

Back to the Future of Museum Exhibit Development

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“As a supernal unity, essence calls for representation. Devoid of unity, existence in turn reaches out toward transcendence.”

Giancarlo Maiorino

Who are we? Where have we come from? Where are we going? These ancient questions still hold true today. Since many museums are repositories of man’s collective memories, experiences, traditions, achievements and perhaps collective wisdom, museum exhibitions often address these age-old themes, helping us make sense of life. As we consider these questions, as we try to make meaning of them, individuals, cultures, societies and organizations constantly evolve, regress, and self-organize in various combinations of form and complexity. So, too, the museum exhibition development process evolves and changes. Museum development teams respond to evolutionary change in this process. They strive to offer meaningful exhibitions that reflect our environment and ourselves, exhibitions that touch the past, present and future. While the fundamental questions remain the same, the answers are dynamic. The unifying force is man’s search for meaning. The museum exhibition development process is one salient venue that can aid in this quest.

The entire 1999 fall issue of the *Exhibitionist*, a journal published by the National Association of Museum Exhibition, focuses on the theme of meaning-making and museum exhibitions (*Exhibitionist*, Fall, 1999). In this issue, Dr. Jay Rounds, a well-regarded museum theorist addresses the notion of a major paradigm shift within the museum profession. The following excerpt from his article (Rounds 1999) is striking:

“The most exciting potential of the meaning-making paradigm lies in the possibility that we can learn to create exhibits that visitors experience as powerful vehicles for exploring such ‘deep meaning’”.

Jay Rounds, Ph.D.

Exhibitionist, Fall, 1999

The emergent meaning-making paradigm within the field of museology may very well be the impetus for new ideas and change within the museum exhibit development process.

Archetypal Pattern Analysis: An Overview

In the spirit of interdisciplinary investigation and collaboration, I will describe an ontological methodology that, when applied to the museum exhibit development process, offers the possibility to create more powerful exhibitions that can facilitate the exploration of “deep meaning” that Dr. Rounds suggests. The method is called Archetypal Pattern Analysis, and its approach is based on archetypal field theory (for more on archetypal field theory, see Conforti 2003). This approach to museum exhibit development is a perspective that intends to complement, not change, the current museum exhibit development process. Towards the end of the article, I will give the reader an overview of this method using a beautiful sculptural exhibit to illustrate the approach.

First, an archetype may be defined as a prototype, the original pattern or model from which all things of the same kind are based. Another way of saying it is an archetype comprises those core, fundamental and universal properties that make something what it is. An archetype is the basic configuration of something that identifies itself to the world. It is significant to note that this configuration holds true from the physical realm through to the symbolic realm. An example of an archetype is a chimney. The core properties or basic nature of a chimney is to eliminate or vent byproducts from some type of heating process and provide a draft to continue the circulation of air that keeps the heating process going. A chimney is a system of sorts. The conversion of fuel into heat, no matter its source, needs a way for byproducts to escape, and a chimney supports this process. A chimney also provides the mechanism (draft) to continue the flow of air that feeds the heat conversion.

An archetype holds varying degrees of complexity in terms of its physical and symbolic form but stands alone from personal associations. For instance, an individual may view an exhibit about a chimney or dream about a chimney and make many personal associations: Santa Claus climbing down a chimney, a chimney fire from the buildup of soot, a childhood memory of a bird flying down a chimney. Yet, the archetype of “chimney” is something that allows for a system of exchange. The previous paragraph addressed the chimney archetype in its physical form. In the symbolic realm, one could say a chimney represents a respiratory system of exchange that occurs in every living cell, organism, and system throughout life cycles. Even the planet has a respiratory system. The chimney symbolizes a process that keeps a constant equilibrium within a system. In either domain, the invariable nature of “chimney” exists.

Archetypal Pattern Analysis is a perspective that identifies, translates and analyzes the archetype of the image, theme or story being expressed by the particular museum exhibition. The purpose of this approach is to determine the archetype of the exhibition (the model, its invariable nature), translate the information on multiple levels, and ensure, by way of analysis, that all the elements of the exhibition are consistently related to and aligned with the exhibit expression. That is, each part of the exhibit is coherently related to the image, story or central theme of the museum exhibition.

