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Look Mickey, "just do it" in the Museum Mall

Virgin supremo Richard Branson tells us that he's in the entertainment business at 20,000ft in the air. As we stretch our feet to avoid deep vein thrombosis, he will move through the cabin chatting, serve ice cream with the unwatchable movie, or provide massage for weary upper class executives.

Back on terra firma the convenient yet irritating 'infotainment/edutainment' descriptions provide a provocative starting point to help unravel the mind set and attitude of the consumer in respect of their perception of what the rambling cultural industries are preparing for their collective delectation.

Stephen Bayley most famous for removing himself, pre development, as creative director of the Millennium Dome, suggests that we are going to die of complexity, He goes on to say that "the excess is baffling, never before has there been so much choice, confusion, segmentation, media fragmentation, data smog and popular bewilderment."

As competition grows for the leisure spend, it is difficult to separate the offers.

Consider the citadel shopping experience, enclosed behind towering windowless edifices containing synthetic scenography that the creators genuinely describe as the filmic storyboard event, that makes the visitor the central character and fuses fantasy, commerce and entertainment. Though a seductive metaphor to sell into clients, it could not be more inappropriate. A storyboard is a device that totally predicts the structural form of the narrative, and can no way be connected to the assemblage of reconstructed picturesque, dislocated, urban grain that forms the backdrop to ubiquitous banners, push-cart vendors, street performers, music and jostling people. *Commedia del arte* meets Frederico Fellini (but not at the 51-screen multiplex attractor).

There is the argument that the skill of 'placemaking,' an expression devised by architect John Jerde, actually responds to the importance of mass taste and human need. People do come in their droves to his supermalls, though their only real taste of urbanity is the journey from their parked air-conditioned automobile, to the portal of the mind-conditioned mall. There is never the suggestion that people meeting here will ever build any relationship or commitment to one another, nor is there any suggestion that the semiotic symbolism of the piazza, agora, or civic forum should actually encourage discourse or exchange of ideas. The only real sense of community is the community of consumers, who are encouraged to express themselves freely in the way that they feel best equipped and empowered, that is their freedom to consume. It may be irritating for the architects of the ersatz movie setting that behind the secondary facades of shopfronts, that at last the true personality and self-expression of the movie extra is allowed to flourish. Actually the basic retail experience is entirely active, even interactive. Individuals, partners and families communicate with one another and sales staff to support the decision making process; it engages the participant with complex sampling that can incorporate sophisticated, cognitive processing, classification of alternatives, data analysis, and personalised aesthetic expression, and we may only be purchasing a hair spray.

Retail interior styling designers are now being challenged by web designers / interpretive interactive museum designers to consider the customer interface, where the color of the sofa that I am sitting on can be changed by casting a smart-tagged colour swatch into a
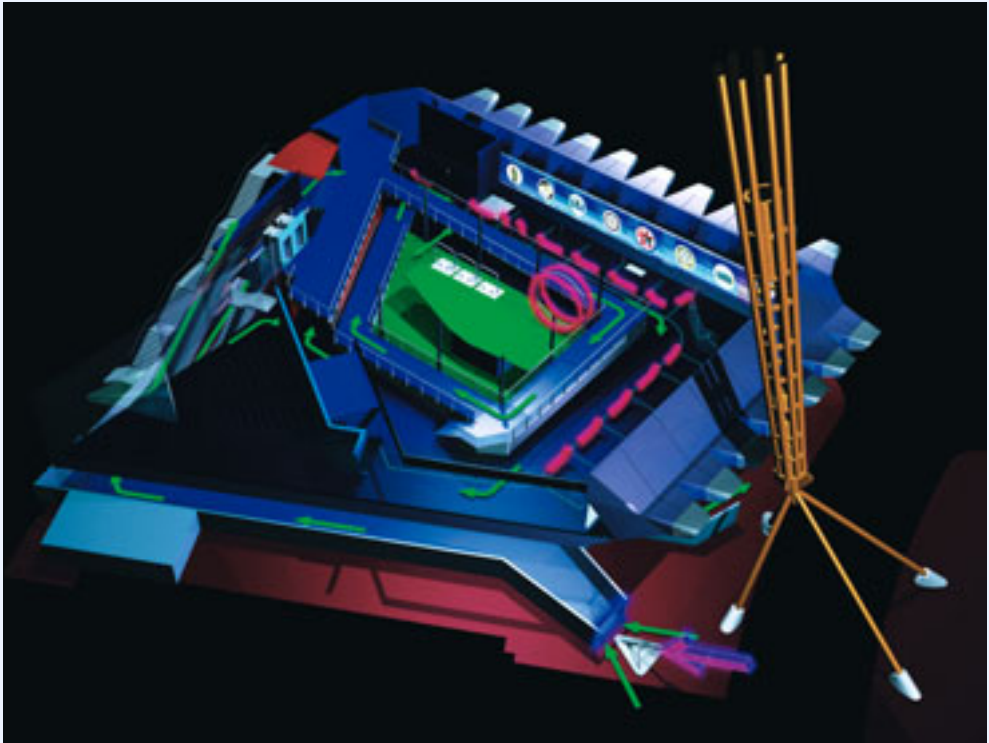
PlayZone, Millennium Dome London: Axonometric of movement system

