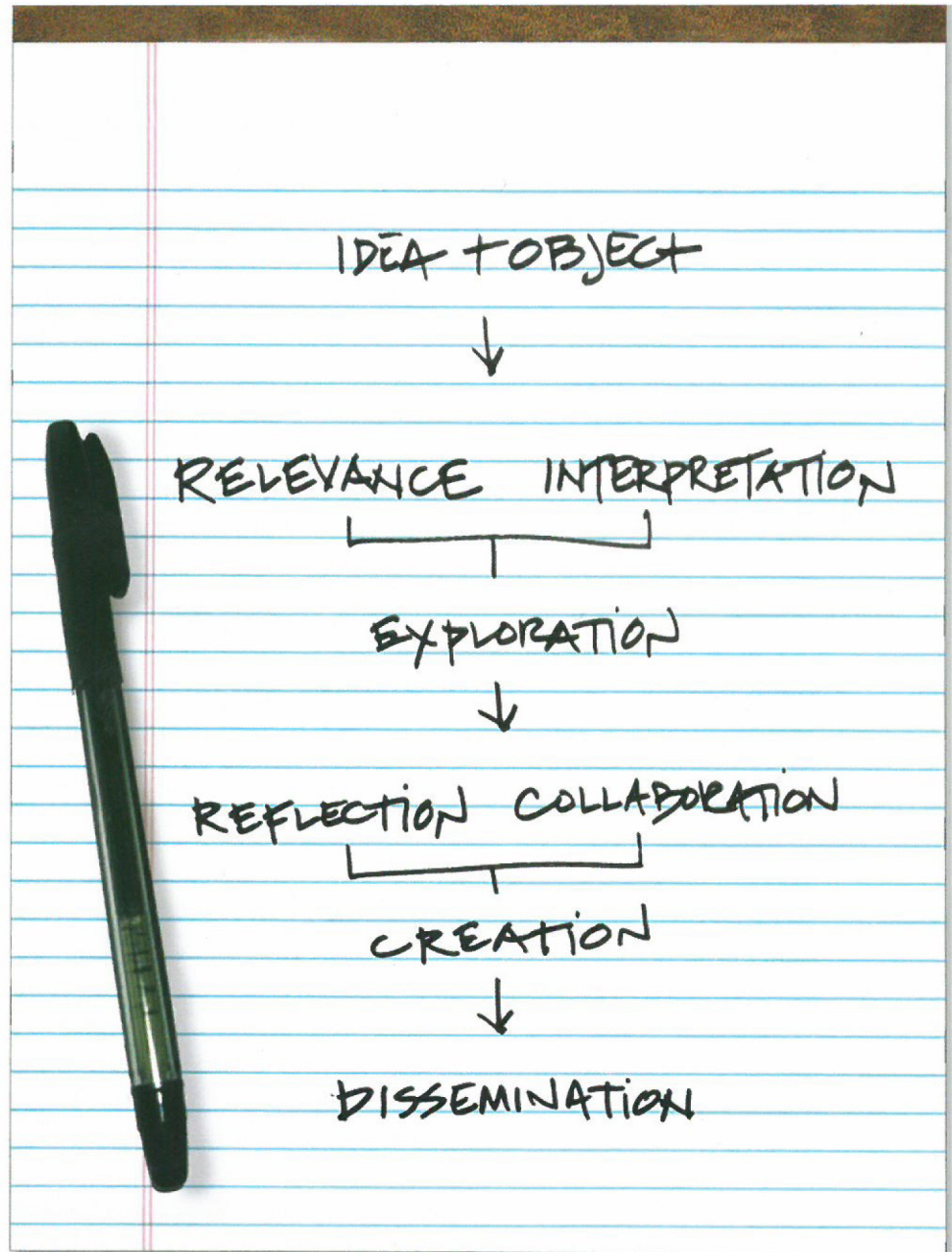


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Intentionally Designed Spaces

Master Class: Design as Interpretation

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I decided that this Master Class could be crafted to break out of the conventional professional box in a more speculative fashion, approaching the larger issues of design as an interpretive tool and medium.