The intention and optimal result of this approach allows for a powerful resonance to occur between museum exhibition and visitor. A strong resonance creates and pulls the visitor into the world of the exhibition. The visitor becomes captivated by the exhibition. Consider the dynamic of two people falling in love. When this phenomenon occurs, two people feel pulled into a strong orbit of attraction. Chemistry is felt whether understood or not. A field of resonance is undeniable between the two individuals. The future of their relationship is unknown at this point. We are aware that levels of complexity exist, and many factors will determine the course of the relationship. Yet, opportunity is there for numerous possibilities. Likewise, strong and congruent archetypal expression in the form of an exhibition can attract visitors. Like the dynamic of falling in love, the attraction can be quite powerful. Many factors will determine if and what type of interaction the visitor will have with the exhibit. Resonance provides the attraction and sets the stage for opportunity and possibilities.

More on Archetypes and Archetypal Patterns

One could say that archetypes are like prototypes – standard examples of universal images, themes or stories inherent in the human psyche. Everything we see in the material world has an archetypal base to it. Every image, every theme, every story has a universal origin which contains the ancient roots or essential features of itself.

In Jungian psychology, an archetype is defined as “a collectively inherited unconscious idea, pattern of thought, image, etc., universally present in individual psyches.” (Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary, 1996). An example of this is the archetype of the hero. The hero, like all the archetypes, is present in the physical as well as symbolic worlds. For example, we may know an actual hero within our personal life. We “know it” because it is universally present in individual psyches. Down through the ages, the hero archetype has been represented in the symbolic realm. Different cultures have their own versions and stories of the hero, but the ontology of the hero image is the same: someone who possesses and demonstrates daring, brave deeds and noble qualities at risk to himself. When we experience or hear about someone who has exhibited these patterns of behaviors e.g. saving a child from a burning building with risk to himself, we, both as individuals and collectively, are aware that this individual is a hero.

Archetypes are the invariable and fundamental nature of form and structure within psyche and matter. Each archetype contains its own specific archetypal patterns. Patterns may be defined as a regular or repetitive form, order or arrangement of matter, thoughts, behaviors, and ideas. Michael Conforti, in his book, Field, Form and Fate, states:

“[Archetypal] Patterns can be viewed as material representations of archetypal, informational fields expressed in space and time. They exist as external mappings of internal processes, be it morphogenetic

promptings in the biological domain or symbolic, archetypal expressions found in the human psyche”
(Conforti, 2003).

These patterns are the morphogenetic (i.e. dealing with form and structure) underpinnings, the innate ordering principles (Rounds, 2006) of the core properties of a particular archetype. One might liken archetypal patterns to blueprints. A pine tree, for example, contains certain innate properties or patterns that distinguish it from an oak tree. As long as pine trees have existed, the configuration of these dominant properties or patterns has existed.

Museum Exhibitions and Archetypes: The Connection

By definition, museum exhibitions are expressions of archetypes because they express images, themes or stories. Exhibits are also amplified expressions of archetypes because the image, theme or story is taken out of context from the real world and created in exhibition form. This usually occurs within the confines of a museum or a special space designated for the exhibition. In a sense, the exhibition isolates and spotlights the dominant archetype it is expressing in a way that intends to capture its audience.

The dominant archetypal patterns of the exhibition are the common threads that resonate deeply within visitors’ psyches regardless of culture, society and time in history. When all elements in a museum exhibition relate and work together to express its image, story or theme in a powerful way, the opportunity for visitors to connect with the archetype increases. This holds true whether visitors are cognizant or unaware of the underlying patterns within the museum exhibition. More than likely, they are not conscious of these patterns. Yet, on a deep unconscious level, visitors “know it”. Similar to the experience of a gourmet meal, a people may not identify, be aware of or notice all the subtle ingredients in the meal, but they know a great meal when they see and taste it. All the consistent patterns of quality ingredients, specific methods to cook a particular meal, flavors added, presentation, and attention to detail make it a gourmet experience.

Human beings engage with great museum exhibitions in the same way they do with other great visual media. One reason is that archetypes function as meaning-carrying structures (Conforti, 2003). For example, family photographs (images) that depict us as babies or young children help us remember and integrate who we were and who we are becoming. Watching a great film, such as *Shawshank Redemption*, is another example. This movie expresses the deep underlying archetypal theme of human survival and friendship that human beings relate to regardless of physical, social or cultural environment.

So, too, museum exhibits often function as meaning-carrying structures, capturing the dominant - those deep structural patterns that hold the integrity of the specific theme that’s being represented. As you have experienced or can imagine, museum exhibitions are able to give us a sense of meaning about humanity, nature and our world. Museum exhibitions have been and can be powerful sources of archetypal expression offering visitors the opportunity to engage with and increase awareness and understanding of their past, present and future. Museum exhibits provide the bridge between the universal archetype and the individual’s personal or subjective perspective (this point will be addressed later in the article).

