

Creating the 'Wow-Aha!' Exhibit

An Interview with Paul Orselli, POW!

Mary Maher, Editor | Interviewer



For nearly forty years, Paul Orselli has worked to create inventive and playful museums and exhibits. He is now the President and Chief Instigator at POW! (Paul Orselli Workshop, Inc.), an exhibit design and development corporation he founded.

Paul has consulted on museum projects in North America, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. His clients include the New York Hall of Science, the Exploratorium, the National Science Foundation, and Science Projects in London. He has taught and lectured at numerous universities on museum topics and has presented at professional conferences around the world. He is also a grant recipient of the Fulbright Specialist program.

Paul has also been the editor and originator of the four best-selling *Exhibit Cheap* books, published by Association of Science and Technology Centers, and has served on the board of NAME (National Association for Museum Exhibition).

MAHER: What was your first museum experience, and what led you to a museum career?

ORSELLI: When I was a little kid, my father took me on a visit to the Cultural Center in downtown Detroit, which housed the Detroit Institute of Arts. The Detroit Historical Museum was nearby. At least that's the story I tell myself. I used to kid my father when he was alive, that if he had brought me to a courtroom or a hospital that day he would've gotten a lawyer or a doctor. But instead he got a museum person. I think in the end he was quite happy with that.

On a later visit with my family to the Ontario Science Center in Toronto, we spent the whole day there. Afterwards I wrote them a fan letter saying how much I enjoyed the museum—especially the chemistry demonstrations—and asked if they could send me some of the “recipes.” They send me a letter back with a photocopy of their floor chemistry demonstrations that included stuff like sulfuric acid. I remember riding my purple banana seat Sears bicycle back from school with a big bottle of sulfuric acid that my seventh grade science teacher gave me. And I did the experiments (with some near catastrophes!) from their booklet of floor chemistry demonstrations. I wish I had saved that letter!

M: Growing up in Cleveland, my family never went to museums, and Catholic

schools didn't take field trips. But my dad had a boat and we used to sail around Lake Erie. On one trip with him and my two friends when I was about eleven, we docked in a little marina in Vermilion, Ohio. He handed me \$10 and told us to go find some dinner. So, we walked downtown, found a hot dog stand and then a museum, the Vermilion Nautical Museum. It was in an old Victorian house. The front door was wide open, no one there. We walked in, wandered around, and saw a display of jars of an invasive species, lamprey eels, with those big sucker mouths, all sizes. These looked like green beans in a jar, grey green beans by then. My friends dared me to steal one, so I grabbed one, and we ran out, I took it back to the boat. I carried it around for years. Later, I majored in art history major, spending a lot of time in the Cleveland Museum of Art. But I didn't lift anything.

O: I just learned something about you! Great Lakes lamprey eel stealer! Holy Mackerel! No, Holy Lamprey!

M: On to exhibits. Basic question: What is an exhibit anymore?

O: Like that old question of what is a museum anymore, an exhibit can be anything. I'm averse to coming up with a dogmatic definition because the boundaries keep shifting, which is good.

Olafur Eliasson, one of my favorite living artists, does a lot of phenomenological

art, playing with light, art, and motion. Some of his pieces look like high-end, very aesthetically-pleasing science center exhibits. Someone described the experience of seeing his work as a “wow” followed by an “aha.” There is my definition of the exhibit.

Eliasson had a show called Look Again at the Museum of Modern Art. Riding the escalator, making this stately museum ascendancy to the second floor, you noticed something weird. Everybody moving where you were headed looked like a black and white movie. It was like a reverse Wizard of Oz. That was the “wow”: what's going on? Then the “aha” when you realized a set of yellow sodium lights, perfectly aligned to the floor landing, took out the color and made everything look monochromatic. A lot of the best exhibit experiences—and they don't have to be interactive—are wows and then ahas. Seeing the Diego Rivera frescoes at the Detroit Institute of Art is a very transcendent experience. I've probably been in that space dozens of times. But it's still very, very impressive.

M: You've taught exhibit design at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Bank Street, the University of the Arts, and in places around the world. How do you begin to teach people to initiate a design process that leads to a wow-aha exhibit?

