

Behind the Scenes: Forging a New Exhibit Program



The African American haven of Lincoln Hills, the down-and-dirty truth about hard-rock mining, and the wartime relocation center of Amache—all were stories audiences told us they wanted to see in the state's new History Colorado Center.

When you're creating a brand-new exhibition program, where do you start? In part I of a series about the History Colorado Center's new exhibits, we look at what it takes for a museum to imagine—and re-imagine—an exciting twenty-first-century experience. Bill Convery, state historian and director of History Colorado's Exhibits and Interpretation, gives us a behind-the-scenes look at the process.

Are History Museums History?

For many people, history is an intimidating word. Good exhibits have something for everyone, from those who actively engage in history-related experiences to those who avoid them.

“History museums nationwide have experienced a slow decline in visitation and public involvement since the mid-1970s,” says Convery. “Yet the public's interest in history—as measured by interest in genealogy, bestselling biographies, the History Channel, and other history-related entertainment—stayed healthy.”

Many history museums have missed the mark in engaging a broad audience. As a result, history museums see fewer visitors than other cultural destinations like science and art museums, which have managed to keep their programs fresh and relevant.



And the Research Says...

Marketing studies revealed mixed messages about the former Colorado History Museum's importance to the public. On one hand, it was a top destination for out-of-state and foreign tourists, rating even higher than the Denver Art Museum. But a 2008 study of local audiences found that many residents were unaware that the Colorado History Museum—which closed in April 2010—even existed.

“We realized that we'd lost the pulse of our local audience,” Convery says. Once the team accepted this difficult reality, it resolved to make the new History Colorado Center a place that would restore Coloradans' relationship to Colorado history.



Looking Inward to Venture Outward

With change on the horizon came a rare opportunity for reinvention.

“As an institution, we took a hard look at what compelling social need we fulfill, and realized that we’re uniquely positioned to spark conversations about the future based on Colorado’s past achievements, missteps, and even tragedies,” says Convery. “Our goal is to inspire visitors to exercise their imaginations by thinking about the state’s past, in order to make informed decisions about the future.”

Building the Building Blocks

After clarifying their goals for a new exhibition program, Convery and staff began looking at what the most successful museums were doing to address similar issues. They visited museums and shared ideas with nationally renowned exhibit developers.

“These discussions and visits gave us incredible insight into how museums are using new media and interactive strategies to entice visitors to get involved in entirely new ways,” says Convery. “We experienced exhibits that heightened our imaginations and piqued our sense of civic responsibility, while immersing us in irresistible stories.

“From this work, we identified the kinds of experiences we believed would resonate with our audiences,” he says. “But, we had to be sure. We needed to bring our ideas to Coloradans.”

Sharing preliminary exhibit ideas with the public took the team outside its comfort zone. “The first instinct of many museum professionals is to talk, not to listen,” said Convery. “But these conversations helped us understand the diverse set of expectations and experiences we need to consider when we tell Colorado’s stories.”

Some topics were rejected, forcing the team to go back to the table and re-envision stories that met audience needs. These conversations also gave the exhibit team invaluable perspectives on topics that did resonate, convincing the team to introduce new elements into program planning and exhibit design.

“As museum professionals, we’re charting new ground. While it’s at times frustrating, the process is exhilarating, enlightening, and helping us develop tools we need to produce outstanding results,” Convery says.

The Next Step

A sampling of the stories that Coloradans told staff were the most important to address are highlighted in a traveler’s exhibit at Denver International Airport (see page 16).

In Part II, we’ll see how the results of the exhibit team’s research will transform into three major exhibition themes for the History Colorado Center.