

# Museums with a Mission

*What's the purpose of a museum? The old answer: to house and to display dead stuff — the museum as mausoleum. The new answer: according to designer Ralph Appelbaum, to experience life and learning. He creates museums with a mission.*

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Not long ago, museums were temples for the dead, mausoleums where you'd walk past walls of paintings, or stroll on a sea of linoleum to peer into glass cases filled with artifacts from ancient times and distant places, or endure a slight odor of formaldehyde to look at wall-size displays of scientific factoids and dead plants and animals.

Then came a spate of museums that were similar to playpens for the young. Recognizing that kids want to touch things, to do things, designers of children's museums worldwide began including hands-on displays and interactive exhibits.

Today, there are the museums of Ralph Appelbaum. Appelbaum and his team of 70 designers at Ralph Appelbaum Associates (RAA) have created more than 100 public spaces in more than 50 cities during the past 20 years, fashioning innovative environments that make stories real, that create total-immersion experiences, that spur the imagination, that awaken the emotions, and — most important — that expand the mind. These public spaces have a public purpose: Their design reflects their mission.

Appelbaum's firm, which is best known for the starkly moving U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, DC, has created a diverse, award-winning collection of museums, including the Intel Museum, in Santa Clara, California; the Museum of African-American History, in Detroit; the Hall of Biodiversity and the Hall of the Universe, which are part of the American Museum of Natural History, in New York City; and the Corning Museum of Glass, in Corning, New York.

Appelbaum, 57, who is bearded, gray-haired, and exceptionally intense, views his firm's work as a synthesis of art and mission. He uses the tools of technology, design, film, architecture, and storytelling to accomplish what he describes as the "social good" of sharing meaningful information: He means to use the power of design to display the potential of human society. "What we do isn't just about exhibit design," he says. "It's about helping institutions create a sense of mission. Ultimately, we are agents provocateurs. Museums are really an ethical system; they present to society the things and the ideas that we believe are worth valuing."

## First the Story, Then the Design

Appelbaum believes that design should begin with words — the ideas and impressions that the museum wants to convey to its audience. For that reason, all RAA exhibits tell a story. "The old style of exhibit making was to place a series of black boxes around a formal great hall, with no rhyme or reason or connection between one box and the next," he says. "We try to control the sequence of experiences that visitors have. We design the spaces in between the exhibits. That does not mean that we control people. It means that we construct a strong linear experience, one that tells a clear story and that lets visitors break away to explore various aspects of an exhibit in more depth."

At the Corning Museum, displays tell the stories of various inventors' discoveries: the development of safety glass, the automated bottle maker, fiberglass, fiber-optic cable. The Holocaust Museum issues identity cards that let visitors follow the fate of a survivor or a victim of the Holocaust. Throughout that exhibit, the experiences of individuals are told with everyday objects: a rusted milk can in which Jewish resistance fighters hid issues of underground newspapers and other materials that documented the horror of the Holocaust; piles of scissors, kitchen utensils, and other necessities that Jews brought with them to the death camps, believing that they were on their way to a new home.

RAA's obsession with content and story is contagious, argues Rob Cassetti, 42, creative director of the Corning Museum. "We spent nearly a year trying to acquire an authentic replica of the mirror that's on the Hubble Space Telescope just because RAA insisted on it," Cassetti says. "Making a plastic model would have been easier and cheaper, but we were already infected with the idea of authenticity. We got the real thing because we knew it would tell the story better."

Appelbaum's passion for having the story inform the design is reflected in RAA's staff — an eclectic collection of both designers and content experts. Among them are historians, artists, and even a paleontologist. "We have people from a broad range of

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disciplines because our front-end process is very intense,” Appelbaum explains. “No one here has a degree in ‘exhibit design.’ All of us have come from other fields and want to apply our skills in a socially relevant way.”

### An Exhibit Is an Experience

Designing a space that is functional, interesting, and beautiful is a difficult challenge in itself. Museum exhibits have the additional burden of explaining complex ideas in a way that allows people to absorb them quickly and easily. “People don’t learn by reading a textbook standing up,” Appelbaum says. So RAA’s designs allow visitors to experience the idea that an exhibit seeks to describe. In the Natural History Museum’s Hall of Biodiversity, for example, RAA recreated a section of the Amazon forest. The display uses latex molds of intricate leaves made from real flora, a wildlife soundtrack, and replicas of nearly two dozen varieties of trees to bring the forest to life. Hidden projectors cast an image of a watering hole onto a screen behind the trees, which gives the scene depth and realism.

The Hot Glass Show at the Corning Museum features expert glassblowers at work in the foreground. At the back of the exhibit, visitors can see crystal glassware being made in an actual factory. “Part of the beauty of Ralph’s work is that he never underestimates visitors’ intelligence,” Cassetti says. “He brings complex ideas to life in ways that stimulate people’s curiosity. Here, they feel the heat of a 2,100-degree oven. We’ve rewritten the script for the Hot Glass Show dozens of times, each time adding more detail and information in response to visitors’ questions.”

### A Safe Place for Social Learning

Conveying information is a formidable mission; enabling understanding is even more difficult. How does RAA help visitors grapple with a mind-boggling number like 6 million or comprehend an abstraction like the scale of the universe? The answer goes to the heart of the museum experience: by showing as well as telling.

In the newly opened Hall of the Universe, for example, a sphere 87 feet in diameter provides a reference point for the size of the observable universe. A walkway that wraps around the sphere lets visitors view objects of different size — from a golf ball to a basketball to a hulking globe — to show how heavenly bodies compare in size: How big is Earth compared to the universe? Which is bigger, the sun or the moon? “We were trying to help people contemplate the question ‘How big is the universe?’,” explains Eliot Hoyt, 32, a content coordinator at RAA who works with the Museum of Natural History. “You can’t do that by just spitting out a bunch of numbers that

no one can visualize.”

In the tour of the Newseum, in Arlington, Virginia, a museum of media and the history of journalism, one of the last stops is the Video News Wall. Measuring 126 feet by 10.5 feet, the wall is a seamless display of breaking news from satellite feeds around the world. On the ground floor, below the wall, are the day’s front pages from 70 of the world’s newspapers. The display bombards visitors with a forceful message: Around the globe, the media delivers a daily deluge of powerful information that connects and changes the world — without demanding that anyone read a single word of it.

To Appelbaum, this kind of learning by doing — delivering a message by enacting it — is the ultimate success. “Museums are often described as secular temples,” he says. “But museums are actually safe harbors where people are able to express a unique body language — one of pondering, thinking, and marveling. All museums have a sense of shared social experience that is a pleasure to see because it rarely happens in other public places. It took us 20 years to get people to recognize that these institutions don’t just happen. They are, in fact, highly managed, highly packaged, highly orchestrated, carefully written, and obsessively designed. We are committed to that kind of social learning.”

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