The Church History Museum recently underwent an extensive renovation of its permanent history exhibit. Learn how the museum staff used local stories and environments to make the exhibited objects relevant to visitors.

Introduction

“There is a history in all men’s lives,” William Shakespeare observed, and that is equally true for plumbers and presidents, printers and prime ministers. Yet, how many times have you met people, told them of your work in public or scholarly history and had them respond, “Oh, I don’t like history. In school it was my least favorite subject—just dusty names and dates and military battles I had to memorize.”

It has taken a lot of experience in public history to realize that when history is related as STORY about other people -- their lives, choices, and outcomes – it becomes amazingly interesting to most people. The hook is to populate the general tissue of context -- the historical facts, dates, places, and experiences -- with the lived accounts of real people.

In the book Nearby History: Exploring the Past around You by David Kyvig and Myron A Marty, the authors borrowed an idea from an English local historian, H. P. R. Finberg, who described levels of history as concentric circles of the individual, the family, the community, the state and national political, financial, and military influences, and supra-national societies. When you study one circle, for the individual, you study the next circle beyond it. “Each requires to be studied with constant reference to the one outside it; but the inner rings are not the less perfect circles for being wholly surrounded and enclosed by the outer.”

As we undertook the planning of the reinstallation of our permanent history gallery at the Church History Museum, this was generally the approach we took: we wanted to relate personal stories as a way of illustrating the larger causes and effects which influenced the lives of the members of the LDS Church in their early years as church members. We cared about authenticity, and relating open, honest accounts of difficult historical and religious topics. We cared about making the local places come alive, by building environments which engaged imagination and portrayed accurate places of history.

We’d like to share images of these environments within the exhibit, some of which we like and sticking with; others which we are in the process of correcting.

By the Numbers

As you can see by the amount of hours put into the exhibit by various divisions—curators, conservators, registrars, educators, architects, and craftsmen—the installation of “The Heavens Are Opened” exhibit was a very large undertaking. But it was worth the effort. By the time we reached our one year mark on September 30 of this year, we had welcomed over 421,000 visitors to see the new exhibit!
First Vision Theater

Our most important immersive environment in the new exhibit is the First Vision Theater—a 220-degree round theater where we literally immerse our visitors in a grove of trees in upstate New York through the use of a movie that was filmed onsite in early spring to create the desired atmosphere.

Unfortunately there were some tensions between historians, film makers, and the design firm, which required compromise to finish the project. Out of many, came a good result. Realities of pulling off this costly, large exhibit with a time clock running were sometimes overwhelming. We had to negotiate and blend the designer’s style with our desire for authentic, immersive environments. We arrived at a compromise of suggestive environments, some which work, and some of which don’t.

A word about authenticity – this was one of the most important features for us. But there are differences of opinion on trying to create an “authentic” sense of place through immersive scene setting. We opted to try to create historically accurate immersive environments where such an environment would add to the story, hook interest, and promote a fuller honest story. Some find fabricated environments the opposite of authenticity. What do you all feel?

Covenant Restored

We had big shoes to fill in reaching the level of authenticity that our predecessors had achieved with our previous permanent exhibition, “A Covenant Restored.” The designers of that exhibit used actual logs from a Missouri cabin, real Nauvoo Temple stones, and even went so far as to gather dirt from Missouri to set the correct scene. They knew that you can’t exactly replicate all of the colors, textures, and look of the real thing.

Artificial Authenticity

Lesson learned is to really understand the aesthetic of the design firm; find a good match from your goals of telling local stories and their finished projects which should illustrate that same goal.

We really tried to get the right look and feel: color choices, textures, surfaces, script, matching our Mormon aesthetic, but because our design and fabrication partners like to fabricate materials, there were limits to the levels of authenticity we could achieve. But we did our best—even our floors are made from reclaimed Illinois barn wood!

Hill Cumorah

One of our fabricated environments that works well is the Hill Cumorah, made to look like the original in Manchester, New York. This area works well because it is inviting for children. The look ties to the deciduous forest of western NY, but we still exercised creative license in the discovery log and hill treatment.

Whitmer Cabin

Ask for a few comments from audience – what is their feeling as they look at the slide? This is one of our less-successful fabricated environments. Though we have suggestions of the actual historic site in Fayette, New York (like the fireplace), the room feels too fabricated to really feel like an
actual log cabin. We find that people just pass through this space without stopping. So we are working on ways to improve the environment in this room.

**Whitney Store**

Storytelling with artifacts. We literally placed authentic artifacts in an object case that depicts the original environment. This has been a very successful example of visual storytelling. Without any words, visitors know where the objects in the store windows came from.

