

Collections Research News

Spring 2000

COLLECTIONS KORNER

(Collections Korner is a regular feature of *Collections Research News*. If there is any topic you would like to see covered in the future, give us a call or drop us a line.)

Double Your Exhibit Space -- Without Building

Guest article by Kim Sorvig

More space! It's a constant cry from museum administrators. Yet there is one huge space that many museums, large and small, waste by overlooking its exhibit potential. That space is the museum landscape.

A museum's site is frequently two to ten times the square footage of the building. But what does the landscape do for your museum's mission? In all too many cases, nothing: a non-descript lawn, some beautiful bushes or trees, maybe a picnic area, but nothing that helps the visitor enjoy and understand the historic or cultural treasures that are a museum's real purpose.

The museum landscape can -- and should -- be an integral part of the visitor's experience. As a museum professional, you've probably visited or read about such landscapes: interpretive trails, sculpture gardens, or "living history" exhibits, for example. These "interpretive landscapes" are not uncommon, but opportunities are frequently overlooked, both by museum staff and by architects. Relatively few designers can coordinate topography, vegetation, climate, existing buildings, and land-use history to tell your museum's individual story.

Creative landscape design opens up space and possibilities for museums, usually at a fraction of the cost of building expansion. The visitor can be guided on a storyteller's journey through

(continued on page 2)

WHAT'S NEW AT CRM

In January, 2000 our principle was in Ft. Worth, TX for one week to conduct an inventory of the collection at the Cattle Raiser's Museum and train their personnel in basic inventory procedures. It was an intense week, but very productive.

We have also been working on a "Web" presentation for gallery access to the Photographic Collection of the Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave in Golden, CO. This is a whole new technology for us, but utilizes the built-in web publishing capabilities of FileMaker® Pro and will allow the museum's visitors to access the Photograph Collection databases in the museum's gallery space.

FILEMAKER® PRO CATALOGING

TEMPLATES NOW AVAILABLE FROM CRM

Collections Research for Museums has created a collection database using the commercial software FileMaker® Pro. Cataloging templates are available for object collections, photographic collections and archival collections. We will also customize a cataloging screen for those of you who have specialized collections. We can also connect your database to an imaging system to allow photographs of the collection to be incorporated into the database. Contact us for details and pricing.

(cont. from Pg 1)
dimensions that can't be contained indoors:

Carefully chosen plantings can exhibit medicinal, agricultural, or ritual concepts for a cultural museum.

For an art museum, plantings might fit the era when the art was created, or suggest how specific natural scenes inspired a "school," or even exhibit sources of artists' materials like turpentine, linen, or madder pigment.

Likewise, topography can evoke powerful experience. A visitor, moving slowly uphill and suddenly discovering a clearing or vista, might identify with historic individuals or cultures who explored and lived on the land.

Beyond this literal kind of evocation, metaphors can also be conveyed by the landscape: that same hill and clearing might suggest the uphill course of an artist's career, or a diplomat's, or a frontierswoman's - moving from early struggles to the clear perspective of mature skill.

Especially when combined with relevant outdoor artifacts (or reproductions/representations), interpretive landscapes can dramatically increase the depth of the visitor's enjoyment.

The beauty of interpretive landscapes is that they are site-specific. There is usually a good reason (or at least an interesting one)

why the museum ended up on a particular site. Often, that story adds richness and context to the collection, linking it to present-day users through the history of the site. Good interpretive site design can help make your museum stand out as unique or unusual. A well-designed museum landscape can show off artifacts too big for indoor display (vehicles, for example). Outdoor activities can turn a small museum from a one-hour visit to an all-day attraction, especially if the landscape is designed to help staff put on festivals and activities that can't happen indoors among the display cases.

So when exhibit space versus budget seems to be backing you into a corner, escape to the outdoors. Interpretive landscapes can take you and your visitors someplace new -- right in your own backyard.

Kim Sorvig is principal of Interpretive Landscape Design, Santa Fe, NM, and a nationally known author on landscape design and construction. His seminars, especially *Meaning & Place*, have been presented by invitation as far afield as Christchurch, New Zealand; Guadalajara, Mexico; and Washington DC. He is the author of Sustainable Landscape Construction: A Guide to Green Building Outdoors (Island Press, 2000) and To Heal Kent State (Worldview, 1990) on the design of a controversial interpretive memorial. He can be reached at 505-474-8531.

SERVICES

Collections Research for Museums can now **assist small museums with computerizing their collection documentation** using off-the-shelf database software. Our current specialty is FileMaker® Pro databases (see article on Pg 1). For more information, give us a call at (303) 757-7962.

In addition, Collections Research for Museums is still offering **classes for small museums in Cataloging and Collections Management**. If you would like more information on topics covered and costs, give us a call at (303) 757-7962 or drop us a line.

We are also still offering a variety of **other services** to museums, large and small. These **range from simple inventories to complete and thorough cataloging of collections**. Feel free to contact us for more information. We still provide a **free initial consultation**.

Also, if you need help preparing your NAGPRA summaries or inventories, we can help. Give us a call.

(Collections Research News is a service of Collections Research for Museums, Inc, 4830 E Kansas Dr, Denver, CO 80246 (303)757-7962. Questions, comments or story suggestions are always welcome.)