

# Behind the Scenes. Conversations on Exhibition Design in the covid-19 Era: Changing the Narrative

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DOI: 10.30763/intervencion.248.v1n23.27.2021 · YEAR 12, ISSUE NO. 23: 317-328

Submitted: 15.03.2021 · Accepted: 31.03.2021 · Published: 28.06.2021

**Alejandro García Aguinaco**

Taller de Museografía (TDM), México

alejandro@t-dm.com | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4085-7450>

## ABSTRACT

Throughout the confinement caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, we have seen a series of online conferences that have addressed the various challenges facing museums around the world today, but there has been little reflection on the challenges and implications that the pandemic and specifically, austerity policies are causing in terms of exhibition design. This review is a reflection on the virtual roundtables that took place on November 16th-19th, 2020 to discuss the challenges of museography in the COVID-19 era.

## KEY WORDS

museums; museography; exhibition design; sustainability; museology; interpretation; audiences

*We live in critical times and because of that  
creative times also.<sup>1</sup>*  
Leonardo Boff, *La dignidad de la tierra [...]* (2000)

## INTRODUCTION

**F**rom November 16th to 19th, 2020, Taller de Museografía (TDM), an independent museum consultancy, held a series of virtual roundtables on exhibition design in the COVID-19

<sup>1</sup> Editorial translation. Onwards, all sources cited, if originally in Spanish, will be editorial translations.

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era. Two fundamental axes served as a frame of reference to better understand the context.

The first of these was to recognize *a priori* that a large proportion of the current problems encapsulating us are part of a systemic problem, and that the crisis was already here long before we had ever even heard the word *Coronavirus*. It is not only a global health problem, but also a social, economic, environmental, energy, food, ethical and, of course, cultural problem. COVID-19 was the straw that broke the camel's back. "We cannot return to normal, because the normal that we had was precisely the problem" (r/Hong Kong, 2019), a graffiti stated on the streets of Hong Kong since the end of last year.

SARS-CoV-2 "it lies, to a large extent, in the complex transmission through animals to people related to the development of intensive agriculture and poultry farming and a growing market and consumption of wild and exotic animals" (Benach, 2020, para. 10). In other words, it is a problem that, as pointed out by scientists such as Rodolfo Dirzo (2020, 8m20s) or Julia Carabias (2020, 1m30s), stems from the way in which we are interacting with our planet.

The second axis, which is derived from the first one, is understanding the reality that museums and, in particular, exhibition design, are experiencing in Mexico. Throughout this period of confinement, we have seen a series of conferences, webinars, online courses and talks that have highlighted many of the challenges faced by museums around the world, but little thought has been given to what the pandemic and austerity policies are generating in terms of exhibition design. As artist Marcelo Expósito points out:

The global museum has been part of a giant set of systems that have combined to produce the kind of bubbles (both economic and emotional) that are bursting in this terminal crisis of neoliberalism and the macro-structures of museums and exhibitions [...] have now been stopped in their tracks by the pandemic (2020, para. 3).<sup>2</sup>

Many museums form part of the frenetic pace of contemporary life, one that has recently had to question its logic surrounding work, production, leisure and entertainment that we experience today.

We are living in times of change, and the museum and exhibition design sector should not be oblivious to this. In addition to

<sup>2</sup> Editorial translation.

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reviewing the impact of the pandemic, it is also time to examine the practices that have been developed in this sector and to question their disintegration.

### THE ROUNDTABLES

In this context, the roundtables were organized around four working groups that approached the current problems of exhibition design from different perspectives, that is, through the eyes of various specialists in the field.

The first roundtable, entitled “The creation of exhibitions: collaboration on stage. The challenge of collaborative and interdisciplinary work in exhibitions in the face of the ‘new normal’” (TDM [Roundtable 1] 2020) (Figure 1), brought into dialogue areas of a museum that do not always work together: a museologist-architect, Alejandro Sabido Sánchez-Juárez (Franz Mayer Museum); a philosopher-curator, José Luis Barrios Lara (Universidad Iberoamericana [UIA]); an archaeologist specializing in visitor studies, Leticia Pérez Castellanos (Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía [ENCRYM]), and an exhibition designer-art historian, Alejandro García Aguinaco (TDM).

