

Spring 2012

Signs of the times

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Signs of the Times

Felicia Hersh

A research project submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Local, Regional, and Public History

May 2012

Dedication

As a little girl, I deeply respected and admired my father. He was a history teacher in the New York City public school system for 33 years, and not only did he instill in me a love of learning, but a profound interest in what would eventually become my discipline. Throughout my academic career, I have made it a priority to strive to make my father proud...

...Dad... wherever you are... this work is a culmination of your inspiration.

Acknowledgements

There are several people I would like to thank who helped make this research project possible. I am indebted to my thesis director, Dr. Gabrielle Lanier, for her guidance in shaping and improving this study, for her enthusiasm and encouragement, and for her willingness to humor me as I threw ideas at the wall to see which ones would “stick.” I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Kevin Borg and Dr. Emily Westkaemper, for their time, their meticulous reading, and their insightful suggestions.

I am grateful to Danielle Kelly and Justin Favela at the Neon Museum for giving me the opportunity to serve as a docent, and for tirelessly answering e-mails with detailed explanations or necessary attachments whenever I needed additional information. My sincere thanks also goes to the entire staff at the Neon Museum for welcoming me to the team and for confirming my decision to pursue a career in the field of museum education. I would like to thank Dr. Michael Green for his continual support and encouragement in pursuing this degree and for his readiness to lend his expertise from 3,000 miles away.

Special thanks goes to Kala Rehm, for sending related articles, for coffee gift cards, and for reading all of my drafts. I must recognize my brother, RJ, for motivating me to earn my master’s degree – because what one twin has, the other always wants. I am grateful for the love of my mother, as well as her daily phone calls to check-up on me and to see how my work was coming along. Finally, I would like to thank Niklas, not only for sending me away for two years with his blessings so that I might achieve my dreams, but also for taking an active interest in my academic pursuits and lovingly reading every page.

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Abstract

This research project endeavors to apply current museum education theory and practice to existing museum education programming, specifically at the Neon Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada. As today's museums are considered leisure-time activities and compete with a host of other leisure and tourist attractions for visitors' discretionary time and income, the development of enjoyable, effective, and memorable museum experiences is crucial to the survival of these traditional institutions. Based on these ideas, this project seeks to incorporate new theories of learning and methods for educating the public into the Neon Museum's development of successful educational programming, including active engagement with the material, as well as the tailoring of method and content based on visitor's unique needs. Adopting the predominant philosophy of the field, constructivist learning theory, this project argues that individual meaning making of an exhibit's materials occurs through personal connections with presented materials. In constructivism, prior knowledge of themes related to the exhibit content is key to promoting internalization of information and, ultimately, learning. An exploration of existing museum education literature thus guides research into visitor satisfaction at the Neon Museum, as well as potential for improvement. This assessment informs this project's modification of existing programming by connecting changes in sign design to developments in transportation technologies. Highlighting a more comprehensive, general theme to which a variety of visitors can relate and connect new concepts, a succinct exhibit brief complete with researcher recommendations presents an outline for a potential new program at the Neon Museum in accordance with these current educational theories and practices.

Introduction

Museum visitation in the United States is at an all-time high. Twenty years ago, nearly one in four Americans went to these institutions with any regularity. In 2000, it was reported that between two and three of every five Americans visit a museum at least once a year.¹ Today, more than 850 million Americans visit museums annually, even while the number of institutions in this country has grown to more than 17,500.² Museum going is rapidly becoming the “single most popular, out-of-home family activity in America,” and in frequenting these institutions, visitors are looking to fulfill a variety of expectations.³ Studies and surveys have consistently found that while the motivation of museumgoers differs, visitors spending free time at these institutions seek both the educational opportunities traditionally associated with museum experiences, as well as the entertainment aspects related to other leisure activities. Many museums struggle with this learning-versus-entertainment conflict; however, studies have shown that visitors do not see education and entertainment as inherently separate, but regard these notions as deeply connected.⁴ Thus, in taking visitor interests and expectations into consideration, today’s museums have the opportunity to bolster their role in society as a venue for free-choice learning through the incorporation of both education and entertainment. The marriage of these concepts ultimately encourages museums to engage the public in educationally enjoyable experiences from which they can derive their own personal meaning or significance, and subsequently better retain newly acquired information.

¹ Early statistics found in John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning From Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press – A Division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 2.

² AAM “Frequently Asked Questions About Museums” *American Association of Museums Website*, accessed October 9, 2011, <http://www.aam-us.org/aboutmuseums/abc.cfm#visitors>.

³ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington D.C.: Whalesback Books, 1992), xiv.

⁴ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning From Museums*, 76.

