

The Development of Narrative-led Cultural Practise

Tim Gardom & Alison Grey with Tricia Austin

Who?



Tim Gardom and **Alison Grey** are leading global creative consultants and practitioners specialising in narrative development, narrative environment design and interpretation planning. Tim is the Founder, and Tim and Alison Managing Directors, at TGAC, employing a versatile and robust Narrative Thinking methodology for creative problem solving and placemaking, as well as regional, national and international identity projects and for heritage/culture-led regeneration. Tim and Alison are Resident Lecturers on the MA Narrative Environments Course at CSM.



Tricia Austin is an academic, researcher, author, curator and design consultant specialising in Narrative Theory and Design Practise. She is Course Leader on the MA Narrative Environments Course at UAL: Central St Martins (CSM) interested in critical design practise for story-led, inclusive, placemaking, as well as culture-led city regeneration projects.

In Conversation...

Tim, Alison and Tricia have known each other for many years through the MA Narrative Environments Course at CSM.

Tricia is in the process of putting a new book together about the processes and power of narrative thinking and narrative environment design, and is in the process of speaking with experts and practitioners in the field who help develop and practically apply narrative theory, communication arts and design practise on a daily basis with high level clients around the world.

Tim and Alison have been working at the forefront of this field for more than 30 years, as well as lecturing on Narrative Environment Design and Museology at CSM, Palazzo Spinelli in Florence, at the University of Malta in Valetta, and the University of Florida in Sarasota.

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TRICIA: Great, well you might want to start then with just saying a few things about when you started TGA and why you started TGA, what the opportunities were and what led you do that?

...major national museums and other organisations had to up their offer and come up with something that was better value for money, more entertaining, more engaging for people...

TIM: So, TGAC has been going for around about 25-30 years now...



I started off in the commercial sector, working with a large agency called Imagination, and we were doing corporate communications at that point...so, you know, events, conferences and car shows and so on...Then the company got the project to create [Dinosaurs] the Dinosaur Gallery at the National History Museum, in London.



That was really because it was one of those periods when national museums were charging. You know, it goes...*they charge...they don't charge...*it follows a sort of political upswing and downswing...therefore they [museums] needed to have something which people will spend their money on – as opposed to Madame Tussauds, or going bowling or going to the cinema – and they took a pretty bold move at that stage to go with a very commercial agency in order to create this iconic exhibition within the museum and make it 'visitor-attractive'.

So, I did that and then loved it so much that I wanted to carry on. The company [Imagination] decided that they did not want to do it anymore, and that's when we started the company [TGAC]. We started it together and our first project came in immediately after that, it was at the Royal Observatory, in Greenwich.



So, it really was a guess, following a trend, I think fundamentally driven by the need to charge visitors to come in, that major national museums and other organisations had to up their offer and come up with something that was better value for money, more entertaining, more engaging for people. I think that is where it kicked off, certainly with the work we did.

ALISON: I think that also coincided, in terms of the museum sector, with a new kind of museum practice.

The old typographic displays and the siloed disciplines and ways of using taxonomy to drive all your exhibitions, and particularly large national museums seeing themselves as repositories of knowledge, was beginning to change and the new taxonomies of, 'How do we explain to people what the science behind evolution is?' or, 'How do we explain why our collections enable you to track the development of a community or a civilization?', as opposed to simply being about pots, or about bones or about fossils, was also kicking off at the same time.

So, there was a changeover in the approach to taxonomy...

[TRICIA: Was this in the mid-80s or late 80s?]

...it was around the early 80s, I suppose '82 to '85.

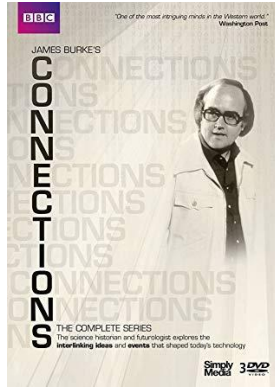
Q

TRICIA: Ralph Applebaum was given the credit for saying, "Oh gosh, you know, all these pictures, all these objects are next door to each other...why don't we make everything that is in this space into a sort of narrative? That is what I've read...but is that something that you...[agree with]?"

...there was a kind of movement to connect different disciplines and to connect stories across different disciplines...and that was a reflection and a driver for the way that museums and cultural institutions were thinking about themselves...

TIM: I think it was part of a movement.

There was a general move towards breaking down barriers and using objects and things which were apparently separate, in order to tell a single story...and there was a series of books were sort of coming out around about the same time.



There the *BBC Connections* series, that James Burke did, on television...

Seeds to Civilization, which was a book that took ten plants and showed how they affected the history of the world...

There was Dava Sobel's, *Longitude*...

There was a kind of movement to connect different disciplines and to connect stories across different disciplines...and that was a reflection and a driver for the way that museums and cultural institutions were thinking about themselves, so it wasn't entirely commercial.

ALISON: No, I think it wasn't entirely commercial, and I think that, also, if you put the need to connect disciplines and new ways of thinking – where, in the general public, you have got an interest in concepts such as evolution, global warming, ideas about the environment or about going back to 'good old civilization', or ideas about how civilization developed, how communities and movements and people and stuff comes together – which I think is very much in the 80's zeitgeist.

When you have got that, set against the need to actually think about who your audiences are, to get people in through the door – and if you cannot charge, then at least create some kind of money through secondary spend, because as an institution you don't see yourself simply being there as a steward of these collections, or just to do academic research on those collections...

I think that was a very important change...it was looking for authorship, it was looking for ways of communicating, and it looked to various disciplines for that – whether that was film or theatre or different educational models – which had some kind of relationship with how museums and galleries might present themselves.