O: That's easy. It's the same process I use for myself: fall in love with what you're

working on. I have to get so excited that I am just bursting to share what I've learned with other people. For example, recently, I've been working on the D&H Canal Museum in Upstate New York. I didn't know a thing about canals, much less the Delaware & Hudson Canal, which opened in 1828 and stretched from the Hudson River to Upstate New York. The exhibit development process started with a very fundamental question: why would anyone go to the trouble of digging something like this? There were no steam shovels, bulldozers, or dynamite at the time. It was all done with picks and shovels by Irish and German immigrants. They essentially created a huge watery highway, a gigantic trench, with locks—for what? Coal!

A canal was the most efficient way to move coal from Pennsylvania mines to east coast shipping ports! Basically, what I think about and what I tell students, is if you can't be genuinely excited about an exhibit, why in the world do you think a visitor would?

When I see what I consider a “bad” exhibit, it's not the idea that was bad, but the implementation. You could do a cool exhibit about anything if you can find something in the idea that is legitimately exciting for you. I once met the president of the International Sand Collectors Society. He had samples of sand from every country in the world, from locations like the Great Pyramids to Gettysburg. He even had some trinitite, a fused glass radioactive sand from the White Sands nuclear testing grounds, which was technically, probably dangerous or illegal to obtain. But nevertheless, his knowledge and enthusiasm were so contagious, that interaction got me excited about sand.

M: What important changes have you seen in exhibits in the last five years, and why do you think they are happening?

O: One of the biggest changes is the increased interaction with our audience. Museums are no longer “Moses coming down from the mount” with tablets of wisdom for visitors, who are merely the vessels to receive it. That sort of curator *über alles* approach has shifted, and I think for the better. Because if we really want to make our experiences as accessible to as many people as possible, we have to meet them where they are and treat them with respect, engage them to think about a topic and make them part of the process.

M: Do you know if this shift has increased attendance at museums that now work this way?

O: Speaking with Randi Korn recently on this subject, it turns out that even though the United States population is growing, museum attendance relative to that population and also across demographic strata is not growing. How do you crack that? It's a challenge to balance audience interests and needs with what a museum can offer. If a museum decided to hold a pie-eating contest and give everyone free ice cream, a lot of people would come. But is that what a museum wants to do? Would visitors attracted to this kind of activity come back? Museums are rightly saying they want to be responsive to the communities and audiences they serve, but where is the line? How do you stay true to your institution at the same time you stay true to the people you want to engage with?

That word “true” leads into a related word, which is “trust.” Because if somebody feels like they are a token or you're just en-

Space Museum and became an astronaut or a pilot. There are plenty of these stories, but how do you harvest them? I'm not minimizing the difficulty of this endeavor, but I am saying that what you measure and how you measure it matters. As a visitor, you can tell when a museum clicks. You go there and it feels welcoming and interesting. You're not thinking about yourself as the one millionth visitor there that day. You're just thinking, “This is an awesome place.”

M: How does a museum get this way? How is this “awesome” experience created?

O: That goes back to the authentic feelings and efforts of the people who created the museum experiences. In one of my museum FAQ video interviews with museum educator Leslie Bedford, she talks about an experience she had in a Japanese museum

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gaging with them to check a box or get a grant, you've broken trust. That's not how you continue any relationship, let alone a relationship between an institution and its communities. It's a tricky. But you know it when you see it. How do museums measure success? The blunt force instrument of admissions numbers are relatively easy number to come by. But what do they really mean? If your admissions numbers went up 5 percent from last year, does that mean you're a 5 percent better museum?

M: Well, admissions numbers are a measure, but they aren't the sole measure. You can't totally throw them out.

O: Well, I'll accept that you can't throw them out completely, but we over rely on them. How can we measure not just quantity but also quality of visits?

Another way to measure a museum's value relates to the stories we told each other at the beginning of this call. Some museum visits are not just one-time experiences but inspire life-changing stories. Kids visit a natural history museum, see the dinosaurs and become paleontologists. Or go to the Air &

connected with Zen Buddhism. Sitting quietly near a placid lake on the museum grounds, she heard a plop in the lake. She didn't know if this was a natural plop or a water drop that was programmed to fall. Nevertheless, it was a very impactful moment that made her think of a haiku related to that kind of experience.

There are plenty of experiences in museums and other places where people have really sweated the details because they want to frame the possibility for something awesome to happen.

