

Pictures at an exhibition: Fenwick (Hallway) Gallery

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Abstract

In 2013 George Mason University research librarians seized the opportunity to craft an exhibit space in the main corridor of Fenwick Library. This article presents adventures in management and partnerships as well as lessons learned. We also demonstrate how Fenwick Gallery's exhibits increase the library visibility and value by engaging, enlightening, and educating passersby.

Keywords

- Gallery
- Collaboration
- Outreach
- Management
- Exhibits

Jamie Coniglio, George Mason University In their book *Exhibits in Libraries: A Practical Guide*, Mary Brown and Rebecca Power declare that "exhibitions can inspire curiosity, wonder, and delight, and initiate learning about the library's collection" and may even draw visitors who would not visit the library otherwise (Brown & Power, 2005).¹ Building on this idea, George Mason University Libraries created a new gallery space in Fenwick Library located on the original Fairfax campus. However, the Library has taken this idea further by engaging existing library visitors in new and different ways. In reference to Brian O'Dougherty's analysis of modern art galleries in the book *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, art and other cultural objects are presented in a clean but non-rarified space (O'Dougherty, 1999).² By transforming what was recently a computer hallway in the main passageway, visitors experience the library and its collections through a new lens.

In summer 2013 librarians embraced an opportunity to transform the primary passageway into a public gallery space. Fenwick Gallery is a hybrid, walk-through exhibit space situated near the entrance/exit of the building. The gallery is housed in Fenwick Library which holds the majority of the physical research collections. The gallery hosts one to two exhibits per semester. The intention of the gallery is to contribute to an atmosphere of scholarship and inquiry. Fenwick Gallery is managed by the University Libraries' Art and Art History Librarian, Jenna Rinalducci, with assistance from the Head of Research Services Jamie Coniglio and a graduate student assistant from the School of Art.

Fenwick Library is currently in the midst of a major addition to the existing facility. Prior to groundbreaking, it was determined that existing library public spaces would be made as attractive and comfortable as possible for users during the two to three years of construction. After a massive re-

¹ Brown and Power provide a hands-on guide for understanding the importance of exhibits in the library and how to start creating an exhibit space.

² Brian O'Doherty analyzes the sociological, economic, and aesthetic contexts in which people experience art.

arrangement of the library's first floor service points, collections, and equipment, an idea was proposed and approved to enhance the library's primary hallway to elevators and stacks with "some kind of art or something like that." This simple idea morphed into proposing a brand new exhibit space: Fenwick Gallery. This article illustrates how a simple idea morphed into an elaborate, ongoing project. This endeavor has required planning and coordinating with campus facilities and personnel, forging a unique relationship with the University's School of Art, creating a management flow, establishing policies and procedures, and integrating with courses.



Spring 2015 exhibit *Artists' Mapping* curated by MFA student and gallery assistant Anne Smith

Initially connecting the original library building (Wing A) with the tower extension (Wing B) in 1980, the first floor passageway in Fenwick Library has always been a primary user space. This area was not only the hallway leading to the library's elevators, stacks and study spaces; the card catalog was located in this space as well. Even with the addition of a new tower (Wing C) in 1984, the hallway remained the only connecting corridor to both Fenwick towers.



Hallway when it was used to house the card catalog

With advances in library automation, the card catalog was retired and the hallway space morphed into rows of OPACs. These were eventually replaced by public PC workstations. In 2013, the PCs were moved due to the most recent Fenwick Library Addition mentioned earlier (scheduled to be completed in 2016). Once cleared, the open hallway space prompted the idea to create an interactive public gallery.



Computer Hallway before the gallery conversion

Open to the public in April 2014, Fenwick Gallery features exhibits of original creative works by Mason students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The exhibits also showcase work held by the Libraries' Special Collections and Archives. Relevant library resources are selected to support the exhibit theme and then placed on a bookcase in the gallery.

Prior to building the gallery space and installing exhibits, there were several administrative issues that needed to be addressed. This phase of the project required meetings with faculty administrators, university legal counsel, and other curators on campus. Foremost among these issues was creating an exhibit release form to address potential legal concerns. This form is posted on the library website at http://library.gmu.edu/sites/default/files/common/forms/FenwickGalleryExhibitReleaseForm_3-20-14JR.pdf. The Art and Art History Librarian communicated with legal counsel from the University and met with the out-going gallery director for School of Art and a faculty curator from the Arts Management program.

This initial development stage also required crafting a clear mission statement and goals to set the course for the gallery. The mission statement and goals are intended to complement those of both the

University and the Libraries. These documents along with the gallery use policies can be viewed at http://library.gmu.edu/sites/default/files/common/forms/FenwickGalleryUsePolicies_03_29-2014final.pdf. As part of its mission this dynamic space serves to integrate library resources with the visual, the dimensional, and the experimental best of emerging artists' works at the University. Ultimately, this space highlights library resources in conjunction with visual and multi-media work created by George Mason University students and related associates. Emphasis is placed on exposure to library collections, research interests of faculty and students, and regional issues, including the support of local cultural initiatives and curriculum. We also crafted five ideal but manageable goals:

- Promote the Libraries' collections to encourage scholarly and cultural inquiry at George Mason University
- Highlight research and scholarship at/of George Mason University
- Stimulate intellectual and creative reflection through visual and multi-media exhibitions, discussions, etc.
- Promote the Libraries' academic and cultural mission
- Support the Libraries' development program and goals

Transforming the physical space of the hallway into a viable gallery was an extensive and at times overwhelming process. There were many details to consider from painting and signage to furniture and lighting. During meetings with administrators from College of Visual and Performing Arts and the School of Art the standard Mason white paint was recommended in part for budget reasons; this recommendation was repeated by the first graduate assistant assigned to Fenwick Gallery who advocated for a "white box" approach to the gallery. Following the initial painting, the standard Mason white was changed to a different shade which led to minor hiccups. One of these hiccups came in the form of the display furniture (e.g. bookcase, pedestals). A white bookcase was ordered to display selected library resources along with each exhibit, but it was

mistakenly painted and in the new shade of Mason white. Thankfully, the painting department was able to repaint the bookcase with a reinforced gloss coating.

Speaking of furniture for display, an exhibit case or vitrine was acquired from another library department that no longer needed it. In addition, two small pedestal vitrines were ordered and painted to match the walls. For the inaugural exhibit, pedestals belonging to the graduate assistant were used. During this time, pedestals of varying sizes were constructed by Facilities based on the measurements of the first pedestals. All of the pedestals were then painted the standard Mason white to match the walls. Subsequent requests for painting (to clean up the area between exhibits) requires the now-retired white paint.

Signage for the new gallery was another important consideration. After creating mock-ups in a variety of fonts and sizes Century Gothic was chosen for a simple sign marking the area as Fenwick Gallery. A local company in the Virginia purchasing system was hired to create and install the sign.



Preparing the passageway

The electrical outlets and Ethernet ports were chosen to remain during the renovation of the hallway. The intention is to use these outlets for multi-media exhibits. During one exhibit, a monitor was hung in the gallery to show a video of the artist making the piece on display. Some elements, however, could not be removed or altered, including a temperature sensor mounted in the middle of the primary wall. Works from the exhibit are either used to subtly hide the sensor or placed around it.

Lighting and potential damage from light was another central concern, and an examination of the literature was required.³ It was discovered that the overhead light bulbs were not a standardized size, and therefore UV filters could not be attached to them. To help minimize some of the potential damage, it was agreed that a selection of light bulbs could be removed. As it happened two of the windows needed to be covered during construction so the remaining five windows were covered with attractive wood panels to maintain the aesthetic and to minimize UV damage. Eventually, the panels were painted to match the red-brown color of the brick wall. The intention for the new paint color was to minimize distractions that could potentially draw visitors away from the artwork. These lighting issues should be more fully resolved in the new library addition.



Installing the gallery sign

As mentioned there is no budget specifically assigned to the gallery, so some display items were received from other departments and others through funding from the University Libraries budget. For example, a medium-sized glass vitrine was donated by the former government documents department which no longer needed it. In addition, library funding was supplied for two small vitrine pedestals. Four pedestals of varying sizes were also commissioned from the office of Facilities Management on campus.

Working with library administration and administrators from the College of Visual and Performing Arts, an existing graduate student position was re-crafted to help with the gallery. This student receives six credits of in-state tuition through the College, and the Libraries agree to only hire MFA students vetted by the School of Art administrators. A salary is provided by the library. Learning outcomes were required for this new position, and they are listed below. The Graduate Research Assistant for the Fenwick Gallery will be able to:

- Interpret and communicate information on art and other objects in order to curate intellectually significant exhibits and organize complimentary educational programming including but not limited to panel discussions, artist interviews, and lectures.
- Conduct scholarly research in order to write exhibit labels and exhibit descriptions, produce content for the gallery website, and craft promotional materials.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the library collection in order to select items relevant to an exhibit theme.
- Understand both theoretical and practical museological approaches in order to be aware of the resources, tasks and competences of today's galleries and the larger networks in which they operate.

The first graduate student, Ceci Cole McInturff, was hired during this initial development stage because of her extensive curatorial background. Working with the Art and Art History Librarian, McInturff created a plan to establish a gallery and a timeline to implement the plan (e.g. installation/de-installation tools, preservation concerns). She also conducted extensive research by examining gallery standards and looking at existing university galleries. This part of her research included interviewing university-based curators.

³ The article "Effect of Light on Modern Digital Prints Photographs and Documents" provides helpful advice about

preservation of photographs that can be applied to other types of artwork and cultural objects.

The inaugural exhibit was curated by McInturff and titled *Women's Voices/Women's Visions*. Because of McInturff's work with the graduate student-run journal *So to Speak*, the exhibit incorporated artwork that had been featured in that publication. Some work was on display in the vitrines and pedestals. Several pieces were shown using high-quality poster reproductions, an effort led by McInturff and Coniglio. Nickel-plated ring magnets were used to hang the posters in order to minimize damage to the walls. A handout describing the intention of the exhibit and listing the featured artists on display in the gallery, and it was featured on the gallery website at <http://fenwickgallery.gmu.edu>.

As the graduate assistant and curator, McInturff interviewed two of the artists featured in the exhibit, Stephanie Booth and Asma Chaudhary, both alumni of the University's MFA program. The interview was conducted in the gallery with their pieces next to them. These interviews were later edited by the graduate assistant Anne Smith and posted to the gallery website at <http://fenwickgallery.gmu.edu/?p=409> and on the library YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/user/masonlibraries> under Events. By sharing their approaches to art and providing access to this information, the gallery's mission to contribute to as atmosphere of scholarship and inquiry is achieved.



Graduate assistant Ceci Cole McInturff installing the exhibit with the assistance of Pierre Davis, Ordering Coordinator from Technical Services and art student



Interview with artists and alumni Asma Chaudhary and Stephanie Booth featured in the exhibit



Inaugural exhibit *Women's Voices/Women's Visions*

In conjunction with the exhibits, books and occasionally journals and maps are selected from the library collection to support the exhibit themes. Books are selected from both the circulating and references collections, and those with borrowing privileges are allowed to check them out. These resources support the scholarly focus of the exhibits. For example, during the *Women's Voices/Women's Visions* exhibit books on women's issues in the humanities and social sciences were chosen and placed on the bookcase in the gallery. In addition, several copies of the student journal *So to Speak* were included in the display since several pieces in the exhibit were featured in the journal. Rinalducci worked with the Head of Technical

Services, Tricia Mackenzie, to establish a system that marks the selected items as temporally located in Fenwick Gallery.



Bookcase in the gallery to display print resources that complement the exhibit

Once the works were de-installed by the graduate assistant, maintenance work was needed to repair the walls and the pedestals. Because of timing snafus with Facilities, much of this work was performed by library staff. Staff patched, sanded, and painted areas of the walls and cleaned and sanded the pedestals. Maintenance between exhibits is now balanced between staff from Facilities and the Library.

Following the inaugural exhibit and subsequent repairs, an exhibit showcasing artwork by staff was installed during summer term. This exhibit, entitled *Selected Works: Celebrating Creative Pursuits of Mason Libraries Staff*, included both fine and applied arts by staff from various departments and distributed libraries. The range of artwork included photography, sculpture, painting, glasswork, needlework, and graphic arts. The exhibit was curated by Rinalducci, but since a graduate student is not employed in the

summer installation assistance was provided by select library staff. Books selected to support the exhibit reflected both the mediums used by the participants as well as their departments (e.g. cataloging). A part of programming, an exhibit reception was held for the staff. It was decided that a staff exhibit would be held annually in the summer to support morale.



Graduate assistant Anne Smith preparing the walls for the next exhibit

The third exhibit, *Call and Response: In 24 hours, everywhere the dawn rises again*, achieved many of the objectives set forth in the gallery's mission statement and goals. This annual exhibit, shown for the first time in Fenwick Gallery following the closing its previous university gallery home, is traditionally part of the University's *Fall for the Book Festival*. It is curated by two faculty members, from the School of Art and the English Department, who have worked with librarians to develop the artist book collection in the library. The majority of the participants are students and alumni of the university with other participants coming from the local arts community. As part of the call and response process, one artist is paired with one writer to create an artist book. One of these artist books was selected to add to the library collection of artist books.



Gallery talk with artist/writer pairs from *Call and Response* exhibit during Fall for the Book Festival



Class visit to the faculty-curated *Call and Response* exhibit

As part of the festival, the Libraries partnered with the two faculty members to hold a gallery talk that several of the artist/writer pairs participated in. This well-attended event in the library drew over seventy people, including students, faculty, staff, and community members. The presentation was recorded by gallery graduate assistant Anne Smith, who was selected as the second graduate assistant by administrators from School of Art. She also contributed to the exhibit as one of the artist/writer pairs. These videos were then posted to the gallery website at http://fenwickgallery.gmu.edu/?page_id=944 and on the library YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/user/masonlibraries>. The faculty curators expressed excitement about using these as teaching tools for future *Call and Response* participants. In addition, several classes from both Art and English came to see the exhibit. These classes

ranged from introductory English courses to printmaking courses. Both of these examples show that educational programming was a fundamental part of this exhibit.

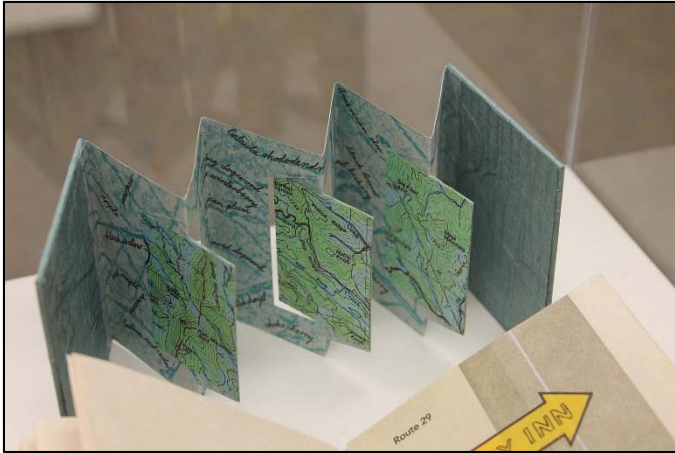
This one-month exhibit was followed by *Scenes from Behind the Wall* which featured photographs of East Berlin and the Berlin Wall from Special Collections and Archives. Under the supervision of the Art and Art History Librarian, Smith selected and installed photographs from this collection. This exhibit was important because it facilitated inter-departmental collaboration, and it had resulted from faculty input from the History Department. At the same time, Special Collection hosted an exhibit featuring East German posters. The library hosted an exhibit reception that was attended by History faculty and students, as well as library staff.



Student visitor to exhibit *Scenes from Behind the Wall: Images of East Germany, 1989/90*

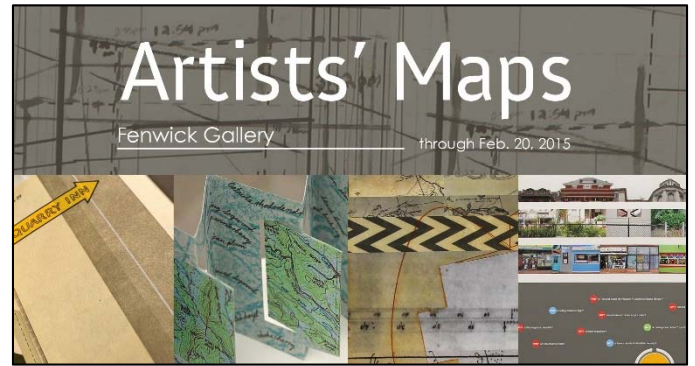
In order to achieve with the learning outcomes created for the graduate assistant, the second assistant also curated her own exhibit entitled *Artists' Maps*. This exhibit expanded on traditional notions of mapping, as a tool for investigating histories, bodies, and geographies. It featured works by artists at Mason, including students, faculty, and visiting artists as well as artist books from the Mason University Libraries collection. The Libraries then purchased the exhibited piece *Mapping Why* by The Floating Lab Collective, a group of artists working collaboratively on social research through public and media art projects in Washington D.C. which includes Mason faculty. This unique approach to mapping the city was

transformed into an artist book following the exhibit and added to the library collection.



View of artist books from the library collection featured in the exhibit *Artists' Maps*

With the purpose of publicizing the Gallery and supporting the research component of the exhibits, a website was created that links from the library page about Fenwick Library at <http://library.gmu.edu/fenwickgallery>. The main gallery website (<http://fenwickgallery.gmu.edu>) includes blog postings that promote the exhibits and elaborate on the featured works and artists. In addition, each exhibit has received its own page with more detailed information about the show, high-resolution images of the works, and interviews with the artists or guest curators when feasible. The website is also an opportunity to highlight the library resources that were selected for the bookcase, with lists linking to the library catalog. The website is managed by the Jenna Rinalducci, as the Art and Art History Librarian, with contributions from the graduate assistant Anne Smith and Jamie Coniglio. The web presence includes creating a slide for the library homepage to advertise the exhibit, as well as one for the LCD monitor in the library's entryway. Both Smith and Coniglio have taken the lead with this promotional material. Rinalducci and Smith have also begun the process to create an online repository for the gallery's administrative documents and items relating to past exhibits (e.g. images, videos). The Omeka platform is being used to build this archive.



Slide created to promote exhibit on the library website and the LCD monitor in the library's lobby

Building your own library gallery? There are some key issues to consider. Listed below is a brief checklist to help in the process:

- Budget for converting an existing space or building a new space including painting, installation tools, vitrines, pedestals, etc.
- Preservation issues like UV ray damage
- Legal concerns addressed in documents such as exhibit release forms
- Collaboration within the library
- Partnership building with the larger institution and with local communities
- Coordination of programming events to support exhibits
- Publicity of exhibits and programming
- Management of a website to both promote and teach

The creation and maintenance of this library gallery has proven to be an incredible opportunity in entrepreneurship by creating partnerships and building communities. For example, new partnerships have been created with both School of Art and the College of Visual and Performing Arts in both formal and informal settings. Fenwick Gallery is intended as a space for inquiry, teaching, and learning. Rooted in the libraries' mission, the purpose of the Gallery is to enrich the intellectual, educational and cultural life of the University. Innovative exhibits and related programming speak to the need for knowledge and to the commitment of the Libraries to find ways to serve as a bridge to the generations of library patrons. As Fenwick Gallery moves into the new library building,

the framework built from an “out-of-the-blue” opportunity will change and adapt to its new setting.

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