TRICIA: It is quite interesting that the commercial sector was already doing that in a way, wasn't it? But in a probably quieter, sort of 'clipped' way...

TIM: Well certainly, the kind of car shows and telecom shows that we worked on at Imagination were narrative environments for sure...though the messages were pretty simple.

But what was interesting was the way that, in that period, sort of the early 80s as you say...the people at the Natural History Museum, really very imaginative people – Roger Miles, Giles Clarke, Neil Chalmers – referred to themselves as the 'radical interpretive tendency' within the museum sector.

That is what they were there to do – they were there to tell the story first and put the 'things' on display second. That was clearly part of what they were trying to do.

ALISON: Actually, Giles Clark called you the ‘radical interpretive tendency’...

TIM: ...well, one of us was...but it was a very interesting moment when people were trying to rethink what the cultural institutions did and the role of those objects and the knowledge that they had.

ALISON: ...and I think it comes to this idea that audiences suddenly became important.

You know, you weren’t just opening your doors in order to allow those who had an interest to come through and to learn things. It was almost going back to the Arts and Crafts movement, you know, to those Morris-ideas, that it was ‘good for people’ and that you needed to explain why they would want to be interested in something and to engage at the starting point where people’s interests are, and to educate them and ‘bring them through’, to lead them to an understanding of the cultural sector, museums, which had a very strong pedagogic background to that movement.

I think also that you also have to put in place the ‘Disney factor’ – if you could get to Disneyland, there were the big rides and those kind of immersive environments, were also much more available to people.



Q

TRICIA: Yeah, so there was competition...and there was also something to measure yourself against or differentiate from.

But there wasn’t such a thing as an interpretation manager in those days, you created it?

The idea that there would be someone who would sat between the curator and the public...or the curator and the designers...that was a new idea...

ALISON: Yeah.

TIM: Yeah, they didn’t...there weren’t people who were called that.

There were curators and there were people who did education and people who did visitor services. So, those tended to be the three bunches of people that came together. The idea that there would be someone who would sat between the curator and the public...

ALISON: ...or the curator and the designers...

TIM: ...yes...that was a new idea, very much kind of feeling its way, and received well in some cases and not in others.

But there wasn't any formal training, there certainly wasn't a university course you could do in it...

TRICIA: ...but is there now, really?

TIM: Well, Leicester does a lot of Museum Studies courses, and there are interpretation elements within that...and there's lots in the States.

As an aside, we do have some significant reservations about what those courses turn out...and how comparatively formulaic and checklist-y they tend to be...and we've never had good experiences working with people who've just done that...it's too rigid and it gives the idea that there is a process that you follow, and if you just manage to follow the process then you'll get the right results...you do get a result, but it isn't necessarily a very interesting one.

Then, it was very much...you needed a willing curator, an enthusiastic curator, and their line managers, or their bosses, who were driving that process.

ALISON: So, to be very practical...I mean I wasn't in the business at that point, but if you think about how the Dinosaur Gallery [at the Natural History Museum] went together, it was that the old taxonomies of 'clinician' and other ways of dealing with fossils and bones, the old ways of talking about dinosaurs as tribes and families and looking at it in a very technical sense, wasn't really doing it for the public...

Spielberg was just about to bring Jurassic Park and there was a massive interest in dinosaurs, so you needed to find a story that would engage people...a narrative that actually could bring together all those academic disciplines, but make it something that people reckoned was going to be an attraction...

TIM: ...it was incredibly simple in the end because there was just one question. It was,

"Were dinosaurs like the animals living today?"

That's it, that was just it...and everything in the exhibition was about that. So...



TRICIA: That was the organizing principle...

TIM: That was organising principle...that was the structure, so it dealt with dinosaurs like living animals. So, how they move, what they eat, how they reproduce, how they fight...

It looked at what they ate, it looked at their physical structure...and it lead to some key interpretive principles which we kind of invented as we went along.

But for example, because that was the question, all the dinosaur modelling in the Dinosaur Gallery is a 1:1 – there are no miniature triceratops, or whatever it is, because it's like if you were a zoo you wouldn't have a miniature giraffe – and all the images, in the original graphic design, of the dinosaurs are in colour, and all the images of the animals you're comparing them to, the living ones, are in black and white, so that the focus stays on what you're actually trying to show...



ALISON: ...and it starts with the whole animal, the big animal, the complete skeleton and then it goes into the parts, looking at different elements, rather than starting with small groups of bones or even fossil finds and *then* building it up to the big animal...and that was also an important principle...

TIM: ...some years later the American Museum of Natural History opened their Dinosaur Gallery and they went absolutely on the traditional taxonomic lines...[TRICIA: Oh really?...]it is a family tree explaining how dinosaurs were related to each other...and, they were very clear about that, but it fails to engage [the viewer] from that point of view, I'd say...

Q

TRICIA: Ok.

So, as you started to carve out this niche, which is now being taught in various different places, in Leicester and in America, you start to discover the principles of what was happening...that must have been very exciting?

...suddenly we were also able to work with some totally brilliant designers who started to see design not just as interior design, but as real communication design...

TIM: Yes it was, it was very exciting...and part of the excitement of it...well, there were about two or three things...

One was looking at objects completely differently...in a completely different way from the way they were previously displayed, or what they were valued for...so, that was in many cases as interesting and motivating for the curator and the institution, as it was for us as we were trying to make it available to the public.

TRICIA: Ah yes, so it/you then injected some life into the institution...

