

Behind the Scenes: *Not Your Grandparents'* History Museum

How do you turn months of research into an exhibit plan for a new museum?

In part 2 of our series about the History Colorado Center's new exhibits, we continue our behind-the-scenes look at the exhibit development process. Bill Convery, state historian and director of History Colorado's exhibits program, talks about how and why we've identified all-new themes for these all-new experiences.

After months of research that included talking with nationally renowned exhibit developers, History Colorado's exhibit specialists, educators, and curators came together to craft an interpretive plan for the new History Colorado Center.

The historical and contemporary storytelling possibilities were vast. Staff drew up a plan that will invite audiences to explore Colorado history *thematically*—by meeting people throughout the state and the places they've built; by discovering the landscape that has shaped us and that we in turn are shaping; and by tapping into the dreams, visions, and folklore that Colorado has always inspired in the people who've come here.



Colorado's allure to its people—past and present—will be a focus of the third phase of the History Colorado Center's exhibits.

In the past, History Colorado didn't have the opportunity to think this broadly. "Our scope for exhibitions used to be much smaller. We tended to focus on individual topics, like the 10th Mountain Division or cowgirls," says Convery. But with the opening of the History Colorado Center, exhibits will focus on universal themes that affect all of us.



A major goal of the new plan is to get visitors involved in stories about the state’s past as a way to inspire them to make informed decisions. But what kinds of exhibits inspire visitors to connect the past to the future?

The developers are working within these three themes—people, environment, and dreams and aspirations—to engage the public with exhibits that are relevant, inspiring, provocative, and fun. All exhibits will include something to *do*, as well as things to see. As Convery says, “From time machines to a Model T simulation to a virtual ski jump, visitors have the chance to try on the perspectives of people in the past.”

Working with some of the nation’s top exhibit developers and media designers, History Colorado is creating memorable exhibits that are immersive, environmental, interactive, and compelling—for visitors of all ages.

When the History Colorado Center opens this April, visitors will experience Phase I of that plan: people-centered exhibits like *Destination Colorado* and *Colorado Stories*. Next fall, an exhibit looking at Denver from A to Z opens. And all of these exhibits will explore what the idea of “community” means to each of us—with stories of uplifting, heartbreaking, and even funny moments and individuals from Colorado’s past.

Later, visitors will experience the second and third phases of the exhibit plan. Phase II will examine the inextricable links between Coloradans and this extraordinary landscape that is both fierce and fragile. History Colorado, in partnership with the Science Museum of Minnesota, will blend history and science to lead visitors on an



exploration of the Mesa Verde region, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and the mountain forests today. As Convery explains, “Through storytelling, oral histories, and interactive experiences, we’re placing science in the context of the social, economic, and political consequences of these issues on Coloradans past, present, and future.”

Phase III will examine the allure Colorado has had—and will always have—for both residents and visitors. Convery is excited about this opportunity to provide a venue for civic engagement: “Colorado is larger than life, and this exhibit will use our larger-than-life history to encourage visitors to talk about the values they want to embrace—or reject—to build a better Colorado.”

Convery advises visitors to anticipate a new museum experience at the History Colorado Center: “We want our exhibits to be evocative, memorable, and *fun*—however visitors might define that term. This isn’t your grandparents’ history museum.”



Phase II will explore the dynamics of Colorado’s scarce water and the legacy of Mesa Verde.



As part of Phase I, opening to members on April 27, *Colorado Stories* looks at Steamboat Springs and the birth of recreational skiing.

