

Chapter 21

USING THE FLOOR FOR EXHIBIT INFORMATION: A FORMATIVE EVALUATION FOR THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST GALLERIES

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Introduction

In the concept design phase of the planning for the new ancient Near East galleries at the Royal Ontario Museum a proposal was made to place maps on the gallery floors at certain key points. The maps were to function as introductions to the geography of various areas covered by the galleries.

The idea to place maps on the floor stemmed from the informal observation that wall maps tend not to be noticed by visitors. It was hoped that maps on the floor would attract more attention and provide a better geographic context for the gallery space as a whole. However, some members of the design team were worried about the proposal to put maps on the floor. The questions raised were:

- Would visitors ignore the maps?
- Would visitors notice the maps, feel inhibited about walking on them, and therefore have their access to adjacent exhibits impeded?
- Would people standing on the maps obscure them for other visitors?
- Would the maps be easy to read?

In addition to the concerns about the placement, there was disagreement in the design team about the quantity and type of information to be placed on maps. It was decided to conduct a formative evaluation to gather more information on these issues.

Methodology

The evaluation was designed by the authors, two of whom are members of the Ancient Near East gallery development team and the third a freelance interpretive planner. Help in data collection came from the staff of Exhibit Design Services, the Egyptian Department, and the West Asian Department.

The study took place in two main phases:

1. Observation of and interviews with visitors who used wall maps already installed in the museum;
2. Two stages of observation and interviews with visitors using a mocked-up floor map.

Phase One

The intention of this step was to observe visitors as they passed maps on the walls at the entrances to five museum galleries. A visitor who looked at a map was to be asked what he/she liked or disliked about it. This phase of the study was short-lived. Very few visitors were using the maps, and those that did found it difficult to comment on any one map. For example, in the course of two half-hour periods on a Saturday afternoon in February the following use of maps was recorded:

<u>Roman World Map</u>	Glanced at.....	1
	Stopped at.....	3
	Ignored	18
<u>Greek and Etruscans Map</u>	Glanced at.....	1
	Stopped at.....	0
	Ignored.....	34

It was decided not to pursue this phase of the study beyond the first day's data collection. It was obvious that even if very few visitors used them, maps on the floor would be at least as effective as maps on the wall. This first phase also led to the decision that for the next phase the visitors would be given a comparison of different versions of floor maps to facilitate discussion of likes and dislikes.

Phase Two(a)

The purpose of this phase was to determine the pattern of visitor use of a map on the floor. In accordance with the findings of Cave (1982) concerning mock-up formats, a full-scale mock-up was used because we were testing patterns of circulation. A full-scale mock-up also had the advantage of allowing us to test design concerns such as type size and colors for the map. A two-color map of the Ancient Near East with key

ancient place names marked in black and a decorative border was silkscreened onto masonite and installed in the center of the floor in the introduction to the Royal Ontario Museum's Mediterranean World gallery. Grey masonite was installed over the rest of the floor so that the floor level in the gallery remained even.

Using the systematic sampling procedure described by Alt (1982:159) unobtrusive observations were made of 205 visitors entering the gallery introduction. Any conversation or interaction with the map or other visitors concerning the map was recorded. At the same time that visitors were being tracked, a second person was stationed at the exit from the gallery. Using the same systematic sampling method, 196 visitors were interviewed. The visitors were asked whether they had seen the map and if so was it easy to understand.

Phase Two(b)

In this phase a similar full-scale map was placed on the floor of a non-public room near the Mediterranean World introductory gallery. Using the same systematic sampling method and selection site, 53 visitors were asked to look at the map and answer a few questions on content and style. Then three acetate overlays with additional information were placed one on top of the other on the base map. The overlays showed:

1. Pictograms (boats, camels, palm trees, the Coliseum, pyramids, the ziggurat at Ur, and the Parthenon);
2. Additional place names;
3. Green wash to indicate fertile areas.

For each overlay added, visitors were asked whether the additional information made the map easier or more difficult to understand. After all the overlays had been added, visitors were asked to select for themselves the combination of information they found to be most effective.

Results

Phase Two(a)

Overall, 71% of the 205 visitors observed either glanced or stopped for more than three seconds at the map. Fewer than 5% stood on the map for purposes other than looking at it. Of the people who glanced at or stopped at the the map, 54% walked across the map and 46% walked around it. Of those who stopped at the map, nearly half (42%) interacted with the map by talking about it to their companions, walking back and forth looking, kneeling to look, touching the map, referring to the exhibit adjacent to the map, or rubbing the border of the map.

Of the 196 people interviewed 66% claimed to have noticed the map. Of those who noticed the map, 98% found it easy to understand. Some of the reasons given for finding the map easy to understand were "the type is clear and simple", "it's big", "it's simple", "it's nice and bright". When asked what drew their attention to the map, its physical appearance, particularly the bright colors, were mentioned most frequently (89%). The next most common reason was the map's position (67%): "...and that it was on the floor--its very unusual--that makes it a good place for it".

Of the people who glanced at the map, 47% stopped at the adjacent exhibit. Similarly, of the visitors who stopped at the map, 48% also stopped at the adjacent exhibit.

Phase Two(b)

Of the 53 visitors interviewed 30 felt that the addition of modern place names would make the map easier to understand. The most positive responses to the acetate overlays were given for the pictograms. The majority of visitors (93%) found that pictograms made the map easier to understand. The variation consisting of pictograms and many additional place names elicited only a 26% positive response with regard to ease of understanding.

When asked what quantity of information they found to be most effective, the results were a little different. Only 14% preferred the addition of pictograms only. A higher density of information was preferred by 72% of visitors, with the numbers being roughly equally divided between the base map with additional place names, base map plus a green wash to indicate fertile areas, and the base map plus pictograms and the green wash.

Conclusions

The evaluation answered the concerns outlined in the introduction about maps on the floor and provided useful data to inform design decisions. The map was not ignored. Some visitors avoided walking on the map, but even so the map did not impede access to adjacent exhibits. Visitors did not stand on the map except to look at it. Complaints on the ease of use of the map were minimal despite the fact that the survey population included a number of elderly people and two visitors in wheelchairs.

Given the information from the formative evaluation, the gallery design team has decided to proceed with using maps on the floor in the new Ancient Near East galleries. The decision of the design team has been to include pictograms on the map and to have somewhat more names than on the base map used in the mock-up but not as many as were on the acetate overlay.

References

- Alt, M. B. (1982). Designing and carrying out the evaluation study. In R. S. Miles (Ed.), The Design of Educational Exhibits. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Cave, J. B. J. (1982). A comparison of mock-up formats used in the formative development of museum exhibits. M. M. St. thesis, University of Toronto, Toronto.