TIM: ...absolutely, yes. Because there were things that they might have had a passion about, or they might have disregarded, but with the right narrative, sitting within the right narrative, they become extraordinarily important and dynamic and interesting.

So I think that was one thing, and I mean the other thing I thought was really fascinating, from the beginning actually, was the idea that different voices would make their way into the museum.

So that you were liberating the narrative from the top down, authoritative, friendly expert – which was always what you heard – voice of the museum and you were putting other voices in there...and that is a line we have pursued ever since.

But again it was, for some institutions and some people in institutions, a hugely liberating thing. Wouldn't you say [Alison]?

ALISON: Yes, that you could bring in evidence, you could use objects to talk about different groups of people, and bring in written evidence and archive material, and use that blend – almost like you do with a play or a film – blend these different voices to help tell the story, and I think that has been very important.

It is something we are still are working through now, and one is endlessly finding new ways of doing that.

But I think the other thing is that suddenly we were also able to work with some totally brilliant designers who started to see design not just as interior design, but as real communication design.

Peter Higgins was somebody who you [Tim] worked with Imagination originally, and then we worked with a lot, and others, who were forging a new kind of the design at the same time that worked with interpretation.

So, interpretive design / narrative design was becoming a thing and we were all working out together how you did that and what the balance between storytelling and the visual, and the 3D and 2D was and that was very exciting.

Q

TRICIA: So, you do a lot of the talking and the text...as part of your work do you produce a lot of written stuff, and then how does that dove-tail with the spatial – which is where I think we get on to the Story Shapes – and how does the Story Shapes come about?

...that is the start point, bar almost none, for the narratives we convey – they happen in a 3D space with people moving through it, that is the essence of it...

TIM: Hmm...there's about three questions there...

Yes we are a word-based practice, but we rapidly realized that there are other/better ways of conveying things than just writing it all down, and so we do a lot of sketching and pictograms and things like that in order to get stuff across.

Because the initial work that you do on a cultural project (it almost doesn't matter which it is, whether is a mascot or a posh gallery) is shaping the narrative and getting a sense of how is it going to hang together as a piece of communication, and then at the same time, how is that going to make its way into the space itself...?

TRICIA: So, to what extent do you have to look at the space when conceiving the narrative – how does the space affect the written narrative?

ALISON: I think there's different kinds of spaces...I mean, a project where you're building the spaces from scratch, where there's nothing there, and you are creating a space which is there to embody the narrative...if you like, to create an immersive environment...to build a new museum from scratch or a visitor experience from scratch, is one thing.

If you're looking at how to interpret an existing space...



For example, my first job was the National Maritime Museum, *Time and Space Galleries* at the old Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park, [there] you have got a site which is in and of itself already a narrative environment...it was built for a particular purpose, it has a history which is embedded in how the site is in and of itself. It's in a place which is very important and also has stories to tell...

So, when you have a site like that, it's not what is just on the outside, not just what you're putting on the inside, it is also, how do you actually use the space that is already there to tell the story...if you like...to reveal the story that is already in the bricks, but also to tell the story you want it to tell.

So, we worked in Malta, two or three years ago, on a large renaissance fortress called, fort St Elmo – which is part of the city of Valletta which is a world heritage site – and it's a brilliant architectural piece, a renaissance, five-pointed star fort, but it also embodies 500 years of Maltese history, with two or three extraordinarily important sieges and battles and people involved with it, and so on...so, there wouldn't be any point in putting a glass box in the middle of that beautiful architectural piece and trying to tell a story that which was in any way at odds with the place that you are in.



So, starting with the building – why the building was there, what you can still see of the history and development of that building – was alongside the historical events that were very important to talk about and the objects they had to tell those stories.

It's like a geese's foot – there is always three strands to that, and those three strands are what we always start with:

Where is it?

What is it? And,

Who is it for?

So, you start with those three things and you don't drop any of them – they work together all the way through.

TIM: So...I think it would be true to say that the shape of the story in the space is in our minds from the very beginning – whether that space is going to be built from scratch in order to accommodate that story, or whether it is an existing space that has constraints and opportunities to it...

...to a greater or lesser extent you can exploit the space, fight against it, ignore it, try to do something with it...but the shape the story that you tell has absolutely works much better if you respond to, or makes use of, the space itself...and stories naturally have a shape that makes them easier or more difficult to tell, depending on how you set them up.

ALISON: Which is why we would say you need a narrative structure, because you may have 25 or 250 so called 'stories' – things you want to talk about, ideas you want to talk about – and you need something that is going to bring all of those together...and the process of developing narrative, for me, is finding a pattern that is going to bring all of those things together, and then articulating the pattern and working out how you then weave all the different threads into that...and I think that narrative pattern – which I would call framework, which has a beginning middle and end but not necessarily in that order – becomes then the driven force for how you work with designers, with the curatorial team, with the knowledge providers to interpret how those stories are going to be told, and to inform what the design opportunities, the interactive opportunities and the engagement opportunities are...

TIM: ...I think there is an important distinction you made there between 'story' and 'narrative'.

I don't know whether your book is ever going to define 'narrative' – we've been trying to define it and we still don't agree after 30 years – but often when you come into a project, your client will say, 'We have a fantastic narrative! All these stories, it's gonna be great, all these wonderful stories...' and some of the least satisfactory exhibitions are the ones where people mistake having lots of stories for actually having a narrative. So it tells lots of things...

ALISON: ...it just becomes, '...one darn thing after another'...

TIM: ...indeed, but there is no pattern, no shape to it. And 'narrative' / narratives naturally lend themselves to, or work better, if you give they're given a shape [and] a physical shape to work in, that reinforces them.