One of the newer museums accounted for in the above-mentioned AAM statistics, and one with a stake in the combination of learning and amusement, is the Neon Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada. Founded in 1996, the Neon Museum endeavors to “collect and exhibit neon signs, the classic Las Vegas art form.”⁵ The official mission of the non-profit organization is to “collect, preserve, study, and exhibit neon signs and associated artifacts to inspire educational and cultural enrichment for diverse members of [the] international community.”⁶ Located in Las Vegas, this institution functions in an entertainment-based environment and essentially must enlist edutainment as an element of programming in order to survive. Engaging and effective programming is key to the museum’s success, as the city has matured since its inception, graduating from desert gambling outpost to bustling recreation mecca. Tourists come to Las Vegas for a multitude of reasons, but for the last five years vacation and leisure have remained the primary purpose of visitation.⁷

The incorporation of entertainment into the institution’s educational repertoire, however, must be carefully considered and planned. Competing with a host of other leisure activities, the Neon Museum faces a number of challenges in terms of attracting tourists who travel to Las Vegas for reasons other than museum going, and risks compromising its values and goals in favor of a more marketable product. The current programming at this nascent organization, which anticipates its grand opening in 2012, has focused on this mediation between education and entertainment; however, their

⁵ Neon Museum, “Mission,” *Neon Museum Las Vegas Press Kit*.

⁶ Neon Museum, “Mission,” *Neon Museum Las Vegas Press Kit*.

⁷ GSL Research “Las Vegas Visitor Profile: Calendar Year 2010, Annual Report,” Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, <http://www.lvcva.com/getfile/107/2010%20Las%20Vegas%20Visitor%20Profile.pdf> [accessed November 5, 2011], 24. Just over one-half of all visitors participating in the LVCVA study reported that they were traveling to Las Vegas for vacation or leisure, an option separate from gambling or visiting friends and relatives.

current tour has a tendency to lean on the amusement component of the equation at the expense of creating a meaningful learning experience for the visitor. As a result, the tour progressively loses sight of a larger theme or narrative and lapses into an amalgamation of short, unrelated anecdotes about the signage or the property represented. While there are some wonderful aspects of the museum's current program, exploring the wealth of scholarship on museum education might aid the Neon Museum in better realizing its mission of "educational and cultural enrichment."⁸

Because so much of the current literature in the field of museum education focuses on constructivist learning theory, or the notion that material must relate to visitor experience in order to be effective, this research seeks to determine the ways in which the Neon Museum's programming can contribute to an individual's existing body of knowledge and ultimately promote learning.⁹ Recent scholarship suggests that learning in a museum setting often involves a mutual reinforcement of the museum's presented materials and the visitors' understanding of a subject. For learning to "hold," many museum educators have underscored the significance of "bridg[ing] the gap between concepts and relationships associated with the collections and the personal experiences and capacity for learning of visitors."¹⁰ Thus, by extrapolating a solid, more universal theme from the Neon Museum's line of interpretation and reconfiguring the institution's programming based on this premise, visitors might find the discussion of localized Las Vegas history more meaningful and consequently valuable in terms of their connection to

⁸ "Mission and History," The Neon Museum, accessed January 10, 2012, <http://www.neonmuseum.org/about/mission-and-history>.

⁹ Constructivist theory is predicated on the notion that museum visitors construct their own meaning through active participation in the process of learning.

¹⁰ Alison L. Grinder and E. Sue McCoy, *The Good Guide: A Sourcebook for Interpreters, Docents and Tour Guides* (Scottsdale: Ironwood Publishing, 1985), 38.

and retention of new material. More specifically, as meaning-making often hinges upon the individual's ability to connect the information presented to their own understanding or familiarity with the topic at hand, the goal of this research is to address the reincorporation of local or regional history into a larger contextual narrative relatable to more museum visitors.

With particular attention paid to the Neon Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada, the goal of this project is to create, propose, and implement a new interactive and learning-centered tour for an enhanced visitor experience. As an educational institution situated in the heart of the "entertainment capital of the world," this nascent museum is uniquely poised to benefit from an assessment of the education-entertainment dichotomy and the implementation of effective yet engaging educational programming. The first chapter of this project, *Museum Education: Theory and Practice*, will thus primarily explore existing museum education models in an effort to uncover appropriate ways of successfully incorporating amusement and interaction into the visitor experience. This chapter identifies a number of best practices that serve as the foundation for proposed changes to the Neon Museum's existing programming. In addition, this theory-based portion of the project will aid in uncovering an individualized, tailored plan for the museum's tour presentation, accompanying literature, as well as supplemental material for facilitating visitor understanding of the exhibit's meaning and significance.

In the absence of formal visitor evaluation surveys, the second chapter of this project examines visitor response to the exhibit in the form of travel website assessment postings so that museum education theory might be directly applied to the Neon Museum's operations. Visitor commentary on past experiences at the Las Vegas

institution guides and informs the adaptation and application of these more esoteric theories in a practical and meaningful way for this museum and its guests. As all museums differ in purpose and approach, this exploration of museum education scholarship in conjunction with visitor reaction offers direction with regard to the translation and implementation of theory in support of the Neon Museum's specific collections, audiences, and volunteer resources.

The third chapter of this project develops a larger theme on which to situate the new tour and its associated materials, specifically elaborating on the connection between sign design and changing modes of transportation. Many signs in the collection suggest how neon sign technology and design developed in tandem with shifting modes of travel. For example, the museum's oldest sign, a simple quarter-circle piece originally positioned above the entrance to a small restaurant called the Green Shack, tells the story of a budding Boulder City that catered to nearby Hoover Dam workers and visitors to the modern marvel. A cocktail sign situated nearby, featuring a full-size glass along with a carefully curved arrow, alludes to the shift from a primarily walking culture to a rise in automobile travel. Finally, a super-pylon resting just a few feet away depicts one of the latest growth spurts in Las Vegas, the 1990s period characterized by the city's family-friendly nature, as well as the height of automobile, highway, and growing air travel. These three pieces briefly touch upon the way changes in sign design shifted along with preferred modes of transportation; however, this particular theme, if fully developed, has the potential to carry the exhibit's other important discussions regarding Las Vegas growth and development.

Significantly, this theme also helps to better situate the Neon Museum’s artifacts and history into a broader context. Explaining the significance of unique neon signage in relation to more widely understood transportation developments will enable a larger audience to then relate their own personal knowledge or experiences with differing modes of travel, thus encouraging them to more easily “make meaning” out of the exhibit material and walk away with new information. Utilizing this more broadly contextualized theme, the final chapter of this project will thus include a comprehensive tour outline and application plan that seeks to ground information about the “Boneyard,”¹¹ the institution’s main exhibit space, and Las Vegas history into a larger historical context relatable to the museum’s international visiting audience. This chapter will also include supplementary materials for this tour outline, including proposals for public programming and an extended research bibliography. The closing pages of this proposal contain a list of recommendations reiterating the ways in which the Neon Museum might strengthen its role as an informal learning environment and improve its service to the public.

In discussing possibilities for improvement, it is both necessary and helpful to profile the Neon Museum’s programming as it exists today. The Neon Museum was first conceived in 1996 when Young Electric Company (YESCO) donated an assortment of old neon signs from their own private “boneyard” to Las Vegas’ Allied Arts Council.¹² YESCO is one of the largest and longest-lived businesses involved in Las Vegas sign production, incorporating a unique business strategy that aided in their continuing

¹¹ The term “Boneyard” refers to the Neon Museum’s outdoor lot that houses the decommissioned neon signs in the collection.

¹² Kirsten Swenson, “The Neon Museum: A Midcentury Vernacular Gets its Due,” *Modern Magazine Vol. 12 No. 4* (Winter 2009-2010): 64-67. <http://www.neonmuseum.org/news/news-article-modernism-mag.pdf>.

success. When a property was interested in acquiring a sign, the company would lease their neon creations to clients for a period of five years, which included maintenance and upkeep.¹³ At the end of the lease, clients could opt to have the sign refurbished, or they could commission another. Because Young Electric officially owned all of their neon, when a client went out of business or chose not to renew, YESCO reclaimed the sign and often kept it in their storage area awaiting refurbishment or a harvest for parts.¹⁴ Ultimately, these five to ten-year cycles for the sign leases given to businesses all over the valley caused YESCO's relatively frequent reclamation of constantly upgraded, enlarged, and outdone signs. This unique business partnership resulted in a sizeable collection of fairly well-preserved historic artifacts from Las Vegas' seventy-plus years of history as a tourist destination.¹⁵

The museum's goal in presenting each of its 150 neon signs is to convey to the public the "unique story about who created [the sign], what inspired it, where and when it was made, and how it fits into the development of Las Vegas and its rich history."¹⁶ The general themes that the museum's exhibit endeavors to address include the individual histories of each sign, as well as each property represented, which together convey the history of a growing city. The staff also works to provide an understanding of the neon medium as an art form and an incredibly profitable innovation for commercial

¹³ This practice originally began in the 1930s when businesses desired attractive advertising to market their wares, but could not necessarily afford to purchase one of these signs outright. A business itself, YESCO could not afford to sustain itself without making sales and subsequently changed its practices to accommodate its clients in a struggling economy.

¹⁴ Reuse of standard lettering, bulbs, and other scraps was an economic way for YESCO and other sign companies to produce newer and larger creations for businesses. Whenever possible, the company would make minor changes to a sign and re-release the piece to another business. Such was the case with the Silver Bells Wedding Chapel sign which received a paint touch-up and a replacement of the plastic nameplate to advertise the Mon Bel Ami Wedding Chapel.

¹⁵ Swenson, "The Neon Museum: A Midcentury Vernacular Gets its Due," 64-67.

¹⁶ Swenson, "The Neon Museum: A Midcentury Vernacular Gets its Due," 64-67.

businesses. Last, the tour utilizes neon signs to aid in the interpretation of a transformation in the marketing of tourism and leisure, especially with regard to the increase in automobile sales that influenced the growth of an industry producing large neon signs used to attract potential visitors traveling along the interstate.¹⁷

To convey these key themes and ideas, the Neon Museum divides its collection into two parts. The “Gallery” is organized as a self-guided walking tour; museum visitors can print brief descriptions of several restored neon signs from the website, and tour the exhibit route that extends from 3rd Street to Fremont Street in Downtown Las Vegas.