**Kirtland Temple**

This is another of our most effective environments: a place of peace, reverence. We observe visitors’ strong response to this space; hear comments of how they like it and want to linger there. The original Kirtland Temple window displayed in the front of the temple façade is a large, powerful artifact.

**Liberty Jail**

This is another of our environments that needs a little work. Some things about this space are great—we have a cooler in the wall to make the area feel cold, suggesting the cold winter endured by the prisoners in Liberty Jail. We also have barren, stone floors, adding to the idea that conditions for the prisoners were very difficult.

But, we have found that it is too stark of an environment; it is too hard to understand the upper living quarters; not engaging; people miss seeing the artifacts, which are at their backs as they face the jail. We are working on improvements which include a stove and harsher furniture above; barrels, blanket, fixed straw, rough benches below; curator’s notebook with historic photographs of the Jail, discrepancies of the height of the upper and lower chambers; etc. We want to make this a more compelling, powerful environment.

**Red Brick Store**

This is another object case that holds authentic objects in an environmental display. It puts artifacts in context. Our environments are “close but not exact” – tension between different points of view, and budget and time constraints. Our compromise was to find a balance between an interesting environmental display that didn’t detract from the actual artifacts, nor cloud the issue of ‘what is real and authentic.’

**Print Office w/ Dock and Mural**

This is another diorama where a bit of river bank and tree creates a sense of place. This area is complete with visuals plus sounds: river boat whistle, crickets, mosquitoes.

**Carthage Jail Wall**

A large painting is used to tell the story. The painted stone wall was an attempt to recreate the Jail wall, but it needs work. Artifacts in this area are really well highlighted here, not overpowered by environmental aspects.
Nauvoo Temple

The sunstone and partially built temple site are again an artifact case which shows off artifacts well and creates environment. Immersive environments can communicate the local scene instantly; people understand more about the artifacts by seeing the environmental cases than they would by reading labels in a large glass case of tools and temple artifacts, with the Illinois ‘scene’ described verbally. Plus people don’t read that much anymore. So visual teaching is important.

The mural of the finished temple is also environmental and shows the river scene of the Mississippi in winter, as LDS are preparing to flee their homes again. Different technique to use a 25 foot long painting; very emotive and powerful for visitors.

Conclusion

The combination of art and a built environment help to tell a powerful story of place in the last section of our exhibit. In this and the other areas of the exhibit that we have discussed today, we really tried to use the power of each important location in Church history to tell the story of corresponding artifacts. We hope that people who have visited these locations will be reminded of how they felt when they were there, and people who haven’t visited these locations can feel a sense of each place—making their experience at the museum more memorable.
BY THE NUMBERS

- 200 man-hours were spent hanging two large murals in the exhibit
- 223 artifacts, 34 documents, and 30 pieces of art were installed in the exhibit
- 3,000 pounds of concrete were used to create the floor of the Liberty Jail environment
- Over 100 gallons of paint were used throughout the exhibit
- 1,500 volunteer hours went into reproducing a quilt for the Whitmer Cabin environment
- 260 man-hours were spent creating a display mount for Joseph Smith’s cloak
- The architectural and interior design teams spent a total of 6,425 hours working in the exhibit
- Volunteer training hours totaled 58,400
- 421,000 people visited the museum during the first year after re-opening
COVENANT RESTORED
ARTIFICIAL AUTHENTICITY
HILL CUMORAH
Manchester, New York
WHITMER HOME
Fayette, New York
NEWEL K. WHITNEY STORE
Kirtland, Ohio
KIRTLAND TEMPLE
Kirtland, Ohio
LIBERTY JAIL
Liberty, Missouri
RED BRICK STORE
Nauvoo, Illinois
Gathering to Nauvoo

With memories of persecution fresh in their minds, thousands of Saints arrived gaily to Nauvoo, Illinois. There they built a new community based on the biblical, social, and spiritual ideals they held dear. A new sense of community, beauty, and progress characterized Nauvoo.

Nauvoo grew quickly from a mosquito-infested swamp to a bustling city of thousands. The Saints soon found themselves at odds with the local authorities, who were wary of their religious and political ambitions. This tension ultimately led to the Mormon War of 1844, which resulted in the deaths of many Saints and the destruction of their homes.

Despite poverty and worries about persecution, the Saints were determined to build and prosper in Nauvoo.
PRINTING OFFICE
Nauvoo, Illinois
CARTHAGE JAIL
Carthage, Illinois
A Test of Faith:
The Saints and Plural Marriage
NAUVOO TEMPLE
Nauvoo, Illinois
Every ordinance belonging to the Priesthood will, when the Temple of the Lord shall be built... be fully restored.

Doctrine Is Revealed