TRICIA: Yes completely...

Well I am following, sort of, Aristotle and Chapman; that you have series of events and characters that you move through the story arc, beginning, middle and end – maybe 3, maybe 5 chapters, maybe 7 – but, it's all underpinned by having a message - there is a purpose to it.

So, there is a content, a telling and a purpose, and of course there's an audience as well. So, hopefully we'll be able to capture that a little bit.

So, how did you come to the Story Shapes that you teach, that you share with us?

...it's really that the story needs to respect the space, and the shape can provide huge power and opportunities for the narrative if you work with it...

ALISON: That is very much Tim's ways of explaining it, so, I will start first because I explain it slightly differently...but, it communicates brilliantly through the way that Tim tells it.

If you've got a narrative which has a pattern to it – and where you want to engage people in the way you tell the story, in the way you tell the narrative – then you have to think of it like writing a film script, or writing a theatre script, or a book.

You want to intrigue, you want to draw them into the subject.

You then need to be in control of how you reveal or conceal information...where or what order you release information in...how you build from one section of the story to another...whether you are building up to crisis...whether you've got a conflict that you start with that you unpack...however that works, helps to drive the way in which you deploy the content.

So, you start with a great big bowl of spaghetti and then you look to see how you are going to turn that into something, and if you are going to do that in 3D, then the pattern of the narrative, that process of organisation, has huge implications for the space in which it is going to be told.

TIM: Yeah...that is the start point, bar almost none, for the narratives we convey – they happen in a 3D space with people moving through it, that is the essence of it.

And therefore, the way you deal with that narrative has to respect the space and what the opportunities and limitations of it are.

So, it becomes really clear after working on a few, that there are some narratives that work best if people know one thing before they know the next – if it's a chronology, for example, if it's a 'History of...' something, and it's really important that you know A before you find out B and C, the space needs to reflect that and how in how it pushed people through.

But in some other narratives, it's far more interesting and the narrative lends itself to, compare and contrast.

So, that might be a social history, or the experience of children or women or workers in different places, and at that point you want people to be able to go back to a thing they've seen before and compare it, or be able to see one thing in the visual frame of something else – so that comparison and contrast becomes part of the experience.

In that case, you definitely wouldn't want people to only go through one way, you would want them to be able to move around.

You may find there are stories, for example, or a narratives you want to tell which is fundamentally all about one thing. So, it all leads up to or leads away from the one single idea or object, or whatever...and at that point you probably want that object probably to be concealed as the very last reveal – like the crown jewels in the Tower of London, for example – or you want it to sit right, slap-bang, in the middle of your story and everything else to lead up to or away from it, and it's constantly in view – as for example if you were doing a car show.

If you were doing a car show the car would be in the middle and all the things about the car would be around the outside.

So, it's really that the story needs to respect the space, and the shape can provide huge power and opportunities for the narrative if you work with it. Quite often you see, and for entirely practical reasons, that either the building is impossible or whatever, that the narrative simply doesn't have the right space to work in, the right shape to work in, and you can see how its message, and its impact has fallen short because it hasn't been able to do that.

ALISON: So, you know, you therefore then need to recraft the narrative, and the narrative framework, in order to work with the space – and that might mean taking a quite radical view on the subject that you are presenting – because the space or the opportunities are not there to do it perhaps in the way that you had originally thought.

TIM: ...and then there are some very, very practical people movement things through the space.

So, we are working on a project at the moment where there is a, in the middle of the sequence, there is a seven minute theatre/film show that people have to go through and then pass out of.

That means everything up to that point everything has to work on a seven minute sequence, there is no other way to do it. And so simply that nature of that space, and putting you through that one [central] space, completely determines everything else all the way back, and in fact, all the way on afterwards.

So, sometimes the shape of that narrative is absolutely determined by extremely practical things, like, how many people can you actually fit into one space? Or, how many people can walk down that passageway, and you have to live with that...

But, as I say, sometimes there's just a mismatch between the shape a narrative is given and what that narrative is actually asking for.

Q TRICIA: So, you developed your list...and what do you think of Duncan McCauly saying, 'Well, there's only really three different kinds of spaces: the linear, the island and the hub a spokes...do you think that the others you've developed..."?

...I think if you went to a client and said, "There's three ways of doing this...which one would you like?", I think they might feel, actually...well, there's more to it than that...

TIM: I mean, those are three and they cover a range of variants, but thinking back over projects that we've been involved with, I think there are a lot more than that and I think that if they are well deployed they have very different effects.

So, he's quite right in identifying those as three ways of doing things, but that's three among a much larger number I think.

TRICIA: Yes, I think the linear, the going and returning past the same spot is kind of a form of the linear isn't it? And also the grid where you can go and investigate is different ways is also slightly different from the islands...

TIM: I think the thing is...all I'd say is that reducing it to three gives you 3 things to go for, but it doesn't necessarily open up opportunities that a more extended range of story shapes actually allow you to explore.

It's certain that we've found in projects, either where we have got a free space to work with or really quite constricted spaces, extending beyond those three in order to make use of the space that was available has been very useful.

So, I think if you went to a client and said, "There's three ways of doing this...which one would you like?", I think they might feel, actually...well, there's more to it than that...

TRICIA: Yes, I think there is too. I think it's the subtle difference...I have to look at it more carefully...the subtle range of possibilities within each of them...if they are sort of key Story Shapes and how the others might fit together...I need to look at that.

ALISON: I think also the Story Shape represents the visitor journey.