A Museum Exhibition as a Meaning-Carrying Structure

Our experiences with the archetypes (images, themes, stories) are one of the ways that human beings make meaning of the world (Conforti, 2003). Meaning-making is multi-dimensional including not only cognitive experiences but emotional ones as well. One can easily see, then, that our experiences with museum exhibitions hold great possibilities for individuals and groups to connect with and experience the expression of many different archetypes. Individuals as well as humanity as a whole, search for meaning, are drawn to meaning-carrying structures and desire to learn and understand more about themselves and their environment.

A museum exhibition titled, *Wolves and Humans: Coexistence, Competition and Conflict* is an outstanding example of how an exhibition is a meaning-carrying structure that creates a strong resonance and engages the visitor with the exhibition. This particular museum exhibition opened in December of 1983 at the Science Museum of Minnesota; closed in July of 1984; and toured for eight years before becoming a permanent installation in 1993 at the International Wolf Center in Minnesota.

“The exhibition defined a theme – wolves and their relationship to humans – and explored that theme through the disciplines of the sciences, humanities, and arts.” (McLean and McEver, 2004, pg 47). The feature display shows a re-creation of a wolf pack active during the winter kill of a white-tailed deer in a north woods setting (McLean and McEver, 2004). The viewer observes a wolf pack involved in a basic survival activity. The unique roles, postures, sounds, and other behavioral interactions that various members of the pack take during a winter kill of a white-tailed deer are brought to light in such a way that draws the visitor into the world of the wolf.

The scope of the exhibition includes multiple supporting exhibits or elements: folklore, paintings, sculpture, literature, scientific and historical research and the like. Some elements are interactive such as a “howling booth” and a walk-in wolf den and others describe many cultural and human perceptions of wolves whether real or imagined. Yet, each element of the exhibition consistently relates to and supports the particular theme: wolves and their relationship to humans. In the case of this complex exhibition, this stated theme is also the dominant archetypal pattern. The dominant archetypal pattern is the major meaning-carrying structure. The supporting elements intensify the experience. It is this amplification and coherence to the dominant archetypal pattern– wolves and their relationship to humans – that create such a powerful resonance whereby the visitor is immersed and absorbed into the world of the wolf.

As visitors interact with this exhibit, perhaps they are unaware of the deeper more complex and profound levels of meaning it offers. Some might gain a deeper understanding of the benefits of finding ways to coexist with wolves. Others might take the theme to a deeper level comprehending the fragility of our planetary environment and so on. These core properties or deep underlying ordering structures of the exhibit can create influence and resonance within the human psyche offering the visitor an experience full of meaning, satisfaction and possibility.

Regardless of people’s individual perceptions, there is an archetype, an ancient blueprint, which is “wolf” and not “elephant” for example. Also independent of individual perception, there are specific underlying repetitive principles in the relationship between wolves and humans. Down through history, wolves and humans have been connected in very particular ways as the exhibit title indicates. We have coexisted, competed and have been in conflict with wolves.

When Museum Exhibition Meets the Individual Experience

The Archetypal Pattern Analysis approach asserts that the more related and consistent the deep underlying patterns of the exhibition are to the image, theme or story it represents, the more powerful the resonance with the visitor. To reiterate, a powerful resonance captures the attention of the visitor, bringing the visitor into its experience. Like a great book, you become caught up in the world of the story. You are immersed and absorbed in it. The field of physics has a term for this phenomenon. It is called “entrainment” and can be defined as “the process whereby two connected oscillating [fluctuating] systems [exhibit and visitor]... fall into synchrony.” Entrainment results from processes that are called self-organizing. (Collier, 2000). A basic way to convey this concept is to simply say, “The exhibit and the visitor are engaged, and the possibility exists for active and multilayered interaction to occur.” Conversely, the less consistent the various exhibit elements are to the image, theme or story, the lesser the degree of entrainment with the visitor and therefore less possibility for meaningful interaction. Remember that each part of an exhibit element affects the invariable nature of the exhibition. It either adds to it or subtracts from it. All parts are not just component parts but are intensifiers related to the dominant archetypal expression.

