Construction

Although construction is the exhibition sector is in many ways similar to construction in the small sector, it involves a number of unique issues. Speed is often vital and the most exhibition specialists are used to the rhythm of careful preparation and installation, and short intensive periods of build up before the opening of a show. Most venues try to minimize the length of time for which they are closed, and squeeze the installation and dismantling of displays into a short period. Construction, graphics, and electrical, multimedia and lighting installations have to be strictly timetabled, which often means working late into the night to meet strict deadlines.

First of all, the designer should consider how the elements of an exhibition or display will be transported and installed. Large constructions have to be broken into smaller segments for transport and access into exhibition spaces. Many venues, particularly museums, have restricted access and it may be necessary to consider how to disassemble individual elements in order to fit them through restricted doors or corridors before they are reassembled on site. For travelling displays, constant assembly and disassembly can be inconvenient and expensive, and the designer has to consider this from the outset. Weight also has a considerable impact when displays are transported over long distances as freight charges are often calculated on the size as well as weight.

Most displays are designed to be as robust as possible as they need to be, given the length of time for which they will be installed. Short-term installations are relatively crude in construction while permanent ones are often designed with higher specifications. This applies particularly to how displays are finished. Non-resistant paints that can be easily painted over when they get dirty are often used for short-term installations. Longer-term displays need durable finishes that will withstand the public handling them over a period of years without the need for maintenance. Children’s displays are particularly vulnerable to rough handling, and even temporary ones must be robust. The designer needs to estimate the effects of use and specify materials accordingly. Like a stage set, exhibition structures often look rough behind the scenes, with unfinished walls and large unimportant areas. Although this would not be appropriate for an inner city design scheme, in exhibitions most clients are keen to spend their money where it can be seen and appreciated. To give visitors a high-quality experience, and not less concerned about anything that is not visible to the public.

The cost of construction is influenced by a variety of factors, including transport, materials and the labour required to make and install each item. Most designers add as much sophistication to their design as their budget allows, and often overestimate it in the first instance. The price quoted by contractors means that particular details cannot be achieved, the designer meets the contractor to discuss what can be done for the money available, and assess the details to achieve the highest standards that are possible and the necessary budget savings. It is preferable to have all elements constructed off site. As time is always limited, it is easier and faster to assemble them off site and then make the exhibition venue than to start from scratch on site.

Many exhibits of exhibition design, such as glass cabinets and light boxes, are available from specialist suppliers, who are often able to achieve high-quality details and organise specialist features such as fire and security precautions, and environmental controls for humidity and temperature. These are complicated to manufacture and generally time consuming to build, so the client and designer should look carefully at these schedules to ensure that they can be completed in the time available. Generally, the larger the designer has to prepare for an exhibition, the more he or she is able to use high-quality specialist suppliers and achieve high-quality details. Final painting and finish are often a factor in inadequate preparation time.

Working with contractors

As in any industry, there is a range of contractors with a range of specialties. Very often, the designer employs specialists in lighting, graphic production, construction, modeling, sound, interaction and projection/moving images. Different jobs require different skills and it is necessary to examine the credentials of each contractor—the type of work they have done in the