It's not just where you place things, it also takes into account how you can reveal the stories or blend the stories together so that you are guiding your visitors into being able to explore and make connections themselves, and develop their relationship with the narrative. And I think that's what guides the type of Story Shapes that we like to work with.

It's not purely a spatial thing is not where things go because you are moving through time and space.

TIM: It might well be that what Duncan is referring to there is, from a spatial planning point of view, basically three sorts of ways of doing things, and that might be accurate. I think in terms of a visitor experience for a Story Shapes, I think there are far more variants than that.

Q

TRICIA: Yes, I think there's part of that, the reveal and the conceal captures a different kind of drama.

Ok, so I'm going to move on to the next question which is just in terms of wanting people to move forward but, but you also want people to stop at objects...

Do you think that is a tricky contradiction, or do you think that is a useful way to think about it, or...?

...there are lots of different ways of using objects, or allowing objects to be used, and it depends entirely on the quality and the nature of the narrative and the nature of the objects...

TIM: I am not quite sure that you actually just want them to move forward, I think you want them to explore the space.

So...I mean ultimately you want them to leave so that other people come in...but your purpose, unless you're running an Expo Pavilion, your purpose is not to shunt them through as fast as you can, or even within a given time, it's to allow them to explore the space. So I don't think there is a contradiction between providing a movement and a reason to go on look at the next thing and stopping and looking at one thing, so I don't see a contradiction there.

There is a range of ways to get people to stop and take notice which is often what you want to do, you know, sometimes it's because the 'thing' is extraordinarily beautiful or it's pulled out and beautifully lit and looks amazing, or has a startling piece of context around it, whether is a quote or an image or whatever. But another way, which works better for some people actually, is that you tell the same story, you tell the story the same way over and over again.



So [for example] there's five things that you talk about with each object, or it's answering five questions, and then people will pick up the thing they are interested in and *that's* what will stop them or *that's* will allow them to follow it [the narrative] through...

TRICIA: ...like a thread...

TIM: ...they're looking for a thread. So that's another way to, as it were, engage people on the way through, and there's other as well I guess...

ALSIAN: Yes and I think also, from my point of view, there are lots of different ways of using objects, or allowing objects to be used, and it depends entirely on the quality and the nature of the narrative and the nature of the objects.

For example, *History of the World in a 100 Objects*, those objects were specifically chosen, and they happened to be randomly placed around the British Museum, because the narrative was about how an object can reveal an entire piece of history and human endeavour, and those objects were chosen because they fulfilled those criteria.

That's completely at odds with the way that anyone of those objects was placed within the gallery that you found it in. It wasn't there because it was helping you tell the whole history of mankind in a 100 objects. It was there because it was, in some cases, one of 25 of that type of object which was part of a completely different narrative in the gallery that you find it in.

You can choose objects because they demonstrate, as with *...100 Objects*, they demonstrate a principle, they demonstrate a narrative, so you choose them for that reason.

If you want to get people to really study and look at the stories that you can unpack from objects and understand what the object itself is you would display them in a very different way, and you might want 25 of the same one because that is the point you are making...that it was the first time that things could be mass produced and look the same way...there are 25 things that come from 25 places, but actually they all use the same principles. So, the way in which you use objects is enormously varied and I think that is one of the things that has changed.

Thirty, fifty, a hundred years ago you wouldn't have found objects being put on display in a museum or a gallery in order to do *that*. They'd have been there for very different reasons because they were part of a collection and that collection had a purpose behind it.

And I think that's what is really exciting, is that you can do really very different things with objects; you can put in context, as with the Pompeii exhibition, you can recreate a room and put them back into a space...and I think digital has made a huge difference too in the way that you get people to respond to objects. So that one is now very used to find different kinds of information about something and being able to choose what bit of it you follow, what makes it interesting to you...



Q

TRICIA: Yes, that's what I was going to ask...the next question is;
Is there a conflict between objects and digital media or media?

...if digital can help that then it's great, but ultimately that is what all the means of engaging people and stopping them and getting them to look at this things is about...

TIM: I don't think a conflict necessarily...

ALISON: There can be...

TIM: ...[yes] there can be, but I think lying behind *all* the ways of displaying objects, interpreting it, or making it look beautiful or extraordinary or intriguing or whatever it is, is the absolutely fundamental power, which is the power of the *real* – ‘this’ is a *real* thing – and that, actually, is what engages people every single time.

So, whatever you do to it...whether you put it up against a Celtic gold torque...against an image of a drippy rainy forest...or whether you put the stone hand tool in a modelled hand so that you can see how people actually use it...or whatever it is...it’s the power of the *real*.

And digital is no better or worse really at drawing people’s attention and getting people to appreciate the power of the real. When it overtakes it, when it side lines the object itself, then it’s probably a whole a lot less useful. But what people respond to, and why they come to museums and what they’re hoping to see when they get there, are the real things, that were in that time and in that place. And I think if digital can help *that* then it’s great, but ultimately that is what *all* the means of engaging people and stopping them and getting them to look at this things is about, is reinforcing the *reality* of that [object].



ALISON: I think that digital narrative is a really interesting area which is opening up a lot of possibilities, but it also can be used as a bit of a short hand for not really trying.

You know, if you provide somebody with an app there this expectation that because it is an app, or because it’s a piece of technology in your hand, somehow that make everything crystal clear and transparent, and actually it’s only as good as the programming...it’s only as good as the narrative and the story telling, just like anything else. I think an awful lot of digital engagement isn’t very good, because is not about anything. And I think the content is very poor, very often, and it’s more about the wizziness and cleverness of the technology than it is about the story or the content or the ‘thing’.