In 2006, the Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester in England invited me to design and conduct a special Master Class on exhibition design for mid-career museum designers and educators. Rather than simply provide another how-to lesson for this seasoned group of participants, I felt that this should be something completely new: something that would raise the bar on a philosophical approach to the practice and that would provide both them and me with an expansive learning experience.

I have spent my entire professional life exploring the communicative potential of design to deliver content and thematic ideas. I decided that this Master Class could be crafted to break out of the conventional professional box in a more speculative fashion, approaching the larger issues of design as an interpretive tool and medium.

I titled the three-day event “Design as Interpretation.” It was described as aiming to “provide training in the processes, knowledge and creative practices involved in generating interpretive environments.” The prospectus went on to state:

The focus of the three-day Master Class will be a design ‘charrette’ wherein participants work directly with Lee in groups on exhibit ‘interventions’ which explore the potential for interpreting content and concepts through design, using locations within the University campus as project ‘sites.’ Issues of audience definition, conceptual framework, narrative, procession, circulation, design vocabulary, materiality, interactivity,

graphics, lighting, and media will be examined in relation to their potential to contribute to the creation of truly interpretive visitor experiences.

It was decided that in order to provide an experience that would offer the greatest value to all involved, the ideal number of participants would be about 30.

While the centerpiece of the Master Class was the charrette, the program was introduced and supplemented by informative lectures, as well as with critical input from experienced practitioners in education, design, media development, and lighting. In addition, in preparation for getting the most out of the program, participants were sent a reading list of books, articles, and papers that would lay a foundation for the themes and activities they would encounter.

The point of this preparatory work, as of the class itself, was to disengage the design process from the conventional interpretation of content; to explore the interpretive potential of design itself to evoke and embody themes, values, and beliefs; and to induce intellectual and emotional epiphanies. How do context, light, space, texture, color, and media combine to create revelatory experiences? How do we invoke awe, surprise, anxiety, exhilaration, grief, serenity through the medium of experiential design? Can the designed experience achieve more than conveying information? Can it actually hold meaning?

Without going into too much detail on the mechanics of the program, suffice it to say that we broke the group down into several teams of three to four

