



The Tao of the Modern Exhibit: Design

Please note that this paper was simply meant to be an outline for an oral presentation. It by no means is meant to represent complete thoughts throughout.

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March 2005

For the
International Home & Housewares Show

Publication Statement

This paper was originally written by Michelle S. Berryman for the 2005 International Home & Housewares Show.

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Introduction:

Good afternoon and welcome to the Design Theater at the International Home and Housewares Show. My name is Michelle Berryman. I'm a Principal in a firm called Echo Visualization in Atlanta, GA. We specialize in interactive and immersive experiences. This includes multimedia work, animation, custom software, product interface work and interactive environments such as tradeshow exhibits.

I've been designing tradeshow exhibits for ten years. I've worked for companies like Siemens, Nike, Home Depot and Medtronic. I've worked on exhibits for Philips and Hamilton Beach for this very show. Along the way, I've discovered a lot of truth and wisdom in the Taoist saying:

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The more you experience,
The less you know.

- Passage 47 from the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu (c.604-c.521 BC)

I've found that it's very easy to sit back in the design studio and think you "know" - what an exhibit is, what your client needs, how to design a solution.

Distilled down to basic elements, exhibits are fairly repetitive things. It's pretty common for an exhibit to have:

- A logo tower or hanging sign
- A reception desk
- A few demo stations for products
- Product displays
- A theater
- A conference room or casual conversation area
- Graphics
- Storage

But, look around you. Wander the halls today. The variety is endless. The interpretations of the basic booth elements are stupendous. I love to come to shows like this to look around. And I always find things that make me think:

- THAT'S really cool.
- Why didn't I think of that?

<Slides 3-8>

And I'm reminded of just how much I don't know.

Part 1: Introduction of Tao & Design

<Slide 9 - Tao & Design>

In Chinese philosophy, Tao literally means the Way or the Path. It's sometimes translated as the Principle. It is an essential and fundamental element or force that runs through everything. According to Taoist philosophy, the Tao simply *is*.

<Slide 10 - The Tao simply is. >

It can't really be defined or formally understood. It's like something you see out of the corner of your eye. You know it's there and you sense its presence but you can't really look directly at it. Design is very much the same. It's somewhat elusive, but you know it when you interact with it. It's a philosophical idea that can be infused into an object or space. Like the Tao, design *is*.

<Slide 11 - Design is . . . >

<Slide 12 - A certain resonance . . . >

The Tao is described as “a certain resonance residing in the negative space created by glamorous objects. At the same time, it flows through the glamorous objects to form the immediacy that they create. It is thus said to nurture all things: to create a pattern in the chaos.”

<Slides 13-15 Cool Design Stuff>

Design is the same way. Objects, materials and ideas are nurtured. Patterns are created from the chaos of ideas, needs, materials and requirements. The negative space inside the object expands to shape the form - complementary opposites that unify and create harmony. Well-designed objects and spaces nurture user experiences that create immediacy for the objects and for the people.

Balancing requirements with needs and desires as well as limitations of materials and production capabilities. This is the Yin & Yang balancing act of design. It's always a struggle to unify opposites and create harmony and balance. Design is the Way or the Path. The Tao.

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Bearing and nurturing,
Creating but not owning,
Giving without demanding,
This is harmony.

- Passage 10 from the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu (c.604-c.521 BC)

Part 2: Philosophy of Exhibit Design

<Slide 17 - Corporations have one primary job: Sell products. >

Selling exhibits is the primary domain and purpose for exhibit designers and builders, but not for traditional business entities. There are no companies on the floor here today with exhibits full of other exhibits. That's not how the business works.

Corporations have one primary job: Sell products.

The way they do this is by investing heavily in technology, innovation and design in order to create superior products that fulfill the needs of their target customer base. Once the product is designed, then the supporting marketing materials can be designed:

- Brochures and spec sheets
- The corporate website
- Ad campaigns with various and sundry collateral materials required to support the branding and messaging.

Only after all of these things have taken place does the need or thought to design an exhibit ever enter the picture.

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The Way bears, nurtures, shapes, completes, shelters, comforts, and makes a home for them.

- Passage 51 from the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu (c.604-c.521 BC)

The exhibit completes the marketing message and the ad campaign. It shelters the products and provides a home for them - a method of presenting them to the world. It supports the corporate identity and branding of the company.