With that said, the visitors’ personal associations or subjective thoughts and feelings are extremely important to consider. After all, visitors have always given personal meaning to exhibitions. They have always made their own interpretations. My contention is this: when visitors are compelled by a commanding resonance with the particular museum exhibition, their own personal experiences, associations and reflections not only come forth but become much clearer against the backdrop of such powerful archetypal expression. The expression of consistent archetypal patterns is the prerequisite for resonance and clarity. Visitors are consciously or unconsciously drawn to the exhibit because its message or meaning is consistent, strong and clear. This clarity is analogous to a mirror of sorts. Any inconsistencies in a mirror such as scratches, dirt, or moisture will cloud a person’s reflection. The clearer the mirror is, the

clearer the reflection. Visitors may become more aware of their unique relationship (alignment) to the archetype. On the other hand, anything that detracts from the clarity of the exhibition's message will dilute resonance and clarity for visitors.

Museum Exhibitions as a Meaning-Making Opportunity

Applying the principles of Archetypal Pattern Analysis, the museum development team can lay the groundwork for an interchange between exhibition and visitor. This juxtaposition between the museum exhibition that resonates and the visitor with his or her personal experiences, associations and reflections (the subjective) serves as the visitor's entry point for interaction with the exhibition. The relationship has been created. Access to the message has been made. The potential for a meaningful experience is possible. Arthur Ganson, a renowned kinetic sculptor, beautifully describes this concept when he says, "...the work [image] exists on a kind of edge between clarity and ambiguity and if the conditions are right, the work can lead someone out into a field..." [where personal construction exists] (Ganson, 2005). When the exhibit resonates with the visitor, the outcome is a meaning-making opportunity.

This interactional field allows the viewer opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of his or her personal alignment and experience with the archetype on any number of levels. Perhaps the viewer will experience an insight, a change of perspective or even an *Aha* moment. Even a clear yet negative experience has value for meaning-making. For instance, the image of a wolf might conjure up negative thoughts, feelings and perceptions in a person's mind depending upon the individual's stories, personal experience and knowledge of wolves. Yet, the archetypal expression of "wolf" in an exhibition offers a safe and engaging way to interact and experiment with negative as well as positive thoughts, feelings and perceptions. It allows the visitor to inquire, investigate, and experiment with new perspectives about wolves and their relationship to humans.

An Amazing Work of Art/Machine with Chair

To illustrate how the application of an Archetypal Pattern Analysis can powerfully enhance an already excellent sculptural exhibit, I will describe an incredible piece of work titled, *Machine with Chair*. Arthur Ganson, the well-known kinetic sculptor, is its creator. Ganson's mechanical sculptures are in motion and often integrate human qualities in the space and form of machines and nature in a whimsical way.

Visualize different sizes of round, mechanical metal gears that have an almost upright human shape but are taller in height. One gear, resembling an elbow, has a long arm-like appendage that moves up and down. Now, imagine this machine in motion, moving laterally down a track. As it moves in a slow, steady even pace, it approaches a Bentwood chair obstructing its path. What will happen? The viewer waits to see. Slowly but surely, the appendage slips into a fixed part behind the seat of the chair and securely picks it up. It brings the chair overhead in an arc-like fashion and places it down gently on the other side of its path and continues on its way. Other things are happening simultaneously. Light and shadow play their part with patterns on the wall behind the sculpture. The viewer notices the different colors, textures, shapes, and sizes of the component parts of the machine as well as the simple clean lines of the Bentwood chair. While all this is taking place, a beautiful piece of music accompanies the work.

Archetypal Pattern Analysis of the Sculpture

The purpose of the brief analysis that follows is to give the reader an overview of how the Archetypal Pattern Analyst might consult on a development project. It highlights the essence of the analysis without getting bogged down in too many details.

What is the dominant theme being expressed? As mentioned earlier, exhibitions are expressions of archetypes. So, too, *Machine with Chair* is an image, an archetypal expression of something. After reading and examining the image patterns, I found the dominant theme of the sculpture to be "human connection with the sensual". By sensual I mean pertaining to the senses.

What sensual patterns are being expressed? Here are my observations of the archetypal patterns of the sensual in this sculptural work:

Sight: Motion; dimension of light and shadow; graceful movement of the machine as it connects and picks up the chair; gentle display of the chair in motion; precise placement when the machine puts the chair down. The machine itself is sensual with form, curves, angles, colors, texture, pace and dimension. The lines of the Bentwood chair are clean, curved and simple.

Touch: While the visitor doesn't actually touch the sculpture, one notices all the textures (as mentioned under "sight"). Touch is suggested and demonstrated in the gentle, yet deliberate physical connection the machine has with the chair.

Sound: The musical piece accompanying Machine with Chair was indeed beautiful. Yet, the Archetypal Pattern Analysis revealed it to be not as powerfully congruent with the overall theme as it might. Let's take a look at an example of a musical piece that is highly congruent with *Machine with Chair*.

First a few thoughts on how musical structure plays into the picture. We know from the field of harmonics that music also contains specific underlying physical structures or properties that can express highly specific images, themes or stories. Like museum exhibits, the innate structures of musical patterns can capture the archetypal expression of what it is representing. For example, wherever indigenous peoples have settled, peasant music has existed. Instruments of various types, including a person's mouth and voice, are often used to set a beat to weaving or working in the fields. In this case, the deep, underlying musical structures might serve to express the theme of survival. Although the musical sounds and rhythms might be different in style depending upon the culture, time in history or task, it matches the pace of the work. For instance, the rhythm and pace might match the weaving shuttle or set the pace for picking cotton. It seems that certain frequencies or regularities capture or match specific activity. It could be said that the expression of this type of musical structure entrains the peasant workers for the survival benefits of efficiency, cohesiveness, and conservation of energy.

Analysis Recommendation:

Bach's *Air on the G String* was found to be extremely coherent with the dominant pattern of the sculpture's image or theme - human connection with the sensual. One might say that Bach's *Air* is on the same frequency as *Machine with Chair*. The musical patterns match the precise movement and pace of *Machine with Chair*. The tempo and bass hit the senses (sound and touch from the standpoint that one feels the vibrations of the bass). There is musical build-up and anticipation as well as musical resolution that fit perfectly with the build-up, anticipation and resolution of the piece as the viewer watches the journey. The underlying musical structures augment and amplify the work bringing forth the sensual. This synergistic phenomenon creates a powerful resonance that pulls –entrains - the visitor into the orbit of human connection with the sensual. The underlying structures of both the sculpture and Bach's *Air* are timeless.

Chia Han-Leon asks in his article, *To Bach is to be Human: a 250th Anniversary Tribute to Johann Sebastian Bach* (Han-Leon, 2001) "Is there nothing more than a beautiful melody?" He goes on to say:

*Yes, perhaps it is nothing more - but **that** is a key to Bach's universality of appeal – there is a nothingness to the connections that surround and attach the Air to our earthly world. It is so detached, in a sense, from its social environment that it becomes very difficult to place chronologically. ...I for one am unable to place the 'time' of this piece. It is timeless* (Han-Leon, 2001).

Chia Han-Leon continues:

Listening to Bach is like watching energy pass from gear to gear in a complicated – but perfectly aligned and synchronized individual parts – machine. Machine turned to art. And somewhere in between – because humans err – art to humanity (Han-Leon, 2001).

Like Bach's music, *Machine with Chair* is machine turned to art! Even without music, *Machine with Chair* entrains and allows the visitor to enter the world of human connection to the sensual. Accompany it with Bach's *Air* and *Machine with Chair* becomes an extraordinary piece of work. The resonance, amplified by such synergy, is striking and extremely powerful. The deep, underlying structures of both the sculpture and Bach's *Air* are timeless. *Machine with Chair* truly has universal appeal. Imagine the possibilities for meaning to occur!

Summary

The application of Archetypal Pattern Analysis involves identifying, translating, and analyzing archetypal patterns from the inception of the exhibit idea and continues throughout the development process. The methodology seeks to detect patterns that dilute, detract and are out of synchrony with the exhibit's core concept. Interestingly, even outstanding exhibits, such as *Machine with Chair*, may display subtle patterns that are inconsistent with its archetypal theme. The new sciences inform us that even subtle changes introduced into a system can significantly influence it (Abraham, 1990). The old adage - an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure - tells us that it is well worth doing the pattern analysis at the outset of a development project, rather than after-the-fact when misalignments might be more difficult and costly to change. This approach offers the museum exhibit development team a tool to measure the degree of archetypal pattern coherence that the exhibition holds. It also saves the development team time, invested energy and resources.

This article attempts to give the reader an overview of an innovative methodology called Archetypal Pattern Analysis that seeks to complement the museum exhibition development process. The approach draws on principles based on archetypal field theory. The aim of Archetypal Pattern Analysis is to find ways to present an exhibition that actively draw visitors into an immediate and strong resonance with the image, theme or story that the exhibition represents. A strong resonance increases the likelihood for the visitor to gain access to the exhibition's message on multiple levels. This type of affinity, coupled with a creative development team, makes for an environment ripe for novelty and meaning to take place. The desired outcome is the opportunity for visitors to experience and explore those ancient yet ever-present questions relating to man's search for meaning.

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