

PRESS RELEASES

Saluting Steinbeck's Stories

by Alice Parman, Exhibit Planner/Writer Formations, Inc. Portland, OR

Main Street in Salinas, CA has a new look. The National Steinbeck Center, a monumentally styled but humanly scaled building, now occupies a prominent site at the north end of this historic thoroughfare, whose brick-fronted buildings have changed very little since John Steinbeck was born just a few blocks away in 1902. Entering the upbeat, elegant lobby, visitors are treated to a stunning, oversized portrait, screened on a Rosco backlit theatrical scrim of the Salinas native as a young man in his thirties.

Ever since a farsighted city librarian began collecting Steinbeck memorabilia and oral histories in the 1970s, a band of regional residents have worked steadily to create a museum that interprets the works and life of this remarkable writer. In June, 1998 their vision was realized — the National Steinbeck Center opened to immediate, widespread acclaim.

Concept Development

Exhibit planners and designers from Formations Inc. first came to Salinas in 1994 as part of a team assembled by LOGIC, a Seattle, WA museum planning firm. The team also included local architects Jerome Kasavan Associates, Salinas, and design architect Bob Thompson, Thompson Vaivoda & Associates Architects, Portland, OR.

Meeting with a highly motivated volunteer committee, Craig Kerger, Formations' exhibit designer, and his team facilitated a planning process that resulted in a radically new approach to interpreting the life and works of a literary figure.

As exhibit designers, the Formations team had to come up with a way to integrate Steinbeck's extremely diverse writing styles, settings, subject matter, and media, as well as his complex, fascinating and adventurous life, into a coherent, compelling and thoroughly enjoyable exhibition. Fortunately, Steinbeck himself provided the key organizing concept: "I think I would like to write the story of this whole valley, of all the little towns and all the farms and the ranches in the wilder hills. I can see how I would like to do it so that it would be the valley of the world." He wrote that in 1933 in a letter to his friend George Albee.

An Experimental Journey

Journey Through John Steinbeck's Valley of the World is the title of an intensely participatory, highly involving exhibit on the life and works of John Steinbeck. In 8,500 square feet of varied, carefully paced experiences, visitors read and hear the author's words as they immerse themselves in a series of environments that evoke his "valley of the world." More than 350 compelling images, 100 authentic objects, classic film footage and reader's theater vignettes blend with the words of Steinbeck in evocative settings filled with fascinating interactives. Visitors of all ages leave full of excitement, ready to re-read their favorite works, or read the Nobel Prize winning author for the first time.

To bring Steinbeck's books to life, the exhibits juxtapose stage sets, films, smells, sounds and tactile experiences. Each stage set is an activity center filled with enticing opportunities for discovery. These interactive activities allow visitors of all ages to explore some of the things Steinbeck experienced, making connections to his narratives and characters.

Throughout the exhibit, visitors hear and read Steinbeck's words describing key experiences and places. A large cone of sound from Museum Tools, San Anselmo, CA, hangs above the exhibit. Digital message recorders are provided by Stop & Listen, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. As they gain familiarity with his characters, themes and stories, visitors are drawn into such timeless works as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Red Pony*, *The Pearl*, and *East of Eden*.

Theatrical sets, period props and dramatic lighting (provided by Hollywood, FL-based Martin Professional Lighting's Imagescan projector units which project graphics onto floors, walls and exhibit components, and with Nova Controls and Grafix Eye from Lutron), transport visitors to landscapes of the imagination. For example, they join George, Lennie and other bindlestiffs in a bunkhouse in a 1920s ranch, and look over Jody Tiflin's shoulder into his pony's stall. A bleak Hooverville recreates scenes of the Great Depression, in contrast to the seedy but festive aura of Cannery Row.

Moving through these environments, visitors encounter many one-of-a-kind documents and other objects related to Steinbeck, from articles he wrote for his high school yearbook to his original handwritten manuscript for *The Pearl*. A series of mini theaters offer excerpts from both filmed and staged versions of the author's stories.

