

ABSTRACT

Museum Gallery Layouts and Their Interactions with Exhibition Narratives and Space-use Patterns: An Investigation of the YCBA, the MoMA and the HMA Galleries

by

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For exhibition installations and museum planning to be effective, it is important to have an understanding of how spatial layouts influence visitors' explorations in gallery space. This study explores the possible effects of gallery layouts on exhibition message and visitors' space-use. Focusing on one gallery floor each in the Yale Center for British Art (New Haven), the Museum of Modern Art (New York City) and the High Museum of Art (Atlanta), this study analyzes how the exhibition narratives is shaped and to what extent space-use patterns are predicted by the gallery layouts.

The gallery layout of each museum is described in terms of permeability and visibility properties using space syntax. These properties are compared and correlated with exhibition narratives and space-use patterns. These correlations account for both top-down and bottom-up characterizations of space to understand the effects of layouts on narratives and space-use patterns, in detail.

This study presents several important findings. First, museum gallery layouts guide visitors' exploration with the most available levels of visual information, whether global level

visibility among the galleries or visual access between neighboring locations. Second, at the scale that this information is most available (layout or room scale), these visibility properties facilitate alternative interpretations of the exhibition narratives by revealing visual comparisons, and thus frame the exhibition message based on top-down or bottom up interpretations. Third, display viewing behavior is motivated by popular paintings and conceptually strong narratives in visually isolated locations. Visitors are more engaged when viewing displays under low level visibility in galleries. In smaller and exposed rooms visitors view displays in conjunction with displays in other rooms. However, larger, more isolated rooms facilitate viewing displays in a contained environment. Fourth, museum gallery layouts also predict scanning behavior when visual information is opened up through atria voids. Finally, in the layouts where information can be captured from a wide array of spaces, visitors engage in explorative, display viewing and scanning behaviors, reflecting synergy among the various space-use patterns. In contrast, these patterns are dissociated in layouts with visually isolated galleries. These findings directly inform the installation of artwork and museum design.