But I do feel that there is a way in which we ought to be working with virtual narrative environments, as well as with physical ones, in a much more playful, imaginative way, because there are now a lot of different kinds of visitors to engage and you can’t necessarily make a physical narrative environment that is going to suit everybody. But what digital, if used well, can allow you to do is to layer onto a narrative environment different story shapes, different ways of approaching those fixed milestone or way marker elements so that people can chose how they want to interact with spaces. And I think *that’s* something that institutions find very difficult, because they like to control...they like the power of control of the narrative...and if you’re introducing lots of different layers where people can make choices, you lose that power, you that control.

TRICIA: Have you got any examples of where you think that's done well, does anything come to mind?

I'm thinking, I quite like sound, you know headphones, I find that helpful and that it gives me extra information...

TIM: Well, I think I'd say the of the projects that we have been involved with where digital has really played a role, it has been more of an intervention than an enhancement. So, I'm thinking of *Transplant and Life*, for example, which was a project we worked on.

It was a temporary exhibition at the Hunterian Museum, which was full with body bits really, I mean an extraordinary collection, a medical collection. It used screens and transducers to turn the glass cases into speakers, in order to put the voices and experiences of transplant patients and transplant doctors into this particular space.

So it wasn't an interpretation what' there...of those objects...it was an intervention and a context to it. And that was transformative of that space and of that collection, but the collection itself wasn't touched...

ALISON: But that was based on the fact that photographer and artists, Tim Wainwright and John Wynne, had spent 15 years working with those particular patients, so the power of the narrative



was in the particular testimonies and the power of the photographs, but it transformed the Hunterian into a very different kind of experience. That was not a wizzy gimmick, that was very simple digital intervention.

TRICIA: Yes, so it didn't have to be super technical.

ALISON: I think, in some ways, the Bowie exhibition worked...

TRICIA: Which one?

ALISON: The David Bowie exhibition.

TRICIA: Oh the David Bowie, of course, which I didn't see...

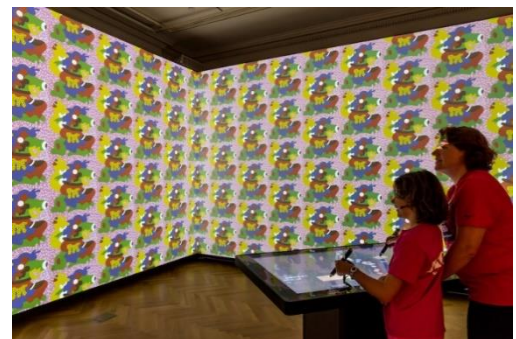
ALISON: ...it used sound, I think some of the display ideas could have had more thought around them, but the way in which the sound interpreted your experience as you were in the space was very interesting...

TRICIA: How does it work?

TIM: It had headphones and a proximity sensor, so as you moved...I mean, it didn't do much for conversation but it made your experience quite...

TRICIA: So as you went up towards a screen [you started to hear it]. Yes it was like that at the Pink Floyd, I thought it was very clever but you were quite separated from the crowd, and there was a huge crowd there...

TIM: I mean there is a lovely digital experience at the Cooper Hewitt, in New York, which is a wallpaper design thing and you can choose patterns from various pattern books and then you can 'throw' it at the wall as your own version of it. And it's a thing in its own right, I guess, but it does make you think again about those items, the patterns.



ALISON: I think in a way a lot of what I want to do doesn't exist yet, and is not necessarily because you are looking for a new technology, I think it would be great to use the technologies that exist in a more imaginative way.

So, rather than going to a picture show and being offered one audio guide, why don't you have a range of ways of interacting which those audio guides could offer you?

The answer is you *can't* make people to stop, or *make* people understand things as you want them to. All you can do is to give them the tools to reach that point if they so choose. But I also think that sometimes you have to do very little in order to flag something up.

Just in the way that, you know, people get very involved with puppets, whereas this piece of wood actually has to move very little, has do very few things, in order to make you feel that its human and empathize to with it.

I think the same is very often true in a narrative environment, in that if you've got a reasonably calm and, not bland, but ordered set of interpretation, and then you put something which changes the environment, which changes the rhythm, people pick up that rhythm that change in rhythm.

It could be done through lighting, it could be done through sound, it can be even be done by just creating more space around something. I think that language of storytelling, which actually everybody is really very used to from film and video and theatre and so on, is underused. Because very often the drive is to get as many things in as possible, or to make sure that you've said exactly the same amount of all these wonderful things about absolutely everything. And I think that process of interpreting is very often taking things out.

Q

TRICIA: Yes, so that means...you're really trying to build a story rather than just include the whole list of items...

I am going to move on to our next question, which may not be much of a question but;

Tone of voice is something that is used in literature and I suppose film, but we don't seem to use it very much [in design]...is that...?

It is absolutely critical...because it is the way...that the display or the exhibition or the institution establishes personality and then gives visitors a reason to be interested.

TIM: ...that's really interesting, because we absolutely use it all the time.

It is absolutely critical...because it is the way, not just in words, but in the choice of images, in the way that things are set out and in the use of pictures, it is the way that the display or the exhibition or the institution establishes personality and then gives visitors a reason to be interested.

So, it is just as crucial as any tone of voice you have in any conversation with anyone.

So, I would say it is right at the top on the list of things we try and work through with an institution or with a client. And different institutions, different groups, have a particular tone of voice that suits them. And once you identify what is essentially true about that organization, or the way they see themselves or the people they want to reach, then you can help find the tone of voice for them, and then it evolves into something that people can work with.

