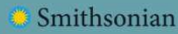


WELL, THAT WAS AWKWARD: INTERPRETING DIFFICULT STORIES IN YOUR EXHIBITS

Presenter: Erin McClelland
August 13, 2020



Definitions

- Difficult stories:
 - *are “...histories of oppression, violence, and trauma”*
 - *“...describe memories of pain, suffering, oppression, and grief...”*
- and they are undertold because they :
 - *they evoke strong emotions*
 - *incite “anxiety, resistance, and stress for their audiences”*

Adapted from Julie Rose, [Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites](#) (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016)

Examples of Difficult and Undertold Stories

- Enslavement of African Americans
- Climate change
- Confederate monuments
- Evolution
- Discrimination against members of LGBTQ community
- Environmental injustice and racism
- Disparate access to resources (transportation, economic, educational, natural, etc.)

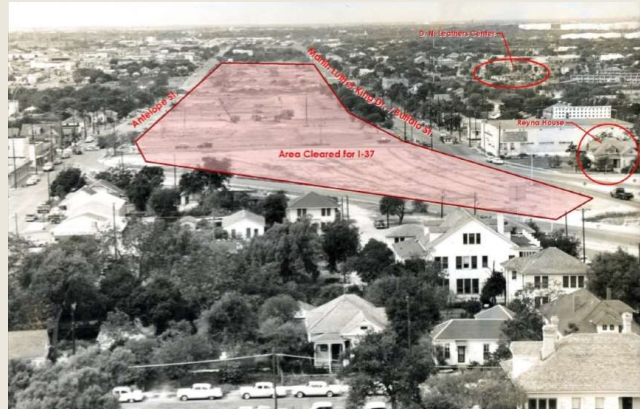


Photo of I-37 construction through Northside community in Corpus Christi. Photo by Corpus Christi Caller-Times, annotated by HNTB. (Courtesy of TxDOT)

Why Are These Stories So Difficult?

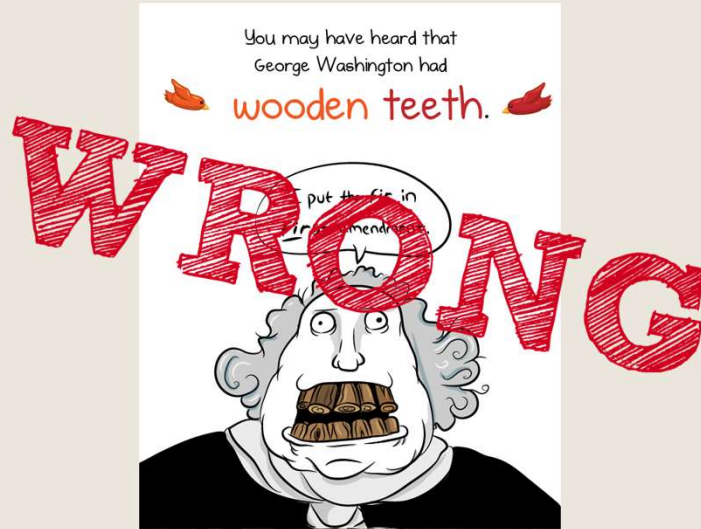
These stories are difficult – evoking strong emotions and creating anxiety, stress, and resistance – because they challenge our core beliefs about the world, society, history, and, by extension, ourselves.

That creates a crisis moment where the audience has to decide between two options:

1. Accept the information and be forced to adapt, question everything
OR
2. Reject the information and maintain the status quo

Adapted from Julie Rose, Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016)

Difficult Stories in Action



Adapted from The Oatmeal, "You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you," http://theoatmeal.com/comics/believe_clean

Difficult Stories in Action

gold, lead, hippopotamus ivory,
horse, and donkey teeth.



Adapted from The Oatmeal, "You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you," http://theoatmeal.com/comics/believe_clean

Difficult Stories in Action

What

if I told you George Washington
had another set of false teeth?

What if I told you this other set wasn't
made from wood, ivory, or any of the
aforementioned materials?

Adapted from The Oatmeal, "You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you," http://theoatmeal.com/comics/believe_clean

Difficult Stories in Action

What if I told you it was made
from the teeth of slaves?

