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N.C. History Center uses high-tech interactivity to tell old stories

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Edwin Schlossberg, designer of the new technology-driven exhibits in the North Carolina History Center, talks Friday about how the center was planned.



Edwin Schlossberg, the founder and principal designer of the design firm that helped dream up the exhibit designs for the new N.C. History Center, said that 10 years ago, it was a stretch to take an interactive and technology-centered approach to aspects of the design.

Schlossberg of ESI Design helped create the design of the Pepsi Family Center and the Regional History Museum, as well as the History Navigator tours that have visitors using smart phones to learn about Tryon Palace Historic Sites & Gardens as they move around the site.

He is married to Caroline Kennedy, the president of the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation, and also an attorney, an editor and a member of the well-known Kennedy family, according to jfklibrary.org.

"We wanted to make the people who visit here, a part of the storyline," Schlossberg said on Friday, as he spoke to more than 100 people gathered in the center's Cullman Performance Hall who wanted to learn about the vision behind the exhibits.

Schlossberg said the children and family-centered Pepsi Family Center is set up so visitors interact with each other as they go through a series of high-tech experiences that show them what it was like to live in the 19th century. They complete group activities simulating what it was like to sail a ship, for example, or to make turpentine for a naval store.

They first enter a time machine experience that he said is meant to change the mood for children who might have just come from the "intensity of the bus."

"The history over the last several generations is, you want to have a monologue with the history of a place," Schlossberg said. "It was sort of you and the stuff. Young people don't expect that. They expect to talk with other people about what they're getting."

Schlossberg also said the Regional History Museum is meant to give visitors a context in which to understand the palace, while the mobile History Navigator Tours allow visitors to get questions answered as they move around using a website accessed through their smart phones.

The mobile media presentation offers different perspectives of history such as from town leaders, women or children.

“You carry a narrative with you, and if you have questions, you can look at them and find out from the narrative with you, so you become as important as the story you’re learning about,” he said. “This was a very out there idea 10 years ago,” he added.

Kay Williams, palace director, said the palace staff decided they wanted to take an interactive approach to the exhibits after surveying students and visitors. They asked the visitors to rank their preferences of what they wanted from the palace.

“All the votes went to more interactive activities,” Williams said. “It became very clear that visitors were seeking social experiences.”

She said that the traditional tour can be limiting for younger visitors, since they have to be quiet, and can’t touch things, and the center offers visitors a wider range of experiences. The interactive, technology-focused design also responds to a view that history is no longer important.

“You have to use the tools of the present and of the future, I think, to (respond) to that,” she said.

New Bern resident Jack Baft said he thinks the interactive and technology aspects of the design are exciting.

“We’re finally going to use technology for something worthwhile, other than just entertainment,” he said.

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