responsive wooden dish. A commercial mobile phone merchandising environment may be transformed into an evening bar setting by reconfiguring the daytime projection hardware, to create an ambience of real-time large-scale web-cam city imaging ... choose your city. Brand experiences are really more focused retail opportunities. It is a form of immersive conditioning that pretends to provide a serious information function alongside slick audio-visual presentation, however, the dilemma of providing such data is the inevitable lack of objectivity brought about by the single brand promotion. Niketown New York, carries lightweight missable fiction and non-fiction storylines throughout sporadic museum-style object displays, and enforces an occasional large-scale audio-visual show on the visitor, that has the effect of being in the front row during the commercial break at the movies, with the house lights on.

The Brand experience is now ubiquitous, helping to deliver the essence and spirit of cars, malt whisky, chocolate, even the life of a Benedictine monk. Excluding the latter, the creative process is often in the hands of the marketing department, which have discovered they can join the creatives in developing integrated presentation strategies. Working outside of their domain, the advertising agency has to demonstrate their ability to think and create "below-the-line experiences," using unfamiliar media in real-time environments. Often the final effect is that of a supercharged tradeshow for which the public has to pay, to be sold the brand.

The mother of all brand experiences has of course been Disney, born in 1955 as Disneyland; it has set the standard of the ultimate stage-managed, nurtured environment. The staggering talent of the team of beardless Imagineers render design and deliver per-

fectly scenographed environments that represent their ultimate fantasy. The problem is that the genre of moviemaking does not necessarily transfer to the tangible built environment. Questions of scale, lighting, juxtaposition, even the surreal appearance of foam-filled characters devalues the fantasy world that is otherwise so complete that it requires no imagination or intellectual participation of the visitor. There is an overwhelming passive expectation of the brand that is consistently delivered in a safe, dependable, homogenous way, even on the dangerous bits, the white knuckles are pink, it's as comforting as seeing the sanitised paper strip on your hotel lavatory seat.

The emergence of entertainment as a fundamental part of the commercial environment has impacted hugely on the world of museums, as they are now simply part of the leisure destination offer, Directors, now called CEOs, are running scared. Architects are charged with creating "brandmark" buildings, even the nomenclature of the building carries a brand as the $350bn Guggenheim testifies. The paradox reverberates as marketing and business plans subvert the traditional positioning of museum as a 'receptacle of the authentic to encourage sensual perception and critical thinking', when we realise the physical extent of the subterranean shopping mall at the Louvre. Or, as the strapline of a national campaign for the V&A in London declared 'an ace café with a museum attached,' whilst its neighbour The Natural History Museum had the paleontologists squirming, but the public queuing round the block to check out the smell of their latest animatronic dinosaur. It's easy to imagine that architect Richard Meier had more than an eye on the corporate soiree facilities that he offered with his spectacular masterplan for Mr Getty in Los Angeles.