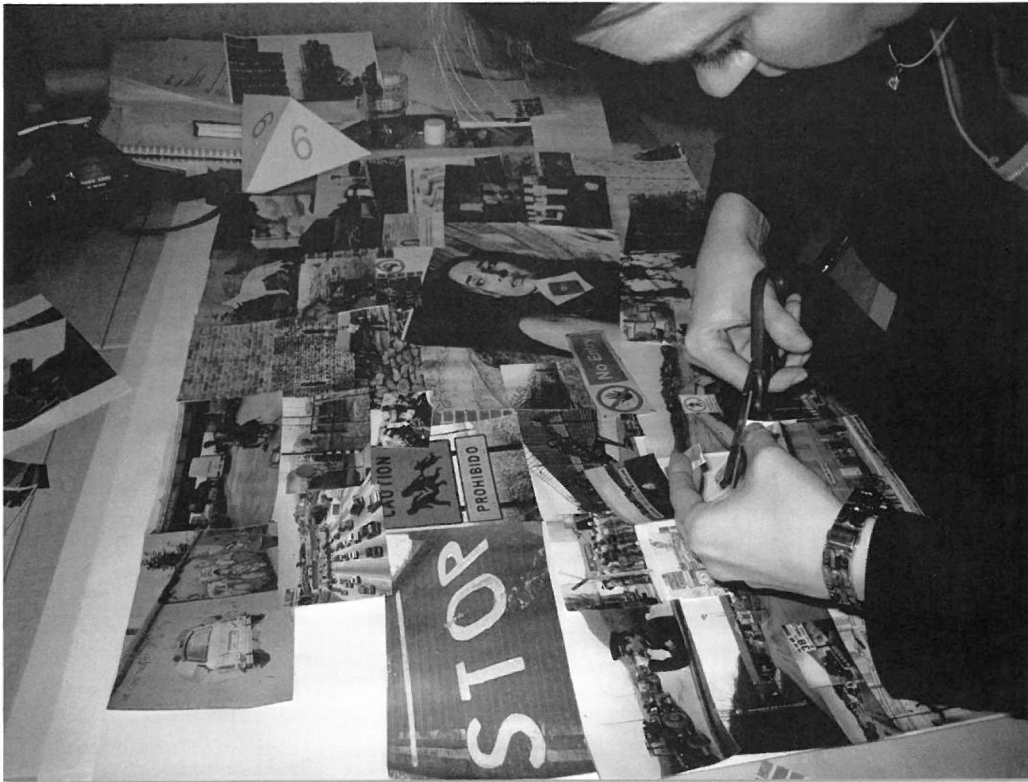


Image research for the "Borders and Boundaries" project. Courtesy of LHSA+DP.

members, attempting to distribute designers, educators, and curators/exhibition developers into each group. These teams were then asked to choose from a carefully constructed list of themes sufficiently broad to lend themselves to the greatest potential for open-ended and diverse interpretation. The topics/themes were: Exhibitionism, Connections, Surveillance/Voyeurism, Public/Private, Site/Sight, Boundaries/Borders, Metamorphosis, Camouflage, Survival, Intersections, and Symbiosis.

Significantly, we did not assign specific content in the form of topics or collections. Since our focus was on the interpretive possibilities of design rather than on the delivery of factual information, it was left up to the teams themselves to choose to include these elements or not. If they felt it helpful or necessary to incorporate more substantive content into their projects in order to more effectively communicate their themes, they were free to do so.

Once they were armed with a thematic program, we added one of the most challenging and important variables into

the mix—one which would ensure that we would not be limited by conventional parameters nor fall back on tried and true practices or solutions: the site.

We had previously toured the campus at the University and selected interior and exterior locations that we thought would incite participants to think and respond in the most creative manner. Eschewing for the most part spaces that resembled traditional exhibition galleries, we had sought out and discovered places of entry, circulation, gathering, interstices, pause, tension, and release. Participants were directed to use the maps and photos we provided to seek out these spaces and determine which held the greatest potential for embodying and communicating their themes in a compellingly designed visitor experience.

Now the real work could begin. Our hosts and partners at Leicester had arranged for us to utilize a large studio space that would serve as our multi-day home for the Master Class activities. In addition, in an attempt to allow for undistracted workflow, we had pulled together a list of all the tools we thought the teams would need to do their work.

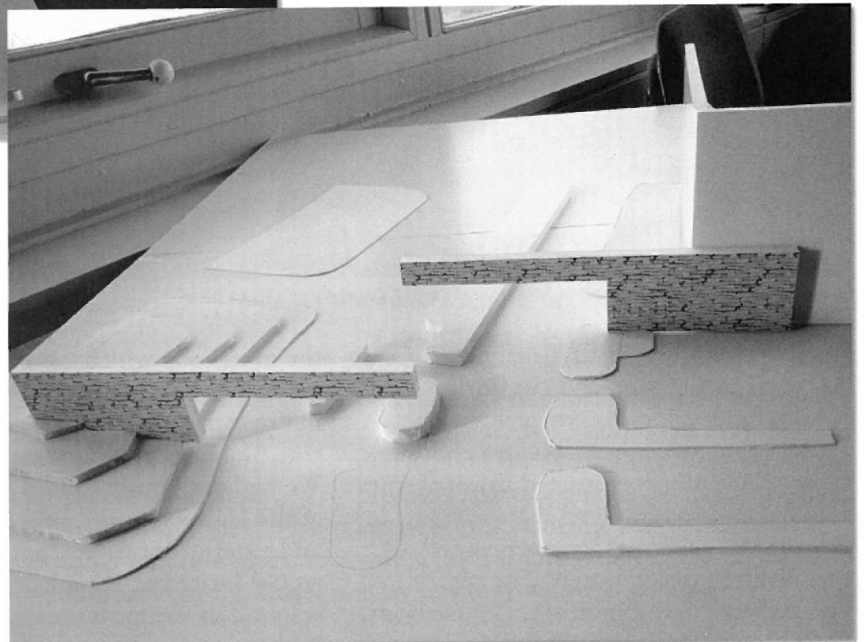
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The "Borders and Boundaries" team work on their physical model. Courtesy of LHSA+DP.

