

## Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries

By Jessica Lacher-Feldman. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013. 200 pp.  
Softcover. \$69.95. ISBN 1-931666-64-4.

During my first year of library school, I obtained an internship in a special collections department at a university library. Shortly into the internship, I was tasked with curating an exhibit. At the time I was, well, terrified. I had no previous experience with exhibit work, I did not have a history degree, and my school did not offer any courses with an exhibit focus. Fortunately, I worked in an institution with a strong exhibit program with plentiful resources, I had wonderful guidance from the entire department, and the exhibit was ultimately a success. However, we all know this is not often the case. Had I had at my disposal *Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries* by Jessica Lacher-Feldman, my first exhibit would have been much less intimidating. The book manages to be an informative and thorough look at exhibit development and creation, while also giving readers the confidence to “Proceed and be bold!”

Jessica Lacher-Feldman is a natural at writing on this subject. While serving as the public and outreach services coordinator and curator of rare books and special collections at the University of Alabama from 2000 to 2013, she developed numerous exhibits. She is a notable expert in exhibit development for archives and has taught a workshop for SAA called “An Introduction to Archival Exhibitions.” Her book is a practical guide on the entire exhibit process, including conceptualization, planning, implementation, outreach, and evaluation.

The author reminds us in the introduction that exhibits require planning, serious commitment, and certain skills; but by understanding our institutions’ strengths, collaborating, and leveraging the tools we already have as archivists, our exhibits can be highly successful. The book is extremely readable and sprinkled with case studies, photographs of exhibits, illustrations, and exercises. Each chapter opens with a summary and closes with a “Notes” section pointing to further readings and resources presented within the chapter. Like a good exhibit, the information presented is easy to navigate, clear, and enjoyable.

The book’s structure closely mirrors the exhibit life cycle. Chapter 1 presents reasons why exhibit development and creation are important and serves as a sort of rallying cry. Lacher-Feldman does not shy away from the challenges of exhibit work: controversial topics, preservation concerns for the materials, questions of objectivity, and institutional constraints. However, she also speaks to the benefits of a successful exhibit program, which she argues is a natural extension of daily work in the archives. Exhibits allow us to reach new audiences, expand our missions, advocate for our collections, collaborate, and disseminate knowledge.

Before moving into each individual component in the exhibit life cycle, Lacher-Feldman gives us an overview of the exhibit process in chapter 2. She lays out twelve clear steps from the initial planning through the dismantling with plenty of practical tips. This chapter presents some points that may not naturally occur to exhibitors, particularly to those new to the process.

Chapter 3 provides a discussion about generating exhibit ideas. Much of the information is fairly general, but Lacher-Feldman does produce some good tips for novices. While exhibits are often informational, they can also be fairly straightforward. Presenting an exhibit with a physical theme, for example a format-specific exhibit on types of prints or bindings, is a quick and easy approach if a more complex idea does not present itself. No matter the type, size, or subject, the author emphasizes planning as the key to success and includes a sample “planning calendar” suggesting dates, anniversaries, and milestones that could be used for inspiration (p. 37).

Chapter 4 continues with a focus on planning, and the author makes the case that without strong emphasis on this factor an exhibit program will not be successful. Knowing your audience, creating attainable goals, and delegating responsibilities while anticipating deadlines and issues can and will make all the difference. This chapter is quite thorough, and Lacher-Feldman includes some very helpful tips, such as a suggested list of supplies to have on hand, the creation of a “planning document,” and an “inspiration folder” to keep track of ideas on a day-to-day basis (pp. 46, 48).

In chapter 5, the book moves into examining policies, procedures, and best practices. The author includes sample policies and forms, which make a great starting point for anyone without an exhibit program. Whether you are starting an exhibit program, or looking to overhaul one, this chapter is a good place to begin. This chapter also covers space planning, which I found to be slightly out of place. While this element is obviously important to the overall theme of this section, I think the topic merits its own chapter.

Chapter 6 takes a closer look at the physical aspects of exhibits such as label creation, graphic design, and layout. The author offers very straightforward advice on paper color, font sizes and styles, and material support options. Lacher-Feldman also points to some outside resources for design advice and offers her view of the “Seven C’s” approach to good design (p. 72). Following the advice presented here, it would be hard to go wrong. More important is the continuous emphasis on creativity and innovation. While this may strike fear in archivists who are not design-inclined, finding ways to create a visual punch can make all the difference.

