

“Exhibition as Dance: An Exercise in Creative Partnering.”
American Studies International, Vol. XLII, June–October 2004
As submitted by Barbara Fahs Charles, 10 May 2004

Exhibition as Dance: An Exercise in Creative Partnering

Barbara Fahs Charles

Principal, Staples & Charles Ltd., Interpretive Planners and Designers for Museums

I have often described our work, especially the exhibitions on historical themes, as a cross between a scholarly book and a Broadway show, two creative realms that combine my love of history with my love of theatre.

The “scholarly book” part is the historian or curator’s point of view that drives the concept of an engaging exhibition. This perspective, typically overtly revealed through texts, is equally powerfully expressed through selections, omissions and juxtapositions. Good exhibitions require a depth of research and attention to detail and accuracy at least equal to a well-respected publication. This authorship, especially for larger exhibitions, may actually involve a team of historians and curators, each with specific areas of expertise. In some exhibitions, these diverse voices retain their individuality and differing viewpoints are an essential part of the concept. More often, the work of many is melded, through editing, into a unified voice. Still, the best exhibitions, whether the vision of an individual or committee, reflect clarity of thought that the audience can readily understand.

In an exhibition, as in a “Broadway show,” the plot—the flow of storyline from prologue to conclusion—is the outline for action. Context needs to be established and the characters introduced. Relationships emerge. The characters—artworks and artifacts, events and people—advance the storyline. There are peaks of intensity and pauses for reflection. In a play, the audience is seated and the actors/characters advance the action. In an

exhibition, the mobility of the audience sets the pace; the objects/characters are stationary. The goal is to give these objects voice, to create a dialogue among them and with the viewers. Other theatrical analogies, especially to a Broadway show, are the costs—as expectations for quality and interactivity rise, exhibitions are increasingly expensive to produce—and the tension rises as opening night draws near. Will the vision that has been outlined on paper come together as an exciting, meaningful three-dimensional whole? Dress rehearsals for exhibitions exist only to the extent that prototypes and mock-ups have been tested or reviewed. There is never a point in advance when the whole exhibition can be experienced, and unlike Broadway shows there are no out-of-town tryouts when major parts can be restructured.

I still believe that theatrical forms and metaphors are a useful way to understand the nature of exhibitions, their creation, and their relationship to the audience; yet, more recently I have been looking at the process of developing exhibitions as “dance.” In dance there is a plot (or at least structure) and characters, but words are not central to conveying meaning. Dance is visual. Dance is form. Dance is a sensory world. An exhibition can and should be equally immersive. Visitors enter into a story that envelops them and slowly visually unfolds. Words play an important supportive, clarifying role, but if the exhibition truly works, the main messages can be understood with little or no reading.

Similar to dance, exhibitions must be carefully choreographed. Determining the structural, visual, and rhythmic embodiment of the message is the critical design issue. What is the intellectual structure that gives clarity to the ideas being expressed? What is its physical

form? Sometimes the message and/or the order of ideas need to be negotiated to reveal the underlining intellectual structure. Sometimes aspects of the concept need to be inflated or conflated to provide a rhythm to the design that the visitors will comprehend.

This process of finding structure is about partnering. With a perfect couple, two become one as they dance together. Regardless of who actually leads and who follows, they rehearse as a team, searching for just the right rhythms and moves that both feel express the essence of the desired meaning. Traditionally, in the museum world, the historian or curator led and the exhibition designer followed. This is still basically true in art-centered exhibitions. But, as exhibitions have evolved from a focus on individual objects to the creation of immersive experiences, this relationship has changed. Designers have truly become equal partners with the content providers. There is often tension when this equality is not acknowledged, and struggles as a working partnership is being forged, and agony as the partners explore creating together, without a choreographer to provide direction. But when it works well, the exhibition emerges as a unified vision.

The discussions that follow look at the development of three museum exhibitions from the perspective of this designer. These examples, all biographical, one completed, two in progress, address the creative process of partnering and finding the intellectual and creative structures that give physical shape to ideas, focus those ideas to meet the goals of the organizers, and present them in an engaging manner to the visitor.