(in all likelihood)

Adapted from The Oatmeal, "You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you," http://theoatmeal.com/comics/believe_clean

Why Are These Stories So Difficult?

- These stories are difficult – evoking strong emotions and creating anxiety, stress, and resistance – because they challenge our core beliefs about the world, society, history, and, by extension, ourselves.
- That creates a crisis moment where the audience has to decide between two options:
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Adapted from Julie Rose, Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016)

Examples of Difficult Stories: The Interstate Highway System



- “The greatest public works project in history.”
- “An integral part of the American way of life.”
- One of President Eisenhower’s top five achievements while in office.

(Courtesy of U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration)

Examples of Difficult Stories: The Interstate Highway System



East Avenue before the construction of IH-35 (Courtesy of TxDOT); IH-35 c. 1970 (Courtesy of Austin History Center)

Navigating the Crisis Moment

1. Accept the information and be forced to adapt, question everything

OR

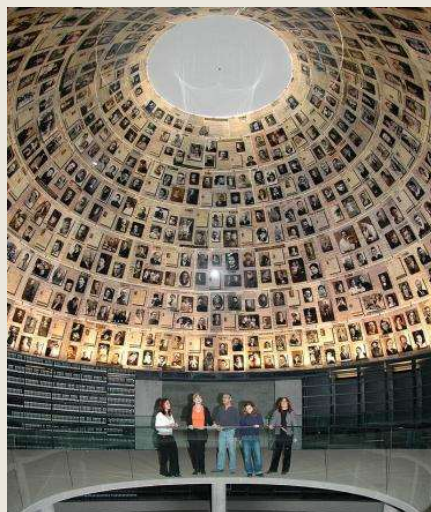
2. Reject the information and maintain the status quo

Put a Name (and a Face) on It



Remember the UpStairs Lounge by Skylar Fein (Courtesy of New Orleans Museum of Art)

Put a Name (and a Face) on It



Yav Hashem, The Holocaust History Museum, Hall of Names (Courtesy of Yav Hashem)

Put a Name (and a Face) on It



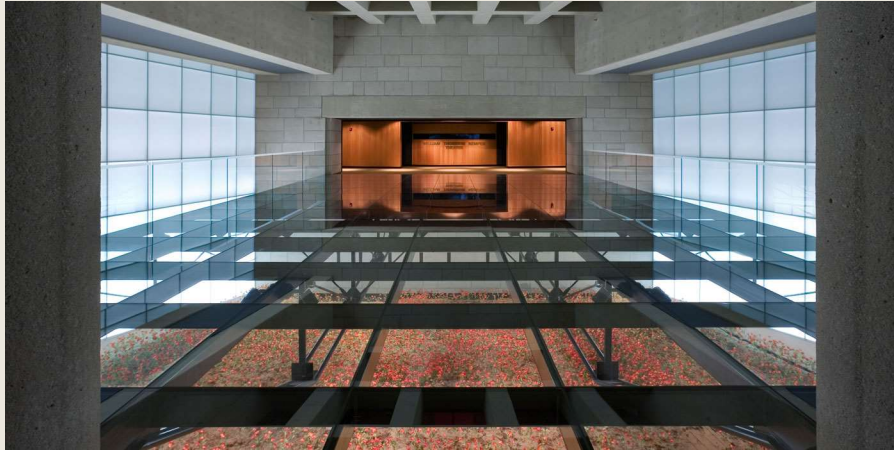
Yav Hashem, The Holocaust History Museum, Hall of Names (Courtesy of Yav Hashem)

Put a Name (and a Face) on It



Yav Hashem, The Holocaust History Museum, Hall of Names (Courtesy of Yav Hashem)

Signals to Visitors: Transition Spaces



National World War I Museum & Memorial (Courtesy of Ralph Applebaum Associates)

