

# A-V floats Britain's boats

**A 12-screen projection sequence is one of the highlights of a new maritime museum project in Falmouth**

**THIS YEAR'S** opening of the National Maritime Museum Cornwall, adding to the Eden Project and Tate St Ives, forms a triangle of major visitor attractions in the south west. The new arrival will bolster local tourism and celebrate Cornwall's relationship with the sea, as the other two do for nature and art.

From humble beginnings – the original scope was simply to augment the trickle of 5,000 visitors per year to Falmouth's back street Cornwall Maritime Museum – the project attracted £27m of funding. This has been spent on transforming three acres of harbour front into the museum – targeting 180,000 visitors – shops, restaurants and a public events square.

The evolution of the project is complex yet serendipitous. The major turning point was the discovery that London's National Maritime Museum in Greenwich was searching for a home for its small boat collection. It had so many that 80 were languishing in storage. Both museums had separately applied for Lottery funding and were encouraged to club together, bringing a large part of the collection to Falmouth. Further funding was obtained from patrons and local business, the South West of England Development Agency and the European Regional Development Fund.

So in the mid-nineties architect Long & Kentish drew up plans for two museums on one site and the promoters contacted Land Design Studio to work on exhibition design. Land and architect MJ Long worked together from the earliest stages and reasoned that it would be most cost-effective to build one museum to house both collections.

## UNUSUAL COLLABORATION

The unusual degree of collaboration between designer and architect, says Land's Peter Higgins, produced a 'seamless interchange between the building and the interior'. The exchange of ideas is evident in the inclusion of a spine wall to divide the high central hall in half, with the dark Set Sail gallery on one side and the daylight Flotilla gallery on the other.

Higgins believes this project was unusual in another welcome way. 'What tends to happen in Lottery projects is that the exhibition fit-out becomes the contingency of the project and it gets eroded.' But Land built a strong case, with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, for ring fencing its £3.7m budget for the exhibition.

Thus there were substantial resources of money and time, given delays to funding and the base build. Land's focus was on both real objects and interpretation and exploration of aspects of boat handling and design and boat history. Higgins and exhibition designer Katherine

Skellon were able to use technology where they thought they needed it.

Cash and creative sweat was therefore splashed on a 12-screen 'title sequence' to introduce the museum, while interactive media stations were employed throughout the museum to provide more in-depth interpretation.

'We spent quite a lot of money on the big show because we wanted to give people an atmospheric and really very theatrical starting point,' says Higgins. 'Quite often these pieces are left to the end but we wanted to use it at the beginning to set the context. The other pieces of media are all to do with interpretation. If handled intelligently it becomes a more interesting way of introducing people to the objects.'

## CONTENT CREATION

Land specified the ground which they wanted each media experience to cover, as well as the interface which visitors would use to control them.

Three different companies were engaged to create the content, with New Angle taking the lion's share of the work. It produced the 12-screen show in the Set Sail gallery, interpretation of boats in the Flotilla gallery and of design principles in the Boatbuilding gallery. Rom & Son took charge of the Meteorology and Navigation gallery and ISO provided an interactive about the Falmouth harbour front view from the museum's tower.

The first space people move into is Set Sail, where a ramp climbs parallel to nine boats with the projection screens behind them. Visitor entrance is not timed, so they can come in at any point during the video, and there are three consecutive viewing stations, so they move through the presentation.

'We wanted people to move along in an episodic way through the space and not have a sit-down auditorium where you may get six or 60 people. Atmospherically, auditoria like that don't work unless you can load them up with the numbers. The expected visitor numbers were quite modest, so we thought this movement style was much more appropriate', says Higgins.

The boats in Set Sail are intended to be representative of types, and are loosely themed into three sections – work, design and leisure – of three. Each trio is backed by a set of one large and three small projections which communicate the stories behind the boats.

Leading visitors through a graphic display area that looks at boat typologies in a more didactic way, the exhibition reaches the daylight canyon of the Flotilla gallery. Two more ramps put people in the midst of a vertigo-inducing