FIGURE 1.  
Roundtable 1  
(Figure: Alejandro  
García Aguinaco;  
source: Taller  
de Museografía,  
YouTube, November  
16<sup>th</sup>, 2020).



Two questions served as triggers for the discussion. From the first —what have been the effects of the pandemic on museological and exhibition design practice— it is worth noting how it exacerbated and brought to light problems that were already there: implicit hierarchies, lack of a common language between specialists and technicians, structural problems that reveal a lack of policies definition in the various action areas within a museum, which in turn leads to bad practices, with a reactive *modus operandi* and rigid

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organizational dynamics, coupled with precarious labor and economic unfeasibility.

The issue does not only lie in internal problems but also, as Pérez and Sabido mentioned, in the need to know, involve and open channels of dialogue with the public and the new and complex reconfiguration of audiences since the pandemic. “What are you doing here, in the middle of a pandemic? What are you looking for? Are we achieving it? What do you need from us and what do we need to change?” questioned Sabido. What is the meaning of what we are doing? Or, as Barrios asked, “what is the *ethos* of museum work?” (TDM [Roundtable 1], 2020, 56m54s). The pandemic made the position of the social and political role of museums explicit in order to give way to reality.

The second question ventured the possibility of reimagining the museum’s contingent futures. In this regard, Sabido commented that “it was necessary to rethink that what we take for granted, can exist in another way” (TDM [Roundtable 1], 2020, 1h16m50s).<sup>3</sup> For his part, Barrios affirmed that “the health crisis has disrupted the forms of space and time on a global and everyday level” (TDM [Roundtable 1], 2020, 28m14s), and abounds “what is being disrupted is a whole system of life” (TDM [Roundtable 1], 2020, 55m35s), which leads us to a slowdown in which our existential time flows differently, giving way to more intimate and personal experiences, more comfortable, more pleasurable, exploring the outside of the places and sites where the museum still does not reach.

On the second table, named “Designers on stage. The challenge of designing expositions in the era of COVID-19” (TDM [Roundtable 2], 2020) (Figure 2), proposals related to a change of spatial-temporal logic were presented. Leticia Pardo (Art Institute of Chicago) narrated the practices and work processes she typically carries out, as well as outlining the importance of responding to the social context that surrounds her institution. Joel Aguilar (Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo [MUAC]) proposed an exhibition design archeology, uncovering and laying bare the vestiges of past exhibitions at the MUAC. Giacomo Castagnola (Germen Estudio) unveiled his research in terms of experimentation with other materials and other spaces, as well as, in a more playful and hybrid way, an inquiry beyond museums.

One of the central objectives of this roundtable was firstly, to detail the ecological footprint of the practice itself and, from a

<sup>3</sup> Editorial translation. All fragments of the roundtables presented in the following pages are also editorial translations.

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FIGURE 2.  
Roundtable 2  
(Figure: Alejandro  
García Aguinaco;  
source: Taller  
de Museografía,  
YouTube, November  
17<sup>th</sup>, 2020).



self-critical stance, learn not to rely on single-use infrastructure; go “beyond the new” (Jongerius & Schouwenberg, 2015) reuse materials, avoid drywall and experiment with other materials of less environmental impact. However, due to the format and conditions of the table, these exhibition design concepts were not explored in as much depth as was initially planned. In addition, designers were left out and should be added in the near future to enrich the conversation.