But, I mean, it is the absolute meeting point between the visitor and the space, so it's essential, and we work with people with very different tones of voice obviously, but it can completely transform people's experience.

As an example, when we worked with the...

[ALSION: Design Museum? TIM: I was thinking of Southampton, but the Ashmolean is another good example...]

So this is really very practical...the exhibition about the crew of the Titanic in Southampton called, *Southampton's Titanic Story*, and all the people who were in the crew, and with the tone of voice, we moved everything, all the stuff in the exhibition, into the continuous present tense.

So, in talking about these people's experience, we didn't say, "The captain joined the ship at 8:45 and went to his cabin and looked at the charts." You put it into the continuous present and, all of a sudden, you are in that moment with them. And it's not like you don't know the end of the story, right?

We know what's going to happen and you're [the visitor is] following that story into the continuous present all the way through, and it just completely transformed the way people engaged with it.





But on a very different level with the Ashmolean, for example, they had to entirely change their tone of voice because the idea, the narrative principle which is, *Crossing Cultures, Crossing Time*.

So, you are looking for all the things that link up and link between cultures and periods, not the things that make them alone and distinctive; whether that's technologies, or whether it's pattern in art, or whether its ideas and belief, or whether its people...and that was a totally different tone of voice for that museum...

ALISON: Yes, so instead of being what the University of Oxford excels in, which is the academic exposition of a subject. If you want for the Ashmolean to become a museum for everybody you had to find a tone of voice for your audiences...you didn't want to not have all those different curatorial and academic voices, but we needed to blend them and present them in a way that was engaging and encouraging and easy to engage with, not alienating, and, you know, nobody needed to feel like they didn't know enough to be there.

So, posing a question and having two or three different ways of answering it; exploring the visual elements off a statue [for example] that was made in Afghanistan, but had a Greek toga on and was reportedly to be of the Buddha – which gives you a sense of what the *Crossing Cultures, Crossing Time* story is – you need to be able to hear the curator and the researchers voices explaining that to you but in a really easy way for everybody to understand: Leaving out all of the jargon, leaving out, you know, some of the things that if you don't have an academic background you would find alienating...

So, it turned into a very Socratic question and answer set of principles, which was one thread of interpretation through the galleries...and I was also going to say that that is also a very important part of the narrative environment, which is saying to the institution, "Who are you speaking to and what do you want to get out of it?", because you can...have great ideas about what you want to communicate to people, but if you're not helping the institution or the gallery understand all the different opportunities at their disposal for creating that communication, then you're not going get very far...

One of the things we did with the Design Museum (London), when it moved from Shad Thames to Kensington, was to develop a Text and a Tone of Voice Toolkit, so that their desire to be a place of debate; a first port of call for people who wanted to know about the design ecosystem in London; to look at the issues around design in all its different facets; was something that we spent a lot of time working with the curators with in order to work out what the principles were that needed to be got across, before they started writing *anything*...and that was very important.



TRICIA: So, very strategic....

ALSION: Yes.

TRICIA: So, that is quite interesting that you created a Toolkit as a set of guidelines, or a way to do it.

So, it's not tone of voice – you're thinking about the organizational *identity* and its *purpose* as leading that, rather than thinking is it blue or is it light or whatever it is...

TIM: Yeah...I mean it has to start from somewhere and the tone of voice has to be true to the institution.

There is no point in the Ashmolean trying to be all, "Hey kids...", that's not going to work. But equally they do need to know what we ask them, which is, "What do you want people to know, think, feel and do at the end of this?", because there will be a Tone of Voice that achieves that and there'll be a Tone of Voice that doesn't achieve that.

And once people have signed up to what they want their visitors to know, think, feel and do...and you've interrogated and agreed on what the essence of that institution is...then you start to have basis for creating a Tone of Voice.

TRICIA: ...and the tone of voice then does the narrative doesn't it?

TIM: Yeah it does, I mean it certainly affects how you put the narrative across.

I think it comes along after the shape of the narrative has been put in place...but you are getting a feel for it very early on...

TRICIA: Right, ok...so it's kind of running in parallel and then you kind of cross check the narrative against it...yeah.

I mean it is very interesting that you really use it a lot, I suppose designers don't really think of it in those terms...

ALISON: Well, we've had experience with designers who clearly engage with that and look at...**Iona Peel?** will tell you a lot about that...so you look at everything – from the font to the spatial arrangement of material (written material) to the relationship of images and objects – to help put that Tone of Voice across...

TIM: That is true...I mean great designers and graphic designers, once you've agreed to Tone of Voice with them, will come up with wonderful ways of conveying that that have nothing to do with the words at all...and that gets very exciting, very exciting indeed.

Q

TRICIA: So, time if getting on, so I am going to run through a bit.

Why is 'immersion' such a buzzword and is it a conflict...or is it opposed to didacticism...or is that a false dichotomy? So, why is it such a buzzword do you think?

...they're [clients] taking their lead from rides and environments and Harry Potter [Studio Tour] and all those kind of things where 'immersion' is what they are selling, but we've never really encountered it being used to push a story forward...

TIM: I think, honestly, most times you come across it, its shorthand for saying lets engage people with as many senses as you possibly can...

TRICIA: Yeah.

TIM: ...and that's it. You know, there are theatre companies – and everyone always talks about Punch Drunk, but there are others – who have worked in immersive environments...but broadly speaking, in the cultural context it is just saying, "Surely we can do more than just show movies and put text on the wall and let people look at things...", and I don't think mostly, at this stage, it gets much further than that.

