



Inklings

Bulletin of Interpretive Ideas

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Current/Recent Project List

- Exhibit Planner, Chilo Lock and Dam, Clermont County Park District (OH), with Lifespace Design
- Exhibit Planner, Mansfield Mill, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with Lifespace Design
- Interpretive Sign Design, Cataract Covered Bridge, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources
- Exhibit Planner, McCormick's Creek State Park, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with Lifespace Design
- Interpretive Sign Design, Clifty Falls State Park, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources
- Exhibit Planner, Lincoln State Park, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with Lifespace Design
- Exhibit Planner, Prophetstown State Park, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with Lifespace Design
- Interpretive Sign Design, Pioneer Cemeteries, Blue Heron Ministries, Angola, IN

Fitting the Story into a Structure Converting Buildings into Interpretive Centers

In a best case scenario, the interpretive theme defines the floor plan and architecture of an interpretive center. First, the exhibits are planned. Then the space, lighting, water and electrical needs are designed around the exhibits.

Unfortunately, few organizations have the luxury of starting from scratch. When a new interpretive center is being constructed, the building design generally comes *before* the exhibits are discussed. Cost determines the size and amenities of a building. Even so, the building IS being built as an interpretive center. Space, walls and windows can meet general requirements needed for that function.

A more challenging situation is when a building, originally designed for another purpose, is retrofitted into an interpretive center. Many of us have seen and worked with interpretive centers that once served as saddle barns, concession stands, pool houses, barracks, etc. The designer and staff have to work around numerous constraints such as low ceilings that limit lighting options, supporting walls that block traffic flow, windows that remove needed wall space, etc. In this case, the interpretive story has to adapt to the structure instead of the other way around.

Elevators and sprinkler systems take away from the historical integrity of the building, but allow the interpretive center to provide a safe, comfortable visit.

Historic Buildings as Interpretive Centers

In many cases an historic structure is converted into an interpretive center. This provides both interpretive opportunities and constraints. If the interpretive theme deals with the original function of the structure, the interpretive center provides a wonderful opportunity to further the visitors' understanding. Standing in the room where the actual events took place provides a reality that is hard to duplicate. An historic structure can go a long way in defining the tone of the experience.

Retrofitting any building is subject to constraints mentioned earlier. Retrofitting an historic structure brings in a further issue of historical integrity.

Historical Integrity

1. *How far do you go in altering the structure to accommodate exhibits?* In some cases the building may have an historic designation which prohibits alterations. On the flip side, the building codes and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) may require alterations for public use. Elevators and sprinkler systems take away from the historical integrity of the building, but allow the interpretive center to provide a safe, comfortable visit.

2. *Do you restore to former appearance or bring in new media to explain the interpretive theme?* Depending on the site, you may wish to show the building as it originally appeared. Interpretation would primarily be labels explaining the original machinery, furniture, etc. The other option is to introduce exhibits that help explain the story but were not part of the original structure.

There is no one right way. The particulars of each unique site and situation will determine the level of modification required for historic buildings.



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The Tale of Two Structures: Chilo Lock and Dam and Mansfield Mill

Chilo Lock and Dam is located in Clermont County, Ohio just east of Cincinnati. From the 1920s until the 1960s it served as one of several lock and dams along the Ohio River. Unused for years, the building is now managed by the Clermont County Park District and is being converted into an interpretive center.

Mansfield Mill is located in central Indiana. From 1819 until 1967 the site supported a water powered grain mill. In the 1880s owners converted the mill technology to an automated process. The building is under the management of the Indiana Department of Natural Resources and has been open to the public for several years.

Some considerations (Table):

| | Chilo Lock and Dam | Mansfield Mill |
|---------------|--|---|
| Interior | With the exception of a few smaller pieces of historic equipment the building is empty. | The original mill equipment still functions and will be left in the building. |
| Access | Elevators will be installed in the three-story building. | Due to narrow stairs and no possibility of installing an elevator, some visitors will access only the main level of the 4-story building. |
| Challenges | Large windows limit wall space. The building is located on the flood plain. All exhibits on the lower level must be designed for quick removal. For the same reason, electrical wiring is limited on the lower level. | The building has important equipment on four floors. With primary access possibly limited to the main floor, explaining the technology poses a challenge. Space is very tight. |
| Opportunities | Windows provide grand views of the river and the company town – the interpretive theme. Pipes and small equipment provide an industrial feel. | Having the mill in working order with original equipment provides a wonderful learning experience. |



Chilo Lock and Dam, above and Mansfield Mill, right



Both buildings are historic structures whose use has changed from industrial to interpreting the industrial. However, interpreting the industrial story is approached differently due to each building's unique constraints and opportunities.