

THE GARDEN OF STAIRS

Combining spatial and social experience in an educational geology installation

Conference Paper for The Transformative Museum International Conference,
23-25 May 2012, Roskilde University.

Theme

Transforming visitor participation and learning.

Authors and Affiliation

Annelise Bothner-By
Research fellow
Departement of Design
Oslo National Academy of the Arts

Anne Birkeland
Senior Lecturer
Department of Exhibitions and Public Services
The Natural History Museum
University of Oslo

Contact Details

Annelise Bothner-By
Oslo National Academy of the Arts
Postboks 6853 St. Olavs plass
0130 Oslo

e-mail: anneboth@khio.no
phone: + 47 95 75 09 61

Abstract

This paper presents the development of and experience with the visitor experience experiment, 'The Garden of Stairs', realised in the Botanical Gardens of the Natural History Museum in Oslo 2011. The project was developed as part of a museum education programme, as well as part of an artistic research project at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts. The aim was to develop an installation for school-groups, with sensory experience as an entrance to the theme of landscape and registration. Further, the project should also be available for the other museum visitors, thus addressing other motivations for visiting the museum in addition to the educational.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many people will state that they visit the museum to see exhibitions, and learn and experience from them. The other visitor is not part of this intention. Yet most people visit the museum together with other people, often friends or family, or they come with their school class or other organized groups. The museum visit becomes a social event, and research shows that a majority of visitors will actually remember the social event longer than they will remember what the exhibition was about (Falk & Dierking, 1992). Further, most visitors have several interests in the visit in addition to learning. Museum researcher John Falk claims that one of the main qualities of the exhibition visit is that the visitor herself decides how and when to engage in the exhibition, thus controlling her own learning and interpretation. He suggests that this 'choice-and control'- situation is one of the explanations why so many people choose to spend their leisure time in the educational environment the museum represents (Falk 2009).

The Natural History Museum in Oslo developed an educational programme for Oslo's nine-year-old pupils on the occasion of The University of Oslo's 200 years anniversary, 2011. The theme of the educational programme, 'The budding researcher'¹, was geological research, fieldwork and landscape. 'The Garden of stairs'² was an experimental project developed for the educational program. Anne Birkeland from the museum's educational department co-operated with Annelise Bothner-By from the design department in The National Academy of the Arts Oslo in the development of this project. The project is part of an artistic research project concerned with social and spatial experience in educational exhibitions³.

The aim was to develop an installation for school-groups that would also be available for all other visitors. The first concern was to explore the distinctive perceptive qualities of the tangible space as starting point for the visitors' introduction to an exhibition theme. The second concern was to explore how spatial design can mediate for relations between people in the exhibition space, and how these encounters relate to, and enrich, the theme of the exhibition. This paper will relate the process and experience of the project 'The Garden of Stairs'.

1 NATURAL SCIENCE SUBJECT CURRICULUM Established as a Regulation by the Ministry of Education and Research on 24 June 2010, Applicable from:

1 August 2010. The Norwegian projectname is 'Forskerspiren'.

2 The Norwegian projectname is 'Trappebakkehagen'

3 The Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Programme, an artistically cross-disciplinary programme, also covering design, is a parallel to other research educations organized as academic PhD programmes. The Programme distinctive feature that artistic work shall be the chief focus of the research fellows' projects.

2) BACKGROUND

A holistic take on exhibition design

The theme 'landscape' is presented in The Natural History Museums Gallery of Geological Evolution, with original exhibition architecture from 1920. The exhibition has a classical layout with a central hall and 10 facing galleries with vitrines in oak. The spatial frame of the exhibits is thus treated in the same way as the principle of the "white cube" (O'Doherty, 1976): as a neutral backdrop framing the exhibits and freeing them from any context. The organisational overview and flow through the space is treated as one design question, while the spatial presentation of the exhibition theme is designed inside defined display cases. Experiencing nature's phenomenon was not the intention of this exhibition. This was a place where the visitors, mostly university students, were literally supposed to study the exhibition content.

In opposition to a strategy for spatial design as a neutral framework, the concurrent modernist and avant-garde architects in the first half of the last century actively treated the exhibitions space as a whole. One example is Friedrich Kiesler's design, where especial attention was paid to people's encounters with the display as part of the exhibition experience. Thus concerns about seating, the angles of the objects, and viewing positions were designed as part of the spatial narrative (Staniszewski, 1998).

The two approaches show that the term 'exhibition design' covers a heterogeneous approach to the relation between design of space and exhibition theme. We follow the tradition of Kiesler and understand exhibition design to be concerned with solving the whole situation; a design that looks after the correlation between spatial design, the people in it and the exhibits themselves, with the visitor as the core of the experience.

This strategy for exhibition design can be defined with the term 'scenographic exhibitions' (Von Arx, 2011) and has in common with 'installation art' that it offers the viewer activities to take part in, and that the meaning of the work evolves through this participation (Cappelen & Andersson, 2011). In this project we are not creating an artwork, but staging a situation that communicates the landscape-theme through our choices of context, situation and structure. Thus the staging is the communicating strategy creating the background for individual and cultural understanding and interpretation of the scene (Cappelen & Andersson 2011).

It needs to be emphasised that this understanding of scenographic exhibition design does not imply that the spatial design directly illustrates the exhibit/exhibition theme, which is a

common understanding (Eriksson, 2004). Rather, as opposed to an illustrative strategy, the spatial frame can potentially enhance the experience of the exhibit by creating attention to the exhibits in surprising or opposing contexts that are in dialogue with the exhibition theme. Thus the spatial framing of the theme has the potential to adding perspective or narrative.



Figure 1. The Gallery of Geology, the Natural History Museum, designed in 1920, Oslo, 2011.

Embodied experience

The previously mentioned Frederick Kiesler's holistic exhibition design involved the comprehension of exhibition not only as something you look at, but a space you actually take part in with your whole body. His spatial elements offer a choreography for your body's movements through and positioning in the exhibition space. This way the designer plan that the visitor embody experiences and re-activate already embodied experiences as part of the exhibition. The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes the body as our means of having a world. It is through our perception we engage with and understand our surroundings (Abram 2005, Merleau-Ponty 1945/2005).

While the Natural History Museums Gallery of Geology is a place designed for the intellectual study, the museums educational programs in geology are concerned with the body as our means of meeting phenomenons of nature. The museum lecturer uses sensory experiences as starting point for the teaching. The educational goal of "The Budding Researcher" was to understand that research is based on observation and registration. This entails that the pupils should become familiar with the qualities of the landscape surrounding them, and be able to verbalize and describe these qualities. It is Anne Birkeland's experience that the nine-year-old fourth grade pupils are still of the age were they need concrete examples to understand abstract terms. Many pupils in Oslo have Norwegian as their second language, and becoming acquainted with the terms used to describe and define nature and landscape will be the most important tool to comprehend the landscapes qualities. Relating to their own sensory experiences, they will comprehend the meaning of the landscape terms. According to Anne Birkeland, the educational program should strive to offer a varied a learning situations to stimulate the children's multiple intelligences and learning styles. The sensory and co-operative offer is one that will include the less theoretical capable pupils (Gardner 2001).

The other visitor as part of the exhibition experience

The aim of social interaction in exhibitions will often be the dialogue that leads to a verbal acknowledgement of the experience, as this reflection is an important part of a learning process (Black 2005). Thus social interaction in exhibitions often imply that there is designed a given

task for co-operation, more or less verbally explicit. An other strategy is to design the exhibition displays in such a way that they invite co-operation (Myllykoski, 2010)⁴.

For the school group, the museum visit is within the educational context, and task-driven interaction is a good way of learning. But the individual visitors have different motivations for entering into task-driven social interactions. The previously mentioned researcher John Falk claims that the motivations for visiting and engaging in are identity related. Thus the identity related motivation will also be the filter for how they react to the exhibition and what experiences the visitor brings back. John Falk reduces the diverse motivations into five identity related motivations: 'the explorer', 'the experience seeker', 'the recharger', 'the facilitator' and 'the professional/hobbyist'. The explorer digs directly into things. The experience seeker wants to see the icon. The recharger wants a mental break in a relaxing setting, and the professional/hobbyist has a specific theme or object as motivation for her visit. The facilitator is concerned with the other visitors' experience and wants his friends and family to have a good time. Thus different visitors will have different motivations to partake in a task of social interaction (Falk, 2009).

In the light of the diverse engagement motives of the general visitors, it is interesting to explore how to treat the social dimension of an exhibition more openly than a facilitated task for interaction. May the experience of the other visitor add a dimension to the experience of the exhibition's theme. The artist Matts Leiderstam's projects with landscape paintings are examples of how to design for a meaningful presence of other visitors. For him, the act of seeing is a central theme. Curating landscape painting exhibitions he literally plans for our observation of the other visitors gaze towards the landscape portraits. The other visitor are thus treated as the intermediate object that adds perspective to our experience of the exhibition's phenomenons. The artist thus lifts the experience of the other to an intellectual level.

⁴ The Classics Exhibition at the Finnish science centre Heureka is one example, described as a structure for interaction, with its design for the visiting families' dialogue and co-operation around the science experiments.

3) DESIGNING THE GARDEN OF STAIRS

Approaching the theme of the educational program: landscape research, registration of landscape shapes and recognition of the landscape's qualities and characteristics, we started out with idea-workshops and experiments on how to create sensory representations of landscape qualities in The Gallery of Geology. This process ended with deciding on making use of the fact that the sensory experience of nature already exists in another of the museums educational areas, namely The Botanical Garden. This space had little former tradition of addressing other themes than the botanical. With several suggestions of intervening installations for different nature-phenomenons to choose between, we decided to work with the landscape shape hill, and the aim was that people should register this landscape shape, and investigate further the information that lies in the encounter with this phenomenon. We chose a hill that lay in a rather inactive part of the garden as the exhibition object for this project.



Figure 2. Framing the qualities of the hill with stairs

Framing the exhibit

The sensory experience of landscape is constant. In the work with the spatial design, it became important to frame this continuous dialogue between body and space, and make the visitor conscious of the qualities of the experience of the landscape. We chose to emphasise the landscape with contradictory elements, and through this strategy direct the attention towards the qualities of the hill.

The hill was surveyed and the contour lines of the garden's map painted in full scale with grass paint normally used for football fields, thus emphasising the quality of the hill's gradient, as well as introducing the topic of how to read maps. A series of man-made steps of stairs were placed around the hill, thus contrasting the constructed man-made climb versus the nature's climb. The stairs were an immediately recognizable and readable element. The steps had different sizes, colours and gradients, so as to emphasise that the hill shape was not constant. The steps also function as an illustration of how to read the equidistant between the contour lines. A series of signs with text and illustration was added on separate steps. These spatial elements had the function of a spatial framework of the exhibit: the hill itself, thus making the experience of the hill more than it is. The exhibition was treated as a whole situation.

"In regard to the garden of stairs I am sometimes unsure about what is the exhibition. Seen literally, the exhibition consist of steps, signs and painted contour lines. Still, it is first in the instance when you start using the elements and the hill that it becomes clear what these elements are for. In a way, it is this experience, sometimes guided by the museum lecturer, that is the exhibit. This hill itself couldn't be called the exhibition? Its just there". Quote Anne Birkeland , March 2012.



Fig. 4. Contour lines and sign,



Fig. 5 Steps of stairs.

Planning for acknowledging embodied experiences

The main concept of the exhibition design is to activate the pre-recognized experience of the landscape shape hill, and thus lead an interest to investigate this phenomenon further. The intention was that already when seeing the added steps of stairs in the hillside the visitor become aware of the specifics of the hill, due to previous experiences with this landscape shape and man-made construction. These shapes are so commonly familiar, that this reading would almost be universal.

The signs placed on other steps had suggestions to tasks you could perform in different ways in order to investigate the phenomenon of gravity. In the text, suggestions for active investigation were given just as much place as the explanations. Thus the phenomenons of gravity, landscape characteristics and how to read maps were introduced through activities.



Figure 6. Embodied experience of gravity

The other visitor as part of your own experience

In the design of the garden of stairs we plan for three ways of integrating the experience of the other visitor in our own experience of the theme. Firstly the observation of someone else

climbing the hill, was planned as part of the visitor experience. The act of the other visitor should work as the intermediate object between us and the hill, adding to the first notion of the steps, an even further recognition of the qualities of the hill-shape.

Secondly the steps are such a familiar element that the visitors might hardly register them, unless they were activated in some way. All the steps were moveable and possible to puzzle together, infinitely creating more sculptural elements. This is potentially a possibility for co-operation between visitors.

And thirdly this possibility to create a stair for someone else also adds a social value to the steps. One question was therefore if the interest in partaking in assembling stairs and possession of the activity would be affected by the fact that someone else has built the stairs you are climbing or remounting, and the fact that someone else will possess the stairs that you created.

4) THE IMMEDIATE EXPERIENCE WITH THE CHOSEN DESIGN

Already a few days after installation the necessity for information became clear. Even though this installation was meant to be self-explanatory, most other elements in the museum have signs. Thus people kept asking what this was. An introduction poster was placed on the top of the hill.

The next reconsideration was the tactical placement of the steps in the hill. If they were too close to the pathway, less people left the path, as they could comprehend them from this distance. Further from the path, the visitors curiosity made them leave the pathway. The result was that more people engaged with the elements.

Thirdly, the stairs of steps were left unmoved the first week. We added a verbal invitation to move and reassemble the steps in the introduction poster. But it was only when we found that the reason nobody moved the steps was that the assembly created at the first installation looked too planned and meant to be, and we then started to pull steps apart to make it look more messy and unfinished, that people started moving them. All through the installation period, every now and then, the stairs had been assembled to a long finished looking shape, and then it might not be changed for several days.

5) THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE WITH THE GARDEN OF STAIRS:

The Garden of stairs was available from medio August until early November 2011. During this period, a wide range of visitor groups visited. We regularly observed and interviewed the visitors in the garden.

The garden of stairs and fourth grade school-groups

The experience with the main target group for the project, the nine-year-old school pupils, was generally positive. This group was facilitated through the whole visit. The museum lecturers' experience was that the pupils were very engaged and enjoyed taking part in the tasks given. The lecturer would spend about an hour giving the pupils different tasks, and the sensory experience of the hill was the entrance to ask questions and introduce the overall theme of landscape qualities and the specific themes of maps and contour lines, gravity and the distinctive features of a hilly landscape, compared to other landscapes. The pupils were eager and wanted to participate. They all jumped from the stairs representing the equidistance between the contour lines in the hill. They ran up and down the hill, feeling the forces of gravity kinetically. The transfer to discussions about what happened and why, and transferring the experiences to reflections on the subject functioned well.



Figure 7. Nine year old pupils standing on a contour line.

The other visitors engagement with the installation

The Natural History Museum and Botanical Garden lies in central Oslo city. The educational garden is not a park, but due to its situation in the city, it is used both as an educational museum space, as a park for recreation, as well as the daily pathway to and from work. Thus the motivation in the confrontation with the Garden of Stairs was very diverse.

Within the great variety of approaches, the identity related motifs of John Falk were recognizable. In general, a distinct difference between tourists that came especially to visit the museum and garden and the accidental passer by was obvious. In bold outline, the first group tried the different ways to engage in the installation, climbing the steps, reading all the signs and moving the steps. The second group had all kinds of levels of approaches.



Figure 8. Examples of the visitors varied approaches.

Children are definitely the clearest 'explorers', literally running down the hills and engaging in the stairs. Quite a few of their adult companions would partake in this impulsive exploring, while others would either find a place to sit down in the sun and observe, like the 'recharger', or they would engage in reading the suggested tasks and information on the signs and involve the children in this information. Thus they adapted the 'facilitator' role.

Adult groups had the same diversity in their approach, but in general a little less of the immediate and active exploration, more often entering the installation after reading the poster and one or two signs. The adult groups seemed often to visit the garden as part of the museum.

The 'professional' or 'hobbyist' was not that easy to recognize. This might be due to the fact that the theme is quite universe and not specialised enough to interest a Natural History Museum 'professional/hobbyist'. But more surprising 'professionals' in another field were the ones that were interested in the installation. This was the un-planned-for group of teachers, caretakers and people responsible for physical education, that were interested in the projects pedagogic qualities. Even a couple of artists that worked either with decorating children's schools or kindergartens. These visitors did not engage themselves physically with the installation, but appreciated it intellectually.

The ones that hardly engaged in, but just made the effort to pass by the installation, stop to take a look and read what it is about, and then continue down the hill, were the ones that came alone. This group seemed to belong to the regular users of the garden, not using it as the educational space, but probably on their way somewhere, walking the dog or taking a stroll.

Then there were the visitors that made the installation their own with unpredictable approaches. Some started competitions in running and jumping, some used the steps as a lunch spot in the sun. The steps were left in surprising new assemblies, like a circle or an obstacle course, and other unpredictable modifications of the intended activities on the hill.

The other unpredicted visitor group was the kindergartens. Kindergartens are regular guests in the garden and the museum, even though the museum has little activities to offer these groups. The classical exhibition is even too high for the younger kids to be able to see anything. The garden of stairs became very popular with this visitor group, and several kindergartens came several times with children groups. For these younger children the bodily experience of the climb was the investigation in itself.

Immigrants were often observed reading and playing in the garden. This pleased the museum, as the introduction of the verbal terms as tools for understanding the museums themes is one of the challenges in the communication to this visitor group.

What all these approaches have in common is that they in different ways engage with the installation, sometimes on a merely embodied level, but the majority would acknowledge that this installation is addressing the qualities of the landscape shape and interpret the meaning of the installation. Thus the garden of stairs is an open installation to the different visitor's motivations but still consistent as a communicator.

The interaction and design researchers Birgitta Cappelen and Anders-Petter Andersson argues for dynamic staging of interactive installations. Her arguments can be transferred to the analog installation the Garden of Stairs. She argues that ‘installations have to be open to many possible structures, interpretations, interaction forms and roles the users can take, and shift between dynamically’(2011). As the essence of the installation is that the users are co-creators in the staging act.

They further argue for several staging strategies, which have to do with openness to genre, time and space (2011). In the Garden of Stairs, the choices of time and place are not open, rather it is the installed spatial elements in relation to the specific situation/space that makes the exhibition. This is what renders an exhibition more than an interactive installation. But still, across visitor roles the installation still communicates what we want the visitor to register, namely the qualities of the landscape. This might be due to the bodily entrance into the theme or it is due to the universal interpretation of a hill.

“This is really nice that it is just laying there so you can choose yourself if you want to engage. In Germany there would have been a guide telling you what to do”, German tourist woman, august 2011.



Figure 9. Examples of the continuously changing assembly of Steps

The experience of the other visitor

Did the act of the other visitor climbing the hill have effect on own experience? No one answered directly positive to this question. One explanation can be that the other visitor's use of the hill do not add a new narrative about the hill, but rather tells the same story that the steps already represent. An other explanation could be that the focus towards the other visitor is hard to obtain, as this installations narrative is not about people at all, it is about the physical phenomenon the hill.

Even so it was obvious that the social relations did have impact on the experience. As mentioned above, the single person would hardly engage actively, just read observe and pass by. While most groups would stop and take a look, and if they came close to the elements, they would start co-operating. Research has shown that for visiting groups a large part of their attention is devoted to the people with whom they arrive (Falk& Dierking 1992). For the facilitator this is the leading motif in their visitor experience (Falk 2009). But not only the groups that were familiar with each other interacted. As soon as one person interacted with the installation, someone else would engage. People with no former relation to each other started co-operating, usually non-verbally. In 15 minutes 10-12 people engaged themselves, and the assembly of stairs would completely have altered several times. According to John Falk research shows that people watching is an interest highly appreciated in the museum. In addition to curiosity the visitor tends to observe the other to gather information, and tend to copy each other's actions (Faulk& Dierking 1992).

Summary and surprises

The Garden of stairs turned out a good experiment in transforming visitor learning and participation. The design strategy of treating the spatial experience holistic resulted in a very different exhibition or installation than the Natural History Museum has tradition. The embodied experience of the phenomenon was the main focus. The museum lecturers had good experiences with the targeted school groups, and the other visitors appreciated the installation. One main quality was that it is an open installation that can be approached in different ways and engagement levels, but still communicates for a common interpretation. This resulted in surprising effects among the visitors, as other visitor groups than intended, especially the kindergartens, became important users. All in all the 'Garden of Stairs' introduced a transformation in how to use the museums botanical garden, and what kind of educational projects the garden can contain and museum can offer.

REFERENCES

- Abram, D., 2008, Filosofi på vei til økologi. D. Abram: *Sansenes magi*.
Å se mer enn du ser : persepsjon og språk i en mer-enn-menneskelig verden, Flux.
- Black, Graham, 2005, *The Engaging Museum Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*, Routledge, New York
- Cappelen, Birgitta & Andersson, Anders-Petter, 2011, *Co-created staging : situating installations*.
// Interactive Media Arts Conference, IMAC2011, Re-new digital arts festival. – Copenhagen.
- Eriksson, Hege Maria, 2004, *Museumsarkitektur. En studie av nyere norske museumsbygg*.
ABM_skrift nr 7, Oslo.
- Falk, John H. & Lynn D. Dierking, 1992, *The Museum Experience*. Howells House, Washington.
- Falk, John H., 2009, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*. Left Coast Press, California.
- Gardner, Howard, 2001, *Disciplin og dannelse. Betydningen af det sande, det smukke og det gode*, Gyldendal Uddannelse,
- Kiesler, Frederick J., 1996, *Selected Writings*, Verlag Gerd Hatje,
- Leiderstam, Matts, 2010, *Seen From Here*, Verlag fur moderne Kunst, Dusseldorf.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, (Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005), *Phenomenology of Perception*, Roulegde classics, London and New York.
- Myllykoski, Mikko, 2010, *Less is More*, Exhibitionist Fall'10, The National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME), USA.
- O'Doherty, Brian, 1976, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, The Lapis Press, Los Angeles.

Staniszewski, Mary Anne , 1998, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, The MIT Press.

Von Arx, Serge, 2011, Norsk Kulturråds årskonferanse 2011, *Scenekunstens praksis og museets rom*, (videostreamed lecture) <http://www.norskkulturrad.no/arskonferanse/videoklipp-fra-arskonferansen/>.