The third panel, “Interactivity and interaction on stage. The Challenge of Technological, Mechanical, and Human Interactivity in the COVID-19 Era” (TDM [Roundtable 3], 2020), dealt with some of the paradoxes regarding the use of technology in museums. The extensive and much-needed timeline on the origins of the use of computers and interactive technologies in museums and science centers (MSC, in the specialized literature) (Figure 3), which was presented by Manuel Gándara (ENCRYM) and María del Carmen Sánchez Mora (Dirección General de Divulgación de la Ciencia-Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México [DGDC-UNAM]) (Figure 4), points out that the use of technology has not fulfilled the social role of the museum and has not gone beyond offering the public virtual access, communication platforms and internet pages. Sánchez Mora said that, even so, it is possible to build joint participatory experiences while linking exact sciences with social problems.

The pandemic has brought into question the position of the interactive as the physical instrument *par excellence*. The experience and interventions of Marcia Larios, Paulina Barrientos and Paulina Rojas (Papalote Museo del Niño) put into context that, after the confinement and constant use of screens, children will seek experiences that break with that monotony. Therefore, they emphasized the diminishing importance of technology, giving more weight

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"En un museo la tecnología siempre acaba caducando, la realidad, en cambio, no caduca nunca"  
Jorge Wagensberg

Mesa 3: Interactividad e interacción a escena  
El reto de la interactividad tecnológica, mecánica y humana en la Era COVID-19

Carmen Sánchez Mora | DGDC, UNAM  
Marcia Larios, Paulina Barrientos y Paulina Rojas | Pappalote Museo del Niño  
Roberto López | siete|media  
Moderador: Manuel Gándara | ENCRYM

**Detrás de escena**  
Conversaciones en torno a la museografía en la Era COVID-19:  
**Cambiando la narrativa**  
Noviembre 18, 2020  
tdm+ taller de museografía

FIGURE 3. Roundtable 3 (Figure: Alejandro García Aguinaco; source: Taller de Museografía, YouTube, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

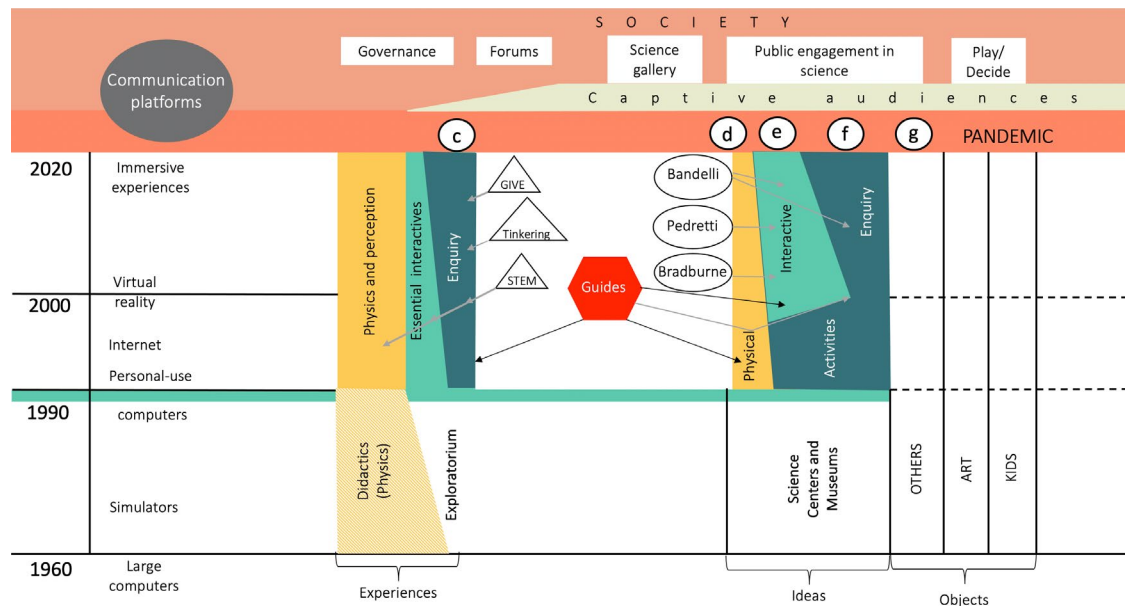


FIGURE 4. Diagram on the history of interactives (Courtesy: María del Carmen Sánchez Mora).

to the physical and playful experience; warm and comforting experiences that provide a real human dimension to the museum visit. As Wagensberg rightly mentions, “in a museum technology always ends up expiring, reality, however, never expires” (2012, p. 110).