Mark Twain / Samuel Clemens (1835–1910)

“Exhibition as Dance: An Exercise in Creative Partnering.”
American Studies International, Vol. XLII, June-October 2004
As submitted by Barbara Fahs Charles, 10 May 2004

The Mark Twain House & Museum in Hartford, Connecticut, is a destination for people interested in Twain and his writings, and for students of 19th-century American decorative arts. Sam Clemens and his wife Livy built their home in 1873/4 and lived there for twenty years. It is a landmark of American literary history. Designed by architect Edward T. Potter with interiors by Louis Comfort Tiffany and his collaborative, the Associated Artists of New York, the house is an expression of the Clemens' aesthetic taste and the immense royalties from Twain's writings. Visitors are fascinated by the richness of details in the exterior carvings and rusticated brickwork and the stenciled interior walls and carved mahogany woodwork. Twain called it a “delicious dream of harmonious color.” They are charmed by the docents' tales of family life, especially the stories Twain would make up for his daughters and the plays the children would write and perform, sometimes with their father in a comic role. In the top floor visitors visit Twain's studio where he wrote *Life on the Mississippi*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and other successful novels. And they learn that Susie Clemens died in the house from meningitis. Sam and Livy were in Europe when they learned of their daughter's death and could never bear to live in the house again. The tour is filled with engrossing stories and beautiful decorative arts, but it is nearly impossible to convey Twain's writings and the sources of his inspiration in such a saturated environment. This is the irony of many house museums dedicated to famous inhabitants. Visitors experience the environment in which a genius worked, but the intellectual and creative products for which the person is famous are more illusive.

In November 2003, The Mark Twain House opened a new Visitor and Education Center to help address this need. As the new center was under construction, Staples & Charles

was selected to work with the staff of the museum to develop the introductory gallery. We would collaborate with Debra Petke, Deputy Director, Chris Barnett, Director of Education, and Diane Forsberg, Chief Curator. Petke and Barnett, as curators of the exhibition, brought to the project a wealth of experience conveying the life and writings of Mark Twain through educational programs, though they had little experience with exhibitions as the new center would have the museum’s first gallery spaces. Forsberg, the project director (“producer” in a theatrical sense) and relatively new to The Mark Twain House, had developed exhibitions at other institutions. From our perspective, as designers for the project, we worked for Forsberg, the project director, and danced with Petke and Barnett.

The immediate question was “What should the introductory gallery introduce?” The overall site and museum are not so extensive that visitors need an orientation to the available options. Nearby, a twenty-minute film by Ken Burns provides an overview of Twain’s life and samples of his humor. Mark Twain, the man, is served well by the film. His home and family were beautifully covered in the house tour. The initial concept for the exhibition was autobiographical with emphasis on the places that inspired Twain’s writings, especially growing up before the Civil War in a small town in a slave-holding state on the Mississippi River. His most widely read works—*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—were inspired by this seemingly idyllic childhood. Other acclaimed works, such as *The Innocents Abroad*, *Roughing It* and *Life on the Mississippi*, were also a response to place and the people he meet in his travels. To some degree this repeated the content of the Burns film, but the importance of place for Twain, if we could express it in the relatively small exhibition space, could be stronger.

But Twain’s words were clearly missing, at least to us; while for Petke and Barnett, who know his writings intimately, Twain’s works were shaping their concept for the show. Quotes from his publications and letters were part of the draft texts; first editions of his books would be displayed; photos of people who were the basis for characters would be included. But as the uninitiated, we wanted to hear longer passages from Twain’s works, not just read short quotes. Twain’s writings were why we care about the man. Ultimately we all agreed that the exhibition should allow visitors, young and old, to enjoy a selection of his writings and listen for as long as they desire. The challenge was to develop an intellectual and physical structure that gave Twain’s words primacy over artifacts and illustrations. Initially, as we worked together, it felt as if we were all dancing to different music, but slowly we found common styles, and fewer toes were stepped on. As designer, we were the leading partner, but never officially.

The gallery, approximately 140 sq. meters, is nearly square and relatively small. One side is open to a large two-story hall, a place both for visitors to gather and for holding events. The plan of the exhibition expresses three conceptual goals. The primary one, putting Twain’s words at the heart of the exhibition, became a central area called “Listen to it!” comprised of six benches with attached listening devices plus two additional listening posts for wheelchair or stand-up use. Here visitors can relax, put on a headset, and listen to Twain. Presently there are twelve readings to choose from, each from one to thirteen minutes in length. More will be added in the future, as well as translations. Some selections are excerpts from Twain’s popular works such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*; others are lesser known

humorous pieces and samples of his sharpest satires from campaigns against bigotry and imperialism.

A secondary goal to invite visitors in, while defining the space physically and acoustically became Z-shaped a glass wall, carrying the title of the exhibition and a large image of Twain. From outside, visitors immediately perceive that the opportunity to listen to Twain’s writings is central to the experience. Surrounding this core, the exhibition is structured like the layers of an onion. The outermost layer, literally on the wall, is a hundred-foot mural illustrating Twain’s literary landscape. It begins with the Mississippi (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Life on the Mississippi*); segues into the Rocky Mountains (*Roughing It*); expands to the Mediterranean, represented by the Parthenon (*The Innocents Abroad*); returns to Hartford, Connecticut, site of his publisher, his home where many of his books were written, and his financial collapse; the Taj Mahal, a favorite stop on his round-the-world lecture tour which restored his monetary health (*Following the Equator*), and finally two American icons, the Statue of Liberty and the United States Capitol, to represent the values Twain’s “pen warmed-up in hell,” advocated and the inhumanity it opposed.

In front of the mural on a platform is the next layer—a series of eighteen freestanding text panels divided into four sections: “A heavenly place for a boy,” “The vagabond instinct,” “There’s millions in it!” and “A pen warmed-up in hell.” The title of each panel is a quote from Twain or the name of one of his books. Texts combine longer quotes from Twain with curatorial statements. Each panel has illustrations— of Twain, from his books, and/or the people and events that influenced him. For example, the panel about *The Adventures*

of *Tom Sawyer* includes photos of family and friends that the lead characters were based on, while the one about *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* addresses Twain’s use of the word “nigger” and the banning of the novel that Ernest Hemingway felt “all American literature comes from.” Related artifacts are in the layer closest to visitors. Cases display first editions of his books, letters, and personal items that belonged to Twain and his family. Also displayed on the platform are important large artifacts such as the type case Twain worked at in his brother’s print shop and the Paige Compositor that was his investing downfall. Intermixed are simple hands-on activities to engage young visitors. Throughout, on panels and in cases are small red magnets with the words “Listen to It!” identifying works that visitors can listen to, bringing them back to the center of the gallery.



Adolf Cluss (1825–1905)

Adolf Cluss was a contemporary of Mark Twain and a compatriot of Karl Marx. Born into a family of builders in the walled city of Heilbronn, Germany, Cluss studied engineering, was active in the Turnerverein movement and the Communist League, sailed for America in 1848 after the failed socialist uprising, and became a major force in the design of Washington DC. Cluss’s capital was known as “the red brick city,” but as his career drew to a close, Daniel Burnham’s “white city”—the Chicago Worlds Fair of 1893—caught the imagination of Washington’s leadership. The resulting MacMillan Commission created a new master plan for federal Washington and most of Cluss’ central city buildings have since been replaced by Burnham’s neo-classical vision. Today Adolf Cluss is little known, even to architectural historians. A joint project between the Stadtarchiv Heilbronn and a consortium of Washington-based institutions and individuals aims to reintroduce Cluss to

both communities, document his legacy, and use his story to discuss social aspects of architecture, planning and preservation.

The dancing partners are multiple. The Washington–Heilbronn connection started, as many projects do, through research. Cluss designed the Smithsonian’s Arts and Industries Building on the Mall. He also engineered major renovations of the Smithsonian’s Castle. Dr. Cynthia Field, director, and Sabina Dugin, architectural historian, of the Smithsonian’s Architectural History and Historic Preservation office, initiated studies of Cluss’s work to guide preservation projects and understand institutional history. Dugin’s research trip to Germany sparked the Heilbronn relationship. Further interest in Cluss developed as two of Washington’s public schools, Franklin and Sumner, built in 1869 and 1871 for white and black students respectively, were restored and a small museum and archives was established in Sumner. Cluss’s designs for both schools reflect his progressive ideas that good architecture could create ideal environments for learning. Independent researchers Harriet Lesser, formerly curator of exhibits at Sumner, Dr. Joseph Browne, now Cluss project coordinator, and Dr. William Gilcher, director of media projects at the Goethe Institute in Washington, joined ranks with Field and Dugin. As discussions evolved into planning an exhibition, the search for a site lead to The City Museum and Historical Society of Washington becoming an active partner. Dr. Laura Schiavo, exhibition curator at The City Museum, will curate the Cluss exhibition, scheduled to open in October 2005.

