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Edwin Schlossberg Inc. Plugs In the Vatican

By FRED BERNSTEIN

EDWIN A. SCHLOSSBERG heads a design firm that specializes in interactive museum exhibitions. He is also an artist who inscribes poetic musings on metal, glass and paper. Last week, at the opening of a retrospective of 84 of his works at the National Arts Club, some of Mr. Schlossberg's employees were surprised to find themselves surrounded by the private thoughts of their otherwise reticent boss.

"It's the stuff he can't express at the office," Mr. Schlossberg's wife, Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg, explained, "because there he works as part of a team."

And yet the work Mr. Schlossberg does at the office has never been more personal. His addition to Ellis Island, where all four of his Russian-born grandparents landed a century ago, is about to make the island's Immigration Museum a place where visitors can not only learn about their family histories but also round them out. This project, which will have its debut April 17, should raise Mr. Schlossberg's profile in New York, where he has often been known more for his marriage than for his work. (He is also designing electronic displays for the new Reuters headquarters to open in Times Square this fall.)

"Until now, visiting Ellis Island was a very melancholy experience," Mr. Schlossberg said in his office last week, "because you couldn't find evidence of your family."

The contribution of Mr. Schlossberg's firm, a database of ships' manifests from 1892 to 1924, will allow visitors not just to find that evidence, but to augment it by recording oral histories and scanning photos and documents into the museum's electronic scrapbook.

Mr. Schlossberg, 55, said he plans to take his three children to Ellis Island this spring. For another part of their heritage, the children may have to accompany him to Washington, where the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, a \$65 million museum designed by Leo A. Daly Architects on the grounds of Catholic University, is set to open next week. For it, Mr. Schlossberg has designed interactive displays that offer visitors repeated opportunities not just to learn about Catholicism, but to explain -- in words, music and pictures -- what the religion means to them.

What is surprising isn't that the church turned to a designer who grew up in a "moderately observant" Jewish home to tell its story. After all, he said, "my wife is a Catholic, and for her and her family it's been a great source of strength." What is surprising is the use of interactive exhibits, in which much of the content is created by the visitors themselves, to explain what is perhaps the most hierarchical of religions.

"What we did is really similar in function to a cathedral," Mr. Schlossberg said, "where the stories were told in the windows and the carvings. Only there, the ideas were fixed. We've made a kind of collaborative cathedral."

The approach weds Mr. Schlossberg's longstanding interest in technology (his 11 books include a best-seller on calculator games) with his ambition to broaden audiences for museums. Ralph Appelbaum, the exhibition designer behind the Rose Center for Earth and Space, calls Mr. Schlossberg's work "a critical part of what new museums are looking for, which is as broad a range of entry points into their narratives as possible." Mr. Schlossberg's approach has the support of Cardinal Adam J. Maida of Detroit, who conceived the project, and of Pope John Paul II, to whom Mr. Schlossberg showed the designs during a Vatican visit last year.

When Mr. Schlossberg was hired in 1996, the plan was to honor Pope John Paul II. The model, Mr. Schlossberg said, was the presidential library. (Mr. Schlossberg designed some of the exhibits at the Kennedy Library in Boston.) At Cardinal Maida's request, Mr. Schlossberg's company, Edwin Schlossberg Inc., which is based in the Flatiron district, hired a polling company to ask 1,000 Catholics in New York and Washington what they most wanted the museum to include. "The life of John Paul II came in sixth or seventh," Mr. Schlossberg said. "What was clear was that people wanted to learn about Catholic beliefs."

At the museum, which Mr. Schlossberg and his staff refer to as JP2, visitors can choose a topic from a list that includes "community" and "imagination"; the swiping of electronic cards tells the ubiquitous computers which theme to highlight.

Mr. Schlossberg and his colleagues wrestled with ways to talk about dark chapters in church history. In the end, they decided to list all the popes, but generally describe the accomplishments of "only the good ones," Mr. Schlossberg said. (The Holocaust is mentioned in a discussion of Pius XII.)

One of his first insights into display design came at the Vatican Pavilion at the 1964-65 New York World's Fair. Mr. Schlossberg, who grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, went there to see the Michelangelo Pietà from the Vatican Museum, on loan to the fair. He remembers not only the sculpture, but the moving sidewalk that whisked visitors by it. "Given the size of the crowds," he said, "there was nothing else they could do."

The sheer number and diversity of museumgoers today require a more interactive approach, Mr. Schlossberg believes. "We are constructing opportunities not just to learn about a particular subject, but also about other people and their way of seeing that subject," he said.

The museum also includes an exhibition of Vatican art and a room devoted to objects, including skis belonging to John Paul II. The interactive displays "aren't meant to replace object-oriented museums," Mr. Schlossberg said, "but to expand the range of things museums can do."

Ten days before its official opening, workers at the museum were still solving minor technical problems. The sights and sounds of dozens of interactive displays were appealing, but also a bit overwhelming. "Come play; we need people to ring the bells," announced a recorded voice at an attraction that lets six visitors play church bells in sequence. Computer terminals where visitors are to

create electronic collages announced, "The word for the day is 'faith.' "

The reliance on computers may create capacity problems. One sure-to-be-popular area, where visitors will be able to design stained-glass windows for display on large overhead screens, has only four stations, hardly enough for the 1,500 visitors expected at the center each day.

Is Mr. Schlossberg trying to make Catholicism user-friendly? "Catholicism is user-friendly," he said. "Don't confuse the delivery system of Catholicism," he added, "which may be hierarchical, with the experience, which is something much more personal and more profound."

Photos: PLEASE TOUCH -- Edwin Schlossberg, above, with his poems on foil (top left) and silk-screen artwork (far right). His firm designed interactive displays (left, top right and right) for the new Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington. (Portrait, Philip Greenberg for The New York Times; installation photographs, Pope John Paul II Cultural Center)