Roberto López (Siete Media) provided an overview of post-pandemic interactive exhibition design and how it is possible to learn from other industries, such as video games, and other immersive experiences at different levels, or through the use of ultrasonic sensors that allow virtual or gestural touch. Also, on the possibili-

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ties of smartphones, he argued that they are a powerful tool that is practically within everyone's reach and not only serves to easily share content like say, through the use of a QR code, but also allows interaction without the need to touch, a feature that has not yet been explored. However, Lopez concluded on the importance of having a sustainable vision and to find, somewhere between the physical and the digital, a hybrid dimension.

### FINAL REFLECTIONS

In closing, and in reference to the fourth table, "Tying up loose ends. Final reflections and contingent futures" (TDM [Roundtable 4], 2020) (Figure 5), two questions were posed: what is the museum willing to do, and how sustainable are our practices? Through this discussion, some relevant aspects for exhibition design practice in the COVID-19 era became evident, which we can frame from a sustainable stance, and its interdependent edges: environment, economy, society and, more recently, culture.



FIGURE 5. Roundtable 4 (Figure: Alejandro García Aguinaco; source: Taller de Museografía, YouTube, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

### Environmental and economic dimension

Given the times we are living in, it is pressing to find another form of ecological coexistence that goes beyond sustainability, which relates to a regenerative development of what we do, where the aim is not only to avoid its destruction but also to improve existing resources (Gabel, 2015). From the practice of regenerative design, avoiding single-use museum infrastructure is proposed, instead re-using and experimenting with more environmentally friendly mate-

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rials, both in terms of their procurement and production as well as in their use and disposal, which would undoubtedly have an impact on the economic dimension. Pablo Martínez sees it from a broader perspective: “Would the museum be willing to “take into account the ecological footprint of its programs, [of its facilities] and act accordingly?” (Martinez, 2020, para. 2). It is pertinent to rethink management and design models to achieve an environmental and economic balance, which inevitably involves the practices that have been developed in this sector, and to question its fragmentation, discretionality and poor distribution of budgets.

### Social and cultural dimension

As for the social perspective, it implies changing the way in which we assume our relationship with others both inside and outside our institutions: being more permeable and empathetic. “Not —as Sabido stated in his intervention— as the wedge that is going to transform the world, but more, as someone else who is adding to a series of questions that we share among many” (TDM [Roundtable 1], 2020, 1h40m50s). The above demands a change of attitude, a more active and critical stance, but also a humbler one, to put the collaborative sense of exhibition design practice at the center of the conversation. We can no longer think of the museum in the same way we used to.

Along the same vein, we have to understand that design is a way of thinking, learning and interacting with the world; it is not just a creative or technical task, design as a plan or a scheme conceived in the mind, it is an activity implicit in every person. The problem is that few participate in design processes, which has to do, as Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020) points out, with the justice of design: who is involved in the design process? For what and for whom do we design? Who benefits and who loses out? Who is included and who is excluded?

This social dimension of exhibition design obliges us to propose a new narrative, which entails, as Gándara mentioned (TDM [Roundtable 3], 2020), knowing how to articulate and tell a story with dramatic tension, with a conflict and a resolution, but at the same time keeping in mind the *what*, *who* and *how* of *why* these stories are told. To achieve greater cultural participation, sensitivity and interpretation are necessary to connect with the lives of those who visit a museum (Figure 6).



# Behind the scenes

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*Changing the narrative*

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## What are the new challenges for exhibition design in the COVID Era?