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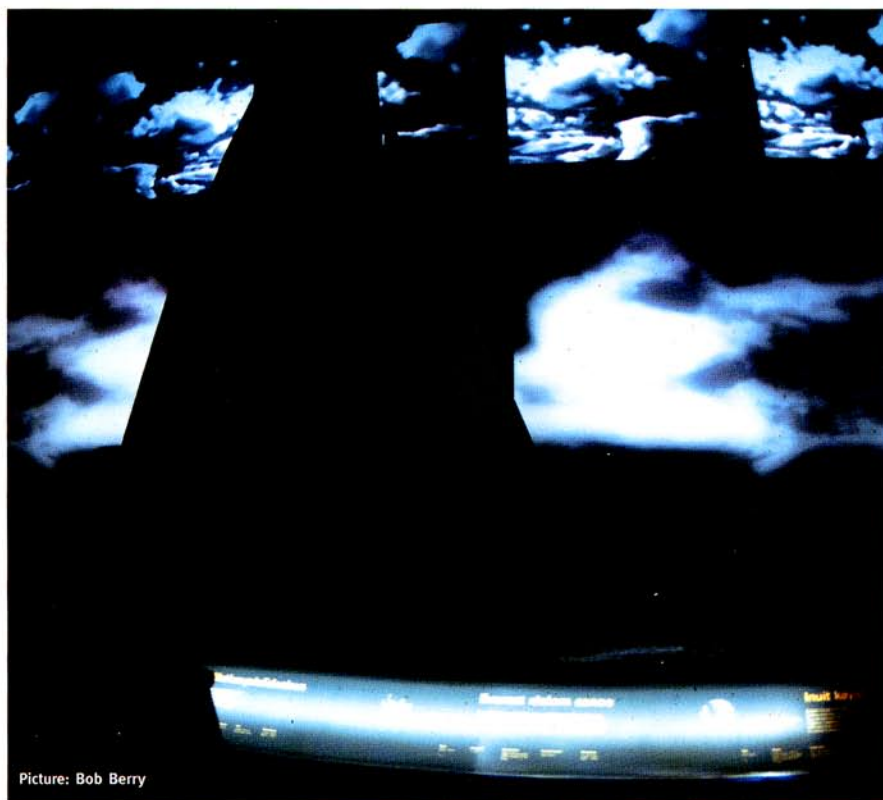
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arrangement of 26 boats hung three abreast and three floors high. Screens stationed along the ramps display floating blueprints of each suspended boat which you can scroll through by turning a winch handle, touching the screen when it displays your chosen boat.

This takes you to a screen which introduces the boat with text and stills and offers you the choice of three video clips. So for example if you select the Brazilian fishing boat, called a jangada, one clip is a video tour of the boat (New Angle filmed all the boats using a black cyclorama in a warehouse to provide closer looks) highlighting important features. The second clip is archive footage of the boats in use, including material shot by Orson Welles of a jangada sailing to Rio de Janeiro in protest at the oppression of the fishermen by the government. In the third clip you listen to a song of the fishermen which comes from BBC footage from the 1970s.

#### VISITOR CHOICE

Having ascended the first ramp of Flotilla, visitors are free to choose their route around the rest of the museum. They can have a break from staring at screens by stopping here at the café with its harbour view or next door in the Cornwall galleries, which host the retained and improved original Falmouth-based maritime museum.

Such spaces, and of course the museum's location, save the place from over-reliance on a-v to keep people entertained. The tower gives views not only over the water but under the water, as it extends down to the sea bed. Visitors can descend to see the high tide gradually climbing up the window on the bottom floor or go up top to scour the harbour with binoculars.

There will also be chances to see famous boats in their element, moored on the museum's pontoon. *Suhaili*, the yacht sailed by Sir Robin Knox-Johnston when he became the first person to make sail round the world non-stop, will be on frequent display. Visitors won't be offered a go, but they can still chance their arm with remote-controlled model sailboats in the indoor pool.

The nautically uninitiated will pick up a lot from two remaining galleries. Meteorology and Navigation contains five a-v exhibits supplied by Rom & Son which teach people to recognise and predict weather patterns and how to read sea charts and appreciate the importance of water depth. Land's exhibition designer Katherine Skellon says: 'People do not have a clue about navigation and what Rom & Son have produced is very informative without being too heavy and nautical.' Usability is helped by some of the interfaces, such as the tiller with which you steer down a safe water channel in one interactive. 'That one is an arcade game really – it has been well-received by the crusty old sailors down there,' says Skellon.

They also hang around the Boatbuilding gallery, ogling the boat under restoration in the open boat workshop, accompanying another series of interactives and displays of boatbuilding materials through the ages. New Angle's interactives cover the basics of how to design boats that a) float and b) do what you want them to, that is go fast, run cheap, stay stable, etc – using cartoon animation and encouraging visitors to reason through problems.

What impresses about the project is that it not only successfully follows the visitor centre strategy of marketing itself to the largest possible audience – anyone who likes boats – but its vision is wider. Education is continued at a higher level with the library of more than 9,000 books and 150,000 photographs. There is also a medium-size lecture theatre for a programme of talks. And the museum has forged links with marine industries and the College of Falmouth Marine School with plans to develop facilities and promote training in boat restoration and repair skills.

It will be great for Cornwall if all this comes good, and perhaps it will influence future visitor centre projects. Higgins has the last word: 'Reviews in the broadsheet press and architectural journals have acknowledged the idea of architects working with interpretative designers at the beginning, as a building is designed to a certain extent from the inside out.' The quality of a-v displays can benefit from such cohesion, as Set Sail proves ...

**Main: Dramatic projections introduce the challenges and conditions which shape small boats**

**Above right: Behind every boat is a story ... and years of research by the curators, Land, New Angle and scriptwriter TGA**

**Below right: Flotilla will be rehung each year with a new collection of boats – which means more content for the interactives**