Our role is to design the exhibition. Dr. Schiavo will be our primary dancing partner as we move into the realization stages of the project, but for now, as it is being conceptualized,

we are participants in an open dance with multiple ideas, interests, and passions. The goal is to find an intellectual and structural style that accommodates these diverse perspectives and communicates with clarity to a public who know little about Cluss, but will recognize some of his buildings. Aspects of what we are creating in Washington will be exhibited in Heilbronn, while elements from the Heilbronn exhibition will be duplicated for Washington.

To meet the interests and aspirations of all of the partners, the exhibition must convey five aspects of Cluss and his work: his youth in Heilbronn which was then expanding beyond its historic walls, the socialist thinking of Cluss’s generation and its influence on architectural design, the robust German-American community of 19th-century Washington, the importance of Cluss’s architecture to the development of the capital city, and the preservation lessons that can be learned from the survival of a few and demolition of most of his buildings. Both the 195-square meter gallery at The City Museum and the budget will demand selectivity. We are now agreed that the core of the exhibition will focus on Cluss’s buildings—schools, churches, markets, residences—and especially his work on the Mall, where he designed four of the five 19th-century buildings and renovated the fifth (the Smithsonian Castle) after a fire. With each grouping there will be a featured building that survives and a hands-on element where visitors understand aspects of Cluss’s style, aesthetics, and social concepts by learning to “read the building.”

Virtual tours of Heilbronn and Washington will be developed on both sides of the Atlantic to be included in the exhibitions in each city. The Heilbronn tour will feature the early 19th-century city where Cluss grew up and allow visitors to step forward through time to

the turn of the 20th century, to World War II when the city was almost totally destroyed, and to the planned city of today. The Washington tour will focus on post Civil War Washington when Cluss’s work was shaping the city, and allow visitors to explore how the city changed as the Mall and its major buildings have been developed over the last century following the MacMillian plan of 1901. The Stadtarchiv Heilbronn will supply other materials on the Cluss family and 19th-century Heilbronn for the Washington exhibition, while the Washington group will create an exhibition module on the Smithsonian Arts and Industries Building for the Heilbronn exhibition. This building is especially symbolic. It was a major commission and is the most important of Cluss’s surviving designs. It was also the site in 1881 of President Garfield’s inaugural ball, an event co-chaired by Adolf Cluss and symbolic of his evolution from communist organizer to Washington insider.

.....
Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)

With some projects, the solutions seem so logical that, on hindsight, one wonders why it required so many discussions and sketches to arrive there. Focusing on Mark Twain’s writings in the introductory gallery of The Mark Twain House & Museum is a good example. The current outline for the Adolf Cluss exhibition with his built environment as the central feature also feels immensely logical. The relatively small scale of these shows demands a strong message and the peeling away of all but the most important secondary themes. Benjamin Franklin’s personality, achievements, and contributions requires a more complex interpretation and presentation.

The Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary is the umbrella group formed by five Philadelphia institutions— The Library Company of Philadelphia, the American Philosophical Society,

“Exhibition as Dance: An Exercise in Creative Partnering.”
American Studies International, Vol. XLII, June-October 2004
As submitted by Barbara Fahs Charles, 10 May 2004

the University of Pennsylvania, The Franklin Institute, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art—to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Franklin’s birth. The Library, the Society, and the University were established by Franklin. The Institute is the nation’s memorial to Franklin. All have major holdings of Franklin-related materials—manuscripts and printed matter, artworks and scientific instruments. These very diverse institutions have different interests, audiences, and reasons for collaborating on a number of programs, the major one being a 750-square meter traveling exhibition: “Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World.” These varying perspectives both enrich and challenge the intellectual and three-dimensional planning.

The Franklin Institute, a leading hands-on science center, will host the exhibition, opening in Philadelphia in October 2005. It will then travel to other science museums and history centers over the subsequent two years. The exhibition will combine precious documents and priceless artworks and instruments with a high level of interactivity—an unprecedented effort to intermix multiple learning strategies and exhibition approaches for a potential audience from eight to eighty.

Approvals rest with Dr. Rosalind Remer, executive director of the Franklin Tercentenary, and the Board comprised of directors or senior executives of each of the member institutions. Our primary dancing partner is Dr. Page Talbott, chief curator. Dr. Talbott brings significant knowledge of American material culture and history to the project. To develop interactive elements, the principals of A More Perfect Union, media producers, and Proto Productions, hands-on fabricator, are part of the core team. To continue the

metaphor, our dancing is vigorous, but we are still in the process of working out exact roles and relationships.