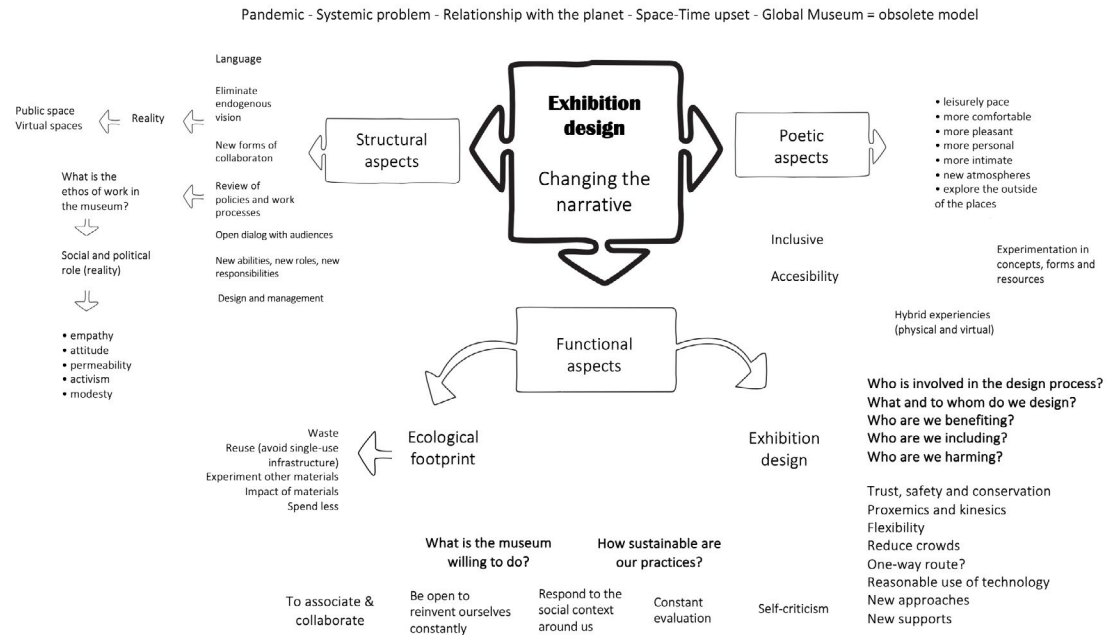


FIGURE 6. Updated diagram (Figure: Alejandro García Aguinaco; source: Taller de Museografía, YouTube, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

This pandemic has posed challenges, but it has also offered an opportunity for a change of direction. It is difficult to draw conclusions about a phenomenon that is still in process. This is a time of crisis, yet historically, crises have also been turning points to re-think practices, to counter inertia and rebuild from new paradigms. As Arundhati Roy describes it:

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world in a new light. This one is no different. It is a portal, a doorway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it dragging behind us the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our greed, our data and dead ideas banks, our dead rivers and smoky skies. Or we can walk through it lightly, with little baggage, ready to imagine another world. One that we are ready to fight for (Roy, 2020, para. 48 y 49).

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Thanks to all the speakers and to those who made this independent initiative possible, and a special thank you to the 115 people from more than 10 countries who registered. This shows the interest and need to open spaces for reflection and training in exhibition design. From the margins of civil society and from professional practice we will continue to contribute to reflection.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Alejandro García Aguinaco**

Taller de Museografía (TDM), Mexico

[alejandro@t-dm.com](mailto:alejandro@t-dm.com)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4085-7450>

Master in Exhibition Design from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM, Spain), Bachelor in Art History from the Universidad Iberoamericana (UIA, Mexico) and graduate of the fourth generation of the Program in Senior Management in Museums (PADEM, 2012) of the Getty Leadership Institute of the Graduate University of Claremont (GLI, UGC, USA) and the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM, Mexico).

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He is founder and general director of Taller de Museografía (TDM), a museology and integral design consultancy with an interdisciplinary approach to the creation of narrative environments that offer visitors meaningful knowledge-building experiences.

He has been distinguished with the Miguel Covarrubias National Award for Museography from the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) on six occasions and has given several lectures and master classes in multiple academic programs.