Signals to Visitors: Transition Spaces



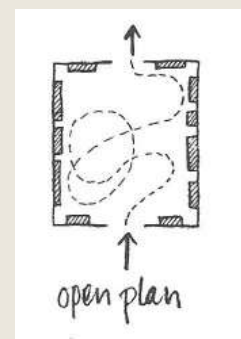
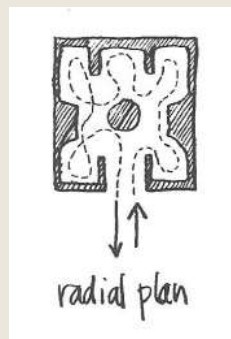
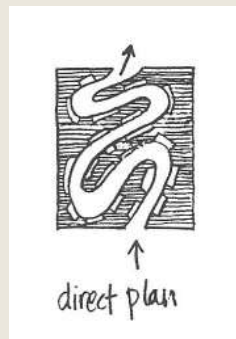
National World War I Museum & Memorial (Courtesy of Ralph Applebaum Associates)

Signals to Visitors: Warnings



National Museum of African American History and Culture (Courtesy of What to See in Washington DC)

Open Floor Plan



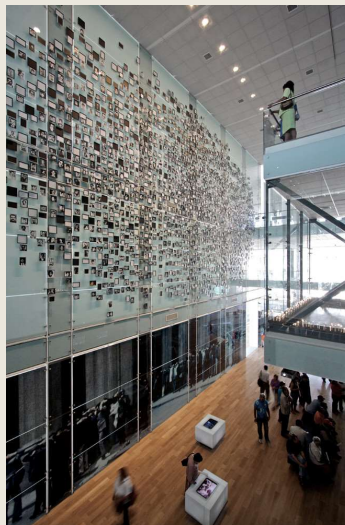
Images from Kathleen McLean, *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions* (Washington, D.C: 1993), 125.

Open Floor Plan



Climates of Inequality traveling exhibition by the Humanities Action Lab (Courtesy of Humanities Action Lab)

Reflection Spaces



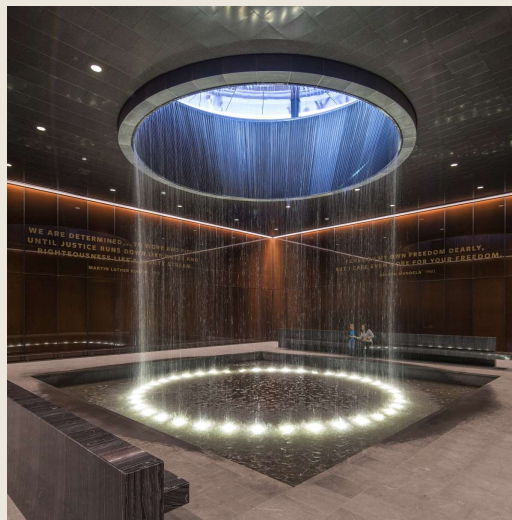
Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Santiago, Chile (Courtesy of Nico Saiegh)

Reflection Spaces



Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Santiago, Chile (Courtesy of Nico Saieh)

Reflection Spaces



National Museum of African American History and Culture (Courtesy of Brad Feinknopf)

Reflection Spaces



"On the Texas Homefront," Bullock Texas State History Museum

Reflection Spaces




"On the Texas Homefront," Bullock Texas State History Museum

Reflection Spaces



"The Enclave," Portland Art Museum

Reflection Spaces



P REFLECTING ON THE ENCLAVE

November 8, 2014 - February 15, 2015
To learn more about this piece and the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, visit portlandartmuseum.org/enclave

I saw the bombs fall in Ireland, over land rather than the people. We still fight to be free, and one day... everyone will be. I heard... I felt...

Image: Richard Mosse, *Ruby Tuesday*, 2014. Photo: Ken Surin. Courtesy of the artist and the gallery. The artwork is part of the exhibition 'The Enclave' at the Portland Art Museum. The artwork is a video installation that depicts a soldier in a red shirt and helmet, carrying a rifle, standing in a field of red flowers. The artwork is a commentary on the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the impact of war on civilians. The artwork is a video installation that depicts a soldier in a red shirt and helmet, carrying a rifle, standing in a field of red flowers. The artwork is a commentary on the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the impact of war on civilians.

"The Enclave," Portland Art Museum

Join us next week for:

Made You Look!: How to Select Visuals That Will Keep Visitors Engaged with Your Exhibits

Thursday, August 20, 2020, at 10:00 a.m.

Find this week's resource sheet at:

<https://www.thc.texas.gov/local-exhibits>

This training was made possible by:

