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It is a wonderful time to be working in museums – at long last audiences are being engaged with collections, and also to support in a practical way the only way forward, thought.

20 years as a curator, I spent a lot of my time training curatorial staff in interpretive principles, planning and techniques. The other lies in my role as a teacher, introducing a new generation of future museum professionals to the delights of interpretation. The two came together in my need for a text that would provide the groundwork from which I could build. There are a number of excellent books introducing environmental interpretation and interpretive planning, but I did not feel that any of them really sought to apply interpretive principles and techniques to the museum world. Equally, there is a huge library of museum texts now available, but I feel strongly that museum literature has lost touch with interpretation (and vice versa) over the last 20 to 30 years, so there was nothing that specifically fitted my needs.

So the book started with the intention of introducing an audience of museum professionals and trainees to a practical interpretive approach to museum and exhibition development. From there it grew. As interpretive planning encompasses all aspects of museum and exhibition development, and as I am committed to a holistic view of the museum visit, it proved essential to provide a background for visitor studies, image projection and visitor services. Because, like many museum professionals, I am committed to sharing my enthusiasms with as broad an audience as possible, a discussion of approaches to audience development and to meeting the needs of diverse audiences was central. As interpretive planning includes defining target audiences and then setting out to meet their needs it was equally essential to include, for example, the 'building in' of relevant project work for structured educational users. Because, like all interpreters, I believe that direct visitor participation leads to learning, it was necessary to engage in the wider learning debate – and the physical impact of a commitment to learning on museums.

At the same time, I was also seeking to expand the range of 'interpretive principles' that I use to underpin my own work specifically to reflect the circumstances of museums which are, in many ways, different to those pertaining to environmental