Indeed how much should the architecture reflect and support the function and emotional state of the visitor experience. A visitor to a museum may be in search of beautifully conserved objects, presented in a sensitive and intelligently interpreted way, or an art collection defining the very essence of an artists work, encouraging sensual perception and critical thinking. Both may now be subverted by the very building that provides the enclosure, practical requirements may be ruthlessly subordinated.

Of the Staatsgallerie in Stuttgart architect James Stirling said that it would be better without paintings. It seems that often the works of art are guests of the architect. Even at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, where the building demonstrates a distinctive narrative, exhibition designer Ralph Appelbaum confessed that the building and interior treatment failed to develop simultaneously. In respect of the idiosyncratic 'interpretive' building types, often the architect/client fails to understand the needs of sequence, media/communication facilities, the use of natural or artificial light and the pace and rhythm of the narrative, or even the very existence of a narrative. As the four stainless steel drums emerged out of the ground for the National Centre of Popular Music in Sheffield, the client declared that there were five stories to convey, not surprisingly this £15m centre closed within one year, a classic case of 'form swallowing function'.

Away from the virtuoso "placemaking" that apparently transports the patina of 500 years of urban Italianate life to LA or Japan, or the creatively stultifying dogma of the brand as god: The critical zeitgeist of a museum experience potentially enables the collaborative opportunity for interpretive architects, scenographers, communications and new media consultants, writers, and curators, to encourage us to investigate the diversity of our culture through active information exchange, incorporating both intellectual and sensory engagement.

The significant competition for the consumer-spend does need to focus the museum to determine its USP set against an established visitor profile. Key criteria can be defined as the objective to inspire, excite and inform through the "power of the real"; real people, place, time and objects. The opportunity to provide intuitive media and interpretive sensory devices that neither exist within the home or commercial domain, the encour-

Millennium Dome London: PlayZone, *Tug of War*

agement of learning through physical / cognitive engagement, and the provision of access to a hierarchy of data and information.

The development of the San Francisco Exploratorium set the standard for the opportunity to learn through the process of engagement and discovery. As with the birth of any new genres, this centre for 'hands on' interactivity has been referenced and rebuilt throughout the world. By now I believe that the time has come to reassess the methodology by which we may encourage people to engage with discovery learning. It is no longer appropriate to depend entirely on unreliable and unimaginative electro-mechanical mechanisms, or dull and unengaging touch-screen interfaces that provide buttons that deliver slabs of binary yes/no learning, or even to enable visitors to visit the website from within the museum. Such ubiquitous devices are derivative, and in some cases better reserved for home use, but clearly if they are not subject to imaginative development will lead to the demise of the existence and important role that museums play in the commercial marketplace. Early research has shown that the work of certain new media artists has unknowingly investigated some of the criteria that may now be applied to the museum environment. The concept of delivery of information for a large group of people activated by an avatar/ navigator is one such example. To achieve this, the audience and avatar need to

be collectively aware of the context and intellectual objective of an interpretive installation. The ultimate delivery of the material needs to be sufficiently coherent, and at an appropriate scale, to extend the experience for larger groups. This method of presentation capitalises on the power of real space, and the ability of people to experience the collective dynamic. Many novel techniques may be applied to the navigation devices incorporated within the avatar installation. The concept of data delivery is probably the most interesting application. Layers of data that may be stored in a variety of formats, e.g. sound image, moving image, and graphic. Traditionally the presentation of such material is screen-based at a scale that rests in the domestic domain. This proposal actually encourages the participant to capture information by virtue of their presence in sensory environments. When the 'player' realises for instance that their physicality and movement may be camera-tracked and processed as say a virtual linear timeline, then appropriate audio-visual material may be delivered. Move one step, and change time and associated media by 10 years, or 5000 years, all for the benefit of the surrounding audience who are engaging in 'passive interactivity.' As well as delivering people stories, such environments may enable investigation into issues of place and location, which is a familiar requirement of the interpretive process. Large format mapped surfaces may be physically walked, and personalised hotspots selected, to describe particular place narratives through sound and image. It is this concept of connection by virtue of personal physicality that provides the all important cognitive link encouraging and supporting memory learning.

Something that will always be central to the museum will be the authentic protected object, protected for the purpose of security, and conservation. Whilst this valued object is heroic, it is vital that we discover new ways of investigating more direct psychological access, being able to metaphorically unlock the glass case. Inspired by some work by Raffael Lonzano-Hemmer, this proposal enables the visitor to track and 'touch' the object with a digitised hand that replicates the location of their actual hand in relation to a remote cased object. Once the virtual hand is engaged, facsimile objects may be touched with the other hand, such as resin casts of pattern or texture to provide an uncanny cognitive connection. In addition, the actual object, which may be subject to low lux-level lighting or have obscure detailed information, may be accessed and enhanced through large-scale screen manipulation for an extended audience. This particular feature of the devise would only be made possible by having access to high quality digitised imaging of the object collection that could be provided by the digital archiving programme.

The museum website has an intrinsic value that is not always appreciated by a visiting audience. This is its inherent potential to provide considerable depth and hierarchy of information, which may be best accessed at a remote location, away from the museum. In response to this hypothesis Land have developed a responsive website, the 'Walk in Web' that actually generates the ambience of the Futures Gallery environment at Thinktank, Millennium Point, presently under construction in Birmingham, where it is possible to interact with, or affect, the information presented. The notion here is to excite and inspire 'on-site' in order that the visitor will re-visit at their own particular level in their own time and place. This is a response to the website merely being used as brochure-ware. Again, as the scale of presentation is exceptional then there is a sense of collective activity. The comparative conceptual and financial failure of both the Millennium Dome in London, and Hanover Expo have been well documented. The critique has mainly been levelled at the misguided aspirations of the executives who delivered wildly optimistic and unachievable business plans, the ambitions of any future Expo ventures may well be forced to review scale, content, sustainability and budget. The irony is in this age of 'the

experience,' themed/experiential/brandmarked/placemaking/interpretive centres are an established part of our culture, that the genesis of such initiatives, the 150 year old Expo tradition of experimental simulation and stimulation, have failed in such spectacular fashion. Certainly in London this was self-inflicted by 'Cool Brittania' arrogance and naiveté. With almost £1bn to spend, and having commissioned the entirely inappropriate dome structure that provided compressed perimeter spaces dedicated to the pavilions, the executive team recklessly hired architects who provided a style fest of high tech, deconstruction, and abstract symbolism, that all hemorrhaged budgets and marginalised narrative content. Other pavilions were in the hands of production companies with a background in narrowband corporate face-to-face business. Add to this the rejection of the need for a creative director, the lethal scepticism of the British press and impossible projection figures of 12 million visitors; cartoons of the upside down Dome represented as the sinking Titanic seemed justified.

However, the greatly stretched, inexperienced client team failed to intercept the aspirations of Land to realise a zone dedicated to play. With self-determined criteria that it should be non-didactic, experiential, instantly interactive, robust, supporting an entirely broad-based audience, we were able to design and build a showcase of International new media artists embracing the concept of digital play. Supported by Ars Electronica it became an important model to establish the concept of a responsive architectural structure, with highly effective sequencing and participation mechanisms; that established new and refreshing ways to engage and involve the visitor with fascinating, intuitive digital interfaces. It is entirely within the spirit and tradition of the Grand Expositions that the knowledge and experience gained from this experiment has encouraged the development of the previously described projects within the museum domain.

There is no doubt that the authorship of experience engineering remains in the hands of a diverse body of people, both as commissioning agents and creative deliverers. In the UK the unprecedented National Lottery funded programme has supported in the region of £3bn expenditure on visitor centres and museum developments over the last five years. All projects have to survive in the marketplace without any further grant aid. Already, in addition to Sheffield, other failures and some successes are emerging. One would hope that in the near future we will have a clearer picture that will enable us to analyse such destinations in a considered, scientific way; that will help to evaluate the alchemy, black art and commercial mumbo-jumbo that presently combine to deliver the edutainment and infotainment to a culture that presently feels comfortable with the invention of such synthetic language.