The current outline of the exhibition is the product of extensive historical research on topics and availability of artifacts, and numerous advisory meetings with Franklin scholars, staff of the consortium institutions, and representatives of the venues for the exhibition. The show will begin as a journey through time that takes visitors from the common image of Franklin today, largely an avuncular old man holding a kite or a rap monetary reference—“It’s all about the Benjamins, baby!”—back 250 years to the 1750s, when the first popular prints appeared of the man who tamed lightning. At the end of this journey, Franklin will introduce himself through his own words. An implicit goal of the exhibition is for visitors to be inspired by Franklin to make a difference in their own communities, just as he wrote in his *Autobiography* that he hoped his posterity would find aspects of his life worth imitating.

From this point the exhibition unfolds chronologically in themed sections with overlapping years. The exhibition texts are as yet unwritten, so the titles and dates that follow are from “working documents.” The first section, “Character Matters” (1706–1723), addresses the profound influence of Franklin’s family and Boston’s Puritan theocracy on shaping his character, giving him a commitment to hard work, thrift, and personal integrity. It also led him to chafe at authority, speak out against hypocrisy through the voice of Silence Dogood, and escape to Philadelphia. The next section, “B. Franklin, Printer” (1723–1748), looks at how Franklin charted his business success and achieved financial independence through printing. His family, and especially his wife Deborah, and some of

his inventions, will also be featured here. “Civic Ben: Civic Virtues” (1731–1751) shows how his belief that one serves God best by helping others played out in Philadelphia, where he was central to the establishment of numerous institutions and projects for civic betterment. Financially secure by the age of 42, Franklin retired from daily business to engage in scientific investigations and active government service. His scientific observations and experiments and the international recognition that his groundbreaking work in electricity brought are expressed in “The Search for Useful Knowledge” (1747–1785). His diplomacy, first among the Indians to build alliances, then in England to avoid separation, and finally so successfully in France to help assure victory, and his role in shaping both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are presented in “The World Stage” (1744–1787). “Taking Stock” (1772–1790) considers Franklin’s final years, especially his evolving position on slavery that led him from slave owner to active abolitionist, and his efforts to shape his legacy through his will and especially his *Autobiography*. At the closing of the exhibition, visitors will be brought back full circle to how the values and lessons of this extraordinary, ordinary man continue to shape lives today.

The concepts of the exhibition—the intellectual structure—are now well established. The challenge is to maintain the rich mix of ideas, artifacts, and interactives, while finding design styles and forms that guide visitors as they explore this multi-level experience. In contrast to the Mark Twain and Adolf Cluss projects, which are designed for one location, the Benjamin Franklin exhibition must travel to four other venues, each quite different architecturally. It must be built to be disassembled into smaller parts for travel by truck and airplane and then be re-assembled easily at each site. Hands-on mechanical,

“Exhibition as Dance: An Exercise in Creative Partnering.”
American Studies International, Vol. XLII, June-October 2004
As submitted by Barbara Fahs Charles, 10 May 2004

computer and video components must be highly durable and reliable. Actual design is just beginning. The style needs to be as engaging, entertaining, and intellectually stimulating as the man himself. With all of the interactives, the aim is to engage visitors in Franklin’s way of thinking and his methods of analysis and argument. Franklin was the most populist and widely read of America’s 18th-century authors. Our goal as designers and Talbott’s as curator is to develop the physical and intellectual exhibition in a manner equally open, humorous, and insightful.



In these three exhibitions, our subject matter, our partners, our clients, and our locales all differ. But the similarities, ideally, are presentations that will mesh content, design, and production so smoothly, that visitors never sense all the players and personalities, all the ideas and opinions, all the collaborations and compromises, all the prototypes and reviews that have been worked through to produce a unified presentation.

Sources of quotes:

[Hemingway on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*] Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa*, New York, 1935, pp22-3 (quoted in Stuart Hutchinson, ed: *Mark Twain: Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, Essays, Articles, Reviews*, New York, 1998, p79)

[Samuel Clemens on the décor of his house] Mark Twain, 1896, quoted on www.marktwainhouse.org.

“Exhibition as Dance: An Exercise in Creative Partnering.”
American Studies International, Vol. XLII, June-October 2004
As submitted by Barbara Fahs Charles, 10 May 2004