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"Borders and Boundaries" physical model. Courtesy of LHSA+DP.

These included: large worktables, laptop computers, digital cameras, and a wide array of drawing, model-making and presentation tools and materials. But, of course, before actual design can begin, the all-important task of concept development must be addressed. After all, since design is a *means* of facilitating interpretation, we must first determine the story we wish to communicate. But in this case we were not constructing narratives built on traditional notions of content and detailed information. We had instead proposed abstract concepts as the subjects and charged the project groups with directly interpreting these ideas through design.

Perhaps due to the disorienting nature

of this unusual aspect of the program, at certain points within the intense flurry of activity some participants had fairly dramatic meltdowns, including one electing to drop out of the class. But as painful as these few incidents might have been, they confirmed that we were confronting some challenging and essential aspects of the design process—most particularly the mining of the potential that design itself holds to serve as a powerful molder of experience.

With the process back on track, what emerged was a true juggernaut of design. The teams dove into their tasks with a rush of energy and largely unbridled enthusiasm. Cognizant of the fact that this

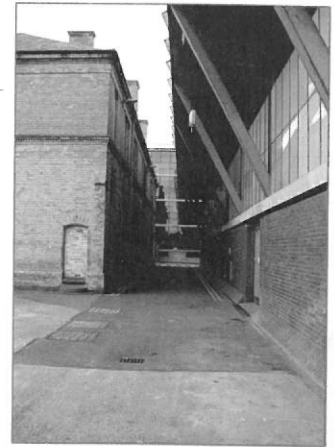
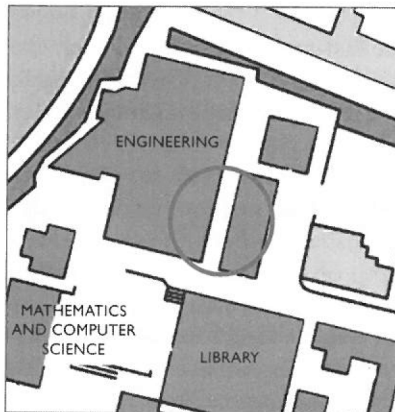
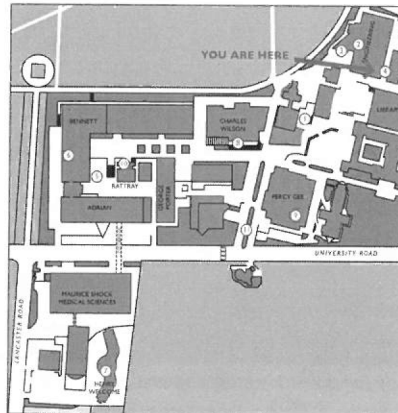
SITE ④ Engineering Passageway

This forgotten linear, sheltered space has the quality of a modernist arcade or allée. Its initially unpleasant and dark quality provides a starting point for a revelatory experience.

was a greatly accelerated exercise, they wasted no time in getting started, which is not to say that we didn't see a healthy dose of anxiety and angst! However, we were particularly gratified and impressed by the ease and zeal with which both the seasoned professionals and the relative novices began to utilize all the tools and materials we had provided in order to develop and represent their ideas. Even more significant was the revelation that most of the participants had no problem transcending the comfortable and conventional limitations of institutional mission, curatorial authority, artifact-based display, and proscribed gallery context in order to explore the more challenging and exotic terrain of purely interpretive experience making.

Charts, diagrams, and outlines quickly gave way to plans and sketches. Laptops flashed on inspirational 'look and feel' reference imagery. Model-making materials were deployed as concepts began to take on shape and form. And as projects were anointed with titles and a visual vocabulary, representative graphic styles emerged, confirming that every element of the designed experience holds the potential to contribute to the overall package. As the teams soldiered on over obstacles, around roadblocks, through fervid brainstorming and sublime epiphanies, each project took on its unique character.