Woven throughout the exhibit are moments of "whole learning" that motivate visitors to connect Steinbeck's plots and characters with aspects of their own lives. Visitors can experience the drama of an agricultural strike from the opposing viewpoints of growers and workers, by listening on 1920s telephones (reproductions by Phonoco Inc., Galesville, WI) to a confrontation drawn from Steinbeck's novel, *In Dubious Battle*. A real Model T Ford invites youngsters to crank up the engine, following instructions quoted from *East of Eden*.

Visitor Focused Design

One of the most challenging aspects of interpretive exhibit design is the wide range of visitors' backgrounds. Some visitors to the Center arrive with little or no prior knowledge of the author. Others are "tire kickers" — professional and amateur experts. Most fall somewhere in between. To succeed, the exhibit must be credible, worthwhile and interesting to everyone.

Again, Steinbeck's writings provided the key for Formations' designers. His words pervade the exhibit, infusing each display with his rich language and refreshing point of view. Accessible even to non-readers, stimulating to the most sophisticated scholars, Steinbeck's writing style and subject matter have near-universal appeal.

Through extensive research and work with the Salinas-based exhibit committee, Formations professionals developed written documents, concept sketches, exhibit drawings, audio/visual scripts, graphic and artifact reference books, and color and material boards that expressed the proposed design in vivid detail. A series of

benchmark reviews by the exhibit committee, consulting scholars and focus groups helped the design team refine these documents.

Fabricating for Quality

To construct thematic displays and environments ranging from Old Town Salinas and Cannery Row to a Mexican marketplace and a World War II battle scene, fabricators and installers from Formations put in more than 21,000 hours. They used 240 gallons of paint, 25,000 lbs of lumber and a wide variety of authentic period objects, from turn-of-the-century children's books and a pre-war map of Italy to a 1910 Model T Ford. Other specialty items purchased for the exhibit include a bucket of bullfrogs, aromas of Cannery Row fish, and a genuine World War II machine gun. Staff haunted antique shops in search of blacksmith tools, farm equipment, period windows, and "hames and tugs," gear for hitching a work horse to a wagon or a play, a steal at only \$10 for a boxful.

Throughout the exhibit, interactives engage the attention of younger visitors. Outside the Red Pony's stall, children can use a hoof pick to clean a model of a horse's hoof, cast in plaster, then molded from epoxy resin. A similar process created the starfish and brittlestar replicas that allow visitors to distinguish between the two species by touch alone.

The exhibits are built to take continual use, over many years, by many thousands of visitors. Security and conservation standards were primary issues during exhibit design and fabrication. Original documents, including priceless manuscripts in Steinbeck's original handwriting, are displayed at low light levels in locked cases. Finish materials were selected for durability and lasting quality. These included sheets of Acrylite OP-2 from Cyro Industries, Mt. Arlington, NJ, Plexiglas® UF-3, metal laminates by Wilsonart, Nevamar (Decorative Products Division of International Paper, Odenton, MD), and Laminart (Elk Grove Village, IL), pine and knotty pine veneers and plywoods, and Sherwin Williams matte-finish lacquer.

Salinas is in an earthquake zone. In accordance with the building code, the installation crew from Formations built the exhibit walls from 2" x 6" construction lumber and 1/2" plywood. They joined seismic structural micro-lams (plywood composites built up to 2" thick and 8" wide) to the building's outer walls by fastening metal L brackets with all thread fasteners. The walls were up and fastened when a 3.5/4.0 earthquake jolted Salinas. "We heard a big boom," recalls Phil Buettner, Formations' head of fabrication. "It was the light grid bouncing in the air. Then the all-threads started vibrating. We could see them vibrate 8" to 10" in a circular motion for about 5 minutes, making an intense whistling noise. Then it stopped, and we just went back to work."

Great Storytelling

Steinbeck would have appreciated this story. He admired fine craftsmanship, and was a skilled and enthusiastic carpenter. With comparable insight and discipline, he wrote for hours nearly every day, crafting his stories. "I nearly always write," he told a friend, "just as I nearly always breathe."