Chapter 7 covers online exhibits, but it is less about online-only exhibits and more focused on using online tools to promote or add depth to a physical exhibit. While I would like to have read more extensively on the topic of online

exhibits (especially regarding the differences between exhibit design online and in a physical space), that information is beyond the scope of this book. The author focuses more on physical exhibits, and advice on creating digital exhibits will have to be sought out elsewhere. A good place to start is Sarah Goodwin Thiel's *Build It Once: A Basic Primer for the Creation of Online Exhibitions*.<sup>1</sup>

Chapters 8, 9, and 10 complement each other by focusing on the outreach aspects of exhibits. An overview of basic tools and ideas for promotions includes many that are an extension of what archives already have in their repertoire. Public programming options are discussed with an emphasis on being creative with exhibit tie-ins to increase impact. Chapter 9 includes tangible ideas any archives or special collections could put into place appropriate to their institutions. Chapter 10 discusses coinciding teaching and learning opportunities with an exhibit. Again, many suggestions here are extensions of existing types of archival public programming. The author places great importance on reaching out to K-12 institutions, which archivists and special collections librarians in academic institutions sometimes struggle with.

Toward the end of the exhibit life cycle, Lacher-Feldman focuses on some areas that will impact the long-term survival of an exhibit program. Chapter 11 discusses methods of creating buy-in not just from the institution, but from all staff who work in archives and special collections. Anyone can make a contribution to an exhibit, and everyone should. The book offers practical solutions to keep people involved. Exhibit assessment is examined in chapter 12. This topic would be easy to neglect, so I am thrilled that Lacher-Feldman included this chapter on how to determine if an exhibit was a success physically, intellectually, and even emotionally. Tools are suggested, from the complex (analytics) to the simple (a guestbook), but the importance of conducting evaluations is made clear.

The author includes brief case studies throughout the book. However, chapters 13 through 15 present more extensive case studies on exhibits about controversial topics written by guest authors. The institutions represented all have unique exhibit programs with varying resources. The case studies help tie together much of the advice and many of the arguments Lacher-Feldman makes in the preceding chapters. They are also inspirational and hammer in the point that yes, exhibits do matter and they have a significant impact on the community.

In the final chapter, the author discusses the importance of documenting the exhibit process and proper procedures for dismantling. A number of very helpful appendixes include further readings, directions on how to make supports, supply resources, and sample forms and layouts.

By making the case that exhibit work is closely related to day-to-day archival processes and complements the archival mission, Lacher-Feldman makes a strong argument that every archivist already possesses the skills to create

powerful exhibits. Lacher-Feldman's practical advice with clear guidance makes the entire process approachable. In addition, she inspires the reader to be creative and bold to discover new methods of reaching a wider audience. Any archivist mounting an exhibit must step out of his or her comfort zone. The exhibit process forces archivists to extend beyond custodial work to further the impact of archives and materials through curation and storytelling. While those who have extensive experience with exhibits may not find anything new here, this book should be essential reading for archivists new to exhibits and a welcome addition to a curriculum in archival studies.

Karla Irwin

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Sarah Goodwin Thiel, *Build It Once: A Basic Primer for the Creation of Online Exhibitions* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2007).

## The Preservation Management Handbook: A 21st Century Guide for Libraries, Archives and Museums

By Ross Harvey and Martha R. Mahard. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014. Hardcover. 375 pp. \$95.00. ISBN 978-0-7591-2315-1.

Ross Harvey and Martha R. Mahard's *The Preservation Management Handbook: A 21st Century Guide for Libraries, Archives and Museums* is a useful new tool for professionals responsible for preservation of all sorts of collections. The authors are both experts on preservation and have taught at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College. Each has experience with traditional and digital preservation practices, and they combine the two areas of expertise in this book. To augment their expertise, Harvey and Mahard recruited experts in their fields to write chapters on holdings protection and many types of materials. No current textbook addresses preservation management for cultural heritage, so this book is a welcome addition to the literature.

*The Preservation Management Handbook* is divided into four sections. The first deals with preservation fundamentals, including a look at the rapid changes that digital preservation has introduced into the field. This section also covers the basic principles of preservation, preservation policy, assessment, and disaster planning. This section is a compact fifty-eight pages and in that short space summarizes the basic theories of preservation in cultural heritage institutions.