People love immersive experiences, and obviously they're [clients] taking their lead from rides and environments and Harry Potter [Studio Tour] and all those kind of things where 'immersion' is what they are selling, but we've never really encountered it being used to push a story forward, but in terms of making things fun for audiences...I'm thinking of the ones we've been involved with...

ALISON: Yeah...I think if you going to a historic site, for example, a castle or a fortress, you're in an immersive environment [already].

And if part of the narrative, or part of the understanding of the subject, is trying to put people back into the shoes of the people who were originally there, or into a relationship with the events of a time or a place, then, I can see that immersion works.

But there is a lot that you can do to create an immersive environment that has got nothing to do with technology.

You know, gardens are fabulously immersive environments and you can use the physical planting and moving people through a space, things they can discover and smell and see and so on...which is *entirely* immersive and can tell stories in that way.

We're/I'm looking at 26 mile of [heritage] railway track at the moment, and to try and create one narrative environment...which goes through cuttings, it goes through housing estates, it has open countryside, it goes over bridges, it goes through tunnels...I mean its extraordinary when you start to analyse what 26 mile of railway line actually is...but the immersion, the immersive-ness of that, is really allowing people to see themselves *in* it in a different way...



TRICIA: Yes, it's about being in it isn't it...

ALISON: ...I think immersive environments can be incredibly didactic.

Because if you have taken out all of the sensory elements and the wayfinding and the natural way in which people relate to their physical space, and you have curated or designed all that for them, then in a way you are being extraordinarily didactic...

Q

TRICIA: Yes, I think so too, I agree with you.

So, we've just got one more question left on here and then your point;

So, none museum narrative environments that you think are worthwhile looking at that you've seen that are really affective in the UK, or actually elsewhere?

ALISON: I'd liked to have had prior notice of that [question]...

TRICIA: Well, I'll get back to you on that one...

TIM: ...yes, I'd probably need to think about that slightly...

ALISON: My mind has gone a complete blank...well, that's not entirely true...

I do actually think the Harry Potter Studio Tour is pretty brilliant...and I really like the way some of the themed bus tours work. So, you get on a bus and you're turning the whole of London into a narrative environment – you're on the Night Bus or the Grave Bus...

TRICIA: Yes...looking at the *actual* narrative environment...what's the one in New York where you just go to an old house...

TIM: ...that's the Tenement Museum, and there is also the Dennis Severs House, which is a wonderful experience of being in a place which is not 'museumy' at all, but that's an immersive environment that really works...I mean an extraordinary immersive environment, particularly at night...

ALISON: ..but a lot of the other ones I am thinking of at the moment are brand experiences and those are narrative environments, but...well, are they narrative environments? I mean, 'Is brand narrative a narrative?' is an endless debate really...

Q

TRICIA: Well I think, yes...that is one of the things that I am trying to address in the scope of the book, but anyway, I think they'd say they're narrative environments probably...

So, "Narrative is as much a process as an end result", I don't know if you want to give me a few words on that...?

...I'd say that narrative was Timespace...and that means that you can play with it in a lot of interesting ways...

TIM: You want to talk about that Alison, that's your...*thing*.

ALISON: Yes, what I mean by that is that; if a narrative works in time and space you have got the 3D or linear element of that, which is one activity or one instant happening after another in a sequence that you have chosen.

People experience that both physically in the space...whether that is sitting in the space reading a book, physically in a space...but they also experience it through time.

So, there's a sequence of working out how long people are spending understanding different elements, but also there is the time sequence that you are giving them as part of the narrative, as opposed to the actual physical real amount of time...so there is a kind of double time thing going on there.

So I'd say that narrative was Timespace...and that means that you can play with it in a lot of interesting ways.

So the process of understanding all of the things you want to say, all the things you want to show – these great bowls of spaghetti – and working out how you are going to manipulate that Timespace through to make a satisfactory experience, or tell the story in the best possible way,

which involves working out when the conflict comes and when people encounter that, what information is revealed or how it is revealed, which characters or personalities or voices you encounter and which parts of that narrative they carry, and how you respond to and receive those is a *process*, and that is a narrative process.

It's the way of constructing the narrative and at the end of it you also got a something called a 'narrative environment'...I suppose is a bit like weaving and then the weaved garment at the end of it; there isn't another word for making narrative, it is a narrative process. And I think that is often as important as the end result...and if it is done well people shouldn't see the process that you have been through.

TRICIA: In terms of people who made it you mean?

ALISON: Yes.

TRICIA: I completely agree with you, I think we are very much on the same page.

I have written a bit of it chronology I think its called, that Chapman talks, the time of the story, and the time you spend reading the story.

I think there is a 3rd dimension actually, that space brings another dimension to it...so that you have as a visitor yet another experience, which is a spatial story experience...there's the time of the story, the time spent looking at the story, but also the adventure that *you* have in encountering that story.

So you almost, as a visitor, are creating your own story, but it's a spatial, bodily one. So that for example an event might be described on this wall and then you turn the corner and you enter another time zone, so you physically experience that. I think I is a quite difficult think to explain to people, and I am struggling with a bit in the book but I will eventually get it, that there's possibly three levels, there is an extra level in narrative environments, which you don't have when you are sitting down reading a book.

So, I think that could be a useful thing for people who are designing to think about that, and acknowledge that there is a 3rd level...but I think I have gotten it in my head, before I can explain it properly...

ALISON: Yes, it is one of those things...one does it, and then trying to explain it afterwards...

It's easier to say, "Come on we will do it..." than it is to try and explain it.

TRICIA: Yes, it's working back from the examples, but I think we are in a good position...we've got a lot of good examples to show...but, I think that we have run out of time...

T&A: Well thank you very much...