The group that chose "Borders and Boundaries" as their theme picked the entry gate to the University campus to evoke competing feelings of exclusion, transition and welcome. They explored how an interstitial space—in this case a



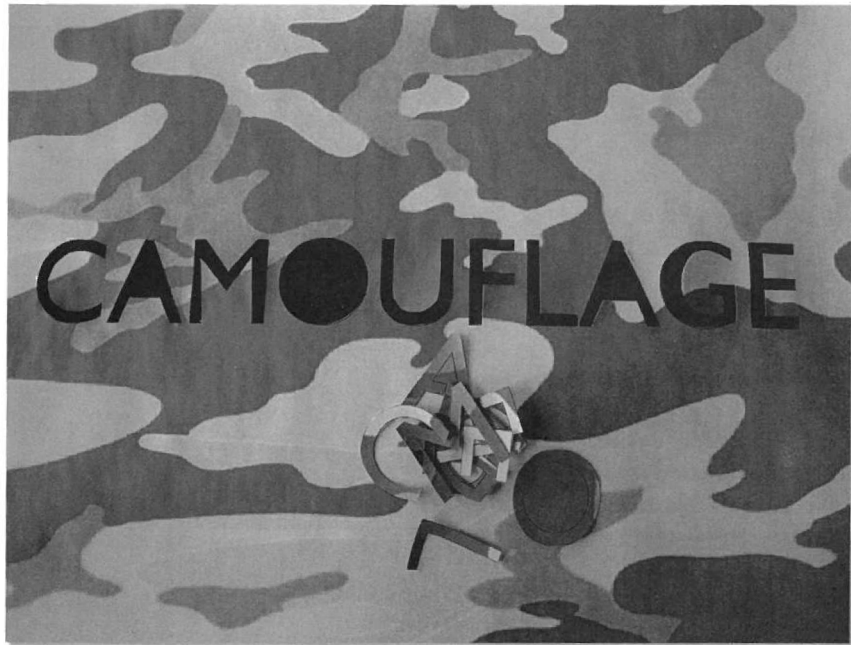
"Camouflage" site map. Courtesy of LHSA+DP

threshold—could be seen as a meaning-laden place. It is a moment of first impressions, an intimate and intimidating trial, a provocation, as in the life of an immigrant. They titled their project "No Man's (Po)land."

The "Camouflage" team chose the lobby of the building in which we held the Master Class as their site. They proposed a wayfinding program that disoriented and hid information even as it oriented and directed entrants to the building. Through the utilization of trompe l'œil and the creation of a social media application, they described the rationale of the space and individualized the experience so that users could create their own personal story about how they used the facility.

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Early concept study using text and imagery for the "Camouflage" project. Courtesy of LHSA+DP

The last morning dawned with the teams feverishly polishing their presentations. Due to scheduling exigencies we could only allot twenty minutes to each team's project. Given the short amount of development time we were truly astonished by both the sophistication and depth of the interpretive ideation and the extent to which the resulting design embodied those concepts. Projects were presented through drawings, models, and the occasional media piece, and there was no doubt that if given the time, issues of materiality, lighting, interactivity, and even detailing would have been addressed in a manner that would have enhanced and strengthened the power of the interpretive experience.

The Master Class concluded with congratulations and thanks all around: to the Leicester University School of Museum Studies, for hosting and facilitating the event in such a magnificent manner; to the enlightening and generous guest lecturers and critics (Jo Ann Secor and Miguel Cardenas of LHSA+DP, Stephen Greenberg of Metaphor, Inc., Peter Higgins of Land Design Studio,

and Mark Sutton Vane of Sutton Vane Lighting Associates). The participants especially were recognized for their faith, perseverance, and creativity. They removed themselves from their preconceived notions and their everyday tasks, responsibilities, hierarchies, and management structures to explore a new approach to making meaning through design. They took a theoretical/philosophical starting point and used a project as the medium through which to see how interpretation and a fresh approach to narrative can inform the design process.

In the end, it was a mutual transaction. Hopefully, the participants took from this some new perspectives on how to mine the inherent and powerful qualities of design to induce strong responses, which in turn provides some higher goals at which designers can aim. For me, the Master Class was a powerful confirmation of my long-held belief that design is a means of interpretation that can go beyond the relating of information to the embodiment of themes that help people experience profound meanings. ✨

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