M: Children are very good at sensing a flat exhibit. They're less inhibited by social expectations, “Oh, I'm in a museum, I'm supposed to like this.” They vote with their feet, or their attention span.

O: “This is boring. Let's leave.”

M: In your work with museums and other exhibit designers, are you seeing any COVID-inspired changes in either the process or the product in terms of exhibit design? Are people adjusting their plans?

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Or, are they just waiting it out until things return to “normal”?

O: The negative, knee-jerk response is the notion of a touchless museum. I understand the motivation: we need to be mindful of our visitors’ reasonable concerns about their health and safety. But simply covering up all the touchscreens, warehousing all the interactive exhibits, and making sure you have more hand sanitizer stations and floor stickers for physical distancing may look safer, but it’s not a better experience. Why should I come to your museum if basically you’re taking away everything that makes it a great experience?

So what’s a positive response? I wrote a blog post, sort of tongue-in-check, but I suggested instead of hands-on museums we should have “feets on museums.”

Bad grammar, but my point was that there are other ways to allow for physical engagement and actually increase universal design and accessibility for visitors with all kinds of cognitive capacities. A high-tech example might be a projection experience where people could use their feet—or even wheelchairs or canes—to spark a process.

Even if 500 people had stepped on that floor projection thing, the 501st visitor isn’t going to wig out by touching a spot with their feet. A low-tech example could involve installing a mat switch instead of a push button in an interactive exhibit. This is an opportunity to be more creative.

M: Some of the initial responses to remove the touchables came from museums trying to safely reopen as soon as they could, both to serve their audiences and for financial reasons.

O: The notion of the touchless museum hasn’t gone away. You can say, “Well, we can’t go back to how things were before March 2020.” But a lot of people haven’t internalized that verbiage. They really want to go back to how things were exactly before March 2020.

Most museums don’t have a large endowment to ride out COVID-19 with no changes. They should be thinking about what they can do to provide a better museum experience for more people. Forget COVID even happened.

M: Well, that’s impossible.

O: Okay, but let’s just say you acknowl-

edge we are still in the midst of COVID, but your decisions going forward are still the same whether COVID happened or not. How can we provide the best, most interesting, entertaining, fun, engaging experience and still be mindful of people’s legitimate concerns—access, financial, physical, societal? That’s still going to be the move five weeks, five months or five years from now if you are a great museum.

M: Some children’s museums have decided not to re-open until they can offer the experience they want to, so they’re going to wait until the environment is safer.

O: I applaud those museums. New York Hall of Science, a large museum in a major metropolitan area, announced that, unlike a lot of other New York museums, they’re not re-opening until after 2021. That was a really tough decision. But difficult situations show you who people and institutions really are. Who are the people, the institutions, the directors, the boards, the museum workers, who made these tough decisions? Those are the museums and the leaders in the field who I want to pay attention to. Some museums are looking for creative ways to respond to immediate needs, such as a UK museum selling grocery items through its gift shop, because the local community needs them and they aren’t easily accessible otherwise. Other museums are using their parking lots for deployment of COVID testing. Some museums have stepped up in ways that don’t neatly fit into a pre COVID understanding of what their mission is, but they still felt compelled to respond in the ways they could.

M: But many children’s museums are reopening, fully or in some capacity, for good reasons. They provide important services to children and families in their communities.

O: The question of whether—or when—to reopen relates to the question of what happens after you reopen. Anybody making predictions further out than two weeks or so is just full of beans. Too many things are changing too quickly. The reopening decision requires you to acknowledge and internalize the notion that you have to be flexible with how you’re implementing any of these decisions. You can’t use January 2020 benchmarks.

M: When you’re working on exhibit plans in the situation we’re in now, it sounds like your approach really doesn’t change. You’re still interested in the long goal.

O: I'm interested in both long and short goals. I have made shifts in exhibit designs that don't detract from the overall experience but clearly signify we are mindful of people's short-term concerns. For example, the D&H Canal Museum project includes a visitors' center with a big screen display. Initially, before COVID, we planned to use a standard touchscreen. But now we're looking at how we could change that interface. Over the summer months, a comfort level with some sort of hybrid interface has developed.

Recently, I was talking with a developer of a traveling exhibit that included a tactile sea animal component made from a composite material. They changed the material to bronze because of its antimicrobial qualities, which met the standards of the organizations with whom they were engaged to create this exhibit. Sum total: they kept a tactile experience but made it accessible and safe. This is how I want to be thinking. I'm not losing things, but I'm scaffolding the design so that if reality or perceptions—and perceptions might as well be reality—change, exhibit aspects can easily shift in terms of their implementation. That's just good design: creating exhibits that have various levels of implementation built into them. Like an A/B switch: things can be in this mode or that mode, but the experience is still a rich one.

If you care enough about your design, your museum, and your communities—the people you're trying to engage with—you're going to figure out how to do this within current constraints, whatever they may be, as well as can be done. Not everything can be designed that way, but the answer to the problem of designing powerful exhibit elements with enough flexibility to remain viable during a pandemic—or beyond—is NOT the touchless museum.

M: What are the key factors you see in place every time an exhibit design project is going really well?

O: Number one: robust conversations. Not everybody agrees all the time, but we can have passionate conversations conducted in a respectful way. With this “creative friction,” the project ends up in a better place than if everybody was wishy-washy in mealy-mouthed agreement just to get along. Too many projects are derailed by a starchitect or a top-down management situation, which can prevent the team from building the level of trust needed for everyone to feel comfortable enough to disagree with something that just doesn't feel right or espouse

ideas that aren't fully formed. If everyone always agrees or looks to one person for The Right Answer, you don't end up with the best possible product. Sometimes there are uncomfortable parts of this process, and human beings like to avoid uncomfortable situations. Sometimes one person simply speaks up and says, “this is just not good enough. I think we can do better.” And oftentimes, if you listen, the exhibit actually does turn out better because of that.

M: There's a lot of talk about the learning value of failure. Many people right now are faced with situations that are not going at all the way they had planned. Have you ever worked on an exhibit that wasn't going well? How do you respond or adjust?

O: I've been in a few of these situations. If you have too much of a predetermined endpoint in mind, you are bound to fail. Be-

new possibilities now.” Meanwhile, the first group is saying, “Yeah, the world has pushed a pause button, and that means we need to pause. We need to gather our wits, retrench, and build on a strong foundation.” A really good organization needs to acknowledge and work with both groups. You can't constantly be changing, you need a certain level of stability. But you also need to look at evolving and rethinking what you're doing. Otherwise you just ossify. It's instructive to think about and not just during COVID.

M: How do museums keep moving forward, and who do they need right now in the balance to keep going?

O: The pandemic has made a number of simmering issues more apparent. On top of the COVID-19-based health crisis is the concurrent economic crisis and a social justice and racial equality crisis. I don't envy

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cause inevitably things happen. Let's say visitors are not engaging in an exhibit in ways you planned. Is that a fail, or are you going to be open enough to look at the original concept and figure out why they are doing X instead of Y? Maybe there's something you can do with that information. A seasoned designer understands that initial concepts may have to change. It only becomes failure if you don't let go of it. Unexpected turns of events can be positive.

I've spoken with a few people in my Museum FAQ interviews about management practices, including Christian Greer from the Michigan Science Center and Anne Ackerson. A common thread was the recognition that there are two types of people in every organization, including museums. The first group always wants to be on solid ground and know everything that's happening. They need that institutional memory foundation and security, which is important for one part of the organizational structure. The second group, the yin to that yang, are the pioneers, always looking for the next thing, looking to move beyond a level of certainty. During COVID times, the latter group is now saying, “The world has pushed the pause button and we can really explore

any director because these are very difficult times with lots of complicating factors.

And we haven't mentioned the elephant in the room: the significant loss of museum jobs has fallen disproportionately on people of color and younger and emerging museum professionals. What does that mean for the future of the field?

Despite all the current difficulties and challenges, I am excited and optimistic about the future of museums and museum exhibits. Acknowledging two types of museum people, the yin-yang combo, trusting each other as they conduct robust conversations as they build enthusiasm for an exhibit—falling in love with the subjects—and engaging with their communities—jumping off from that base point is tremendously exciting to me. We have to change, the way we've been doing things, not just in exhibits but in the entire museum field, for all kinds of reasons that we've discussed.

If there's one thing that museum people often complain about, it's that they don't have enough time to fully consider where to go next. This massive cosmic pause button is an opportunity that we can't escape. One thing we have now is time. How do you want to use it?