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It becomes a three-dimensional representation of the company and everything about the company including its culture.

<Slide 20 - Pop-Up Book>

In many ways, an exhibit should literally be a three-dimensional representation of the corporate literature, brochures and the web site. It's a pop-up book of branding.

<Slide 21>

People often fail on the verge of success;
Take care at the end as at the beginning,
So that you may avoid failure.

- Passage 64 from the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu (c.604-c.521 BC)

Design it like you mean it. Your exhibit should be as carefully crafted as your products and your marketing message. In many, many ways, your marketing materials - including your exhibit - are your most valuable assets. They need to work for you.

<Slides 22-27 Fusion Images>

<Slide 28>

The Way bears sensation,
Sensation bears memory,

- Passage 42 from the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu (c.604-c.521 BC)

When the marketing message is unified and each piece of the brand supports the other pieces - as is the case with Fusion, your customers are more likely to embrace your brand. It doesn't feel like marketing. It feels natural. It's memorable. It is a holistic brand experience.

Part 3: Pattern & Substance - Overlapping Concepts of Tao & Design

<Slide 29> Pattern & Substance - Overlapping Concepts of Tao & Design

<Slide 30>

We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel;
But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the wheel depends.
We turn clay to make a vessel;
But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends.

- Passage 11 from the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu (c.604-c.521 BC)

A designer might say it this way:

<Slide 31 - Form follows function.>

Form follows function.

- Louis Sullivan, American Architect, 1896

Returning to the Wikipedia definition of Tao for a moment . . .

<Slide 32 - "a certain resonance residing in the negative space. . .">

This morning, before the Housewares Show opened, the exhibits were all assembled. The products were unpacked and neatly displayed. Everything was ready. But, the halls were empty. The aisles had no traffic. The meeting rooms and conversation areas in the exhibits were empty. The success of the day depended on the empty space, the negative space. There was definitely "a certain resonance residing in the negative space created by glamorous objects"

Once the show opened, however, there was a dichotomy. As the halls and the aisles filled with people, like a river rushing through a dry streambed, the empty spaces filled and the exhibit components became the complementary empty spaces creating a pattern in the chaos.

<Slides 33-36 - series of exhibit images>

Another passage from the Tao Te Ching tells us . . .

<Slide 37>

Too much color blinds the eye,
Too much music deafens the ear,
Too much taste dulls the palate,
Too much play maddens the mind,
Too much desire tears the heart.

- Passage 12 from the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu (c.604-c.521 BC)

<Slide 38> Booth

Or put in terms a designer might use . . .

<Slide 39 “Less is More”>

Mies van der Rohe & Buckminster Fuller both adopted this design philosophy. It resonates with designers to this day.

<Slides 40-44 Philips Lighting >

<Slide45>

If you offer music and food
Strangers may stop with you;

- Passage 35 from the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu (c.604-c.521 BC)

This is a Taoist tenant that resonates here at the Housewares show. Think about all of the exhibits in this hall that have integrated theaters with live cooking demonstrations and theme music.

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It also resonates with an important design principal for exhibits - appeal to all of the senses - not just vision. Smell and taste are incredibly powerful senses that people observe and follow unwittingly. How many of you have had a fresh baked brownie or cookie today? They're in there. And if you walk around this show long enough, you're bound to wander up to an exhibit with samples of some fresh, hot, yummy. It's not an accident or coincidence. It's by design and the smell will lead the Way.

<Slide 50>

Nature says only a few words:

- Passage 33 from the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu (c.604-c.521 BC)

In a tradeshow environment, you have 3-5 seconds to catch someone's attention with your message and graphics. Your information design has to be like nature - brief and commanding.

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Design and the Tao converge philosophically in many ways. I've tried to illustrate just a few of them here today. I suspect that we could spend hours discussing these points of convergence and I'm certain that we could identify many more. As a concept, the Tao is much older than design as we understand it. Over the centuries, Taoism has transcended mere philosophy and is now practiced as a religion by many.

Now, I'm not saying you should worship design but, one thing is certain. Design contributes great power to your marketing efforts when it is well conceived and fully integrated with your brand message. It does flow through glamorous objects and it contributes greatly to our desires to own glamorous objects.

So, I leave you with one final Taoism:

<Slide 55>

Eat well and make beautiful things.

- Passage 80 from the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu (c.604-c.521 BC)

Thank you.