

Mixing the old and the new

Paul Milligan visited the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea to see how new technologies are being used to tell stories hundreds of years old

THE NATIONAL Waterfront Museum Swansea (NWMS) is to open to the public on 17 October. The £30.8 million project is the first in Wales to be designed and built for free access. Part of the funding for the project came from the Heritage Lottery Fund, who gave the NWMS the biggest ever grant in Welsh history (£10.69m).

The museum houses the largest collection of maritime and industrial artefacts ever seen under one roof in Wales, with hundreds of items that were previously located at different sites throughout the country. The architects have merged the old and new by linking a new and modern-looking gallery and a restored Grade II listed dockside warehouse (previously housing the Swansea Maritime and Industrial museum). The museum, built by architects Wilkinson Eyre, has been constructed using glass walls and Welsh slate throughout and is part of the overall renovation of the maritime and cultural quarter of the city, which involves the building of new hotels, restaurants and shops.

INTERACTIVE CONTENT

Museum designers Land Design Studio wanted the project to have as much interactive content as possible, so the building has a number of installations in which the visitor becomes the effective author of their own learning experience. The use of digital interfaces and video is installed in such a way that the building's designers hope the NWMS will stand up to repeated visits from locals and tourists alike. The archived material runs for over 12 hours and uses ordinary working people to help provide a human angle and link to historical events in Wales.

Newangle was appointed as the lead software design and production consultant, providing a significant part of the media and coordinating diverse input from studiosimple and ISO, whilst maintaining a consistent graphic communication protocol. It completed the development and production of over 100 a-v programmes for the museum, every one of which is accessible to visitors with disabilities.

The NWMS is the first fully compliant DDA (Disability and Discrimination Act) museum to open in Britain. Peter Mercer, Newangle md, says: 'Many of the elements of the exhibits, and the way they are structured, have never been attempted before. For example, all narrated programmes are BSL (British Sign Language) signed as well as subtitled. We were producing in three languages – English, Welsh and



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BSL.' With a signer constantly in view on-screen, the area available for graphic content needed very careful planning. In addition to designing and producing a number of exhibits, Newangle developed templates and production procedures in association with other companies involved, and were responsible for coordinating the creative collaboration of 3D designers, curatorial staff and other software contractors. The a-v led installations help to use human stories with themes such as 'Landscape', 'Money' and 'New Industries' to illustrate Welsh industrial history.

'FREE TO ROAM'

There are four entrances to the NWMS, and at each one the visitor will see an orientation unit. All four are filled with objects relevant to the themed areas, and have touch screens to help take the visitor on a journey through the building so they can anticipate and prepare for what they want to see.

'We would like people to use them to prepare their journey and they have been designed accordingly. With the thematic, and non-chronological treatment we have devised, you are free to roam and that's very unusual to treat a museum like that,' says Peter Higgins from Land Design.

Simple interfaces were chosen by Newangle – tracker balls, touch screens – in order to make as many people as possible interact with the information. The technology installed is used to lead people to stories and objects.

Thanks to a display animating the 1851 census, visitors can tour the streets of Swansea in that era. By clicking on each house it will give information on who lived there, what their occupations were etc. As well as the electronic display a paper copy of the census is also on display in a case above the screen to help illustrate the story further.

'It's not about gimmicks but density of material. This technology allows us to give a greater depth of material but still with a tangible object. We have static, tangible objects in a glass case which we have traditionally had for hundreds of years and now we are saying lets access them and unpack those stories in a much more interesting way, that, consistently is the theme throughout this museum,' says Higgins.

RESISTANCE TO NEW MEDIA

One of the highlights of the NWMS is a 330 degree interactive panorama with a digital image taken from the top of

the city's Kilvey Hill. The image starts from Port Talbot, with a vista across Swansea Bay to the city through to the lower Swansea valley. Its aim is to show the impact of industrialisation on the local landscape. Hotspots dotted around the screen give information (when highlighted by a trackerball) on particular towns and landmarks. It's all to give the visitor what Land Design call a 'sense of place'.

'A lot of media is extensively used throughout' the museum, we can't pretend we haven't used new ways of accessing objects, people's stories, and archive data in a very interesting way. Essentially, the journey new media has taken us through is the possibilities and the best and most appropriate way to use computing in a museum environment. A lot of new interfaces were used to apply that media in very particular instances. It's often been resisted (the use of new media) in a museum environment for many many reasons, but we thought it was worth using this as a launch pad for many new ideas,' said Higgins.

LAYERS OF INFORMATION

Land's philosophy for the museum was built around the idea of 'layers of information', for every touch screen there will be also be some audio and something for the visitor to pick up to help back it up. 'Throughout the museum we tried to use existing technology in an innovative way, like the tracker ball, it's been used before but we have tried to find new ways of using them,' says Mercer.

Work stations around the museum have been split so sound pollution can be controlled and 'sound-finders' have been installed throughout the museum to alert the visitor to the section they are entering, for example you are welcomed into the maritime section with the sound of a ship's bell. The exhibit designs also include a hand-tracking user interface and a networked exhibit monitoring system which staff will use to interrogate systems and update media from anywhere in the building.

All those involved in the project are convinced that this project will lead the way for museums for the foreseeable future in terms of the approach they have taken towards technology. It is a rare event in the UK to see a new museum being built, so it is refreshing to see a traditionally conservative sector take an open-minded and forward-thinking approach to the role a-v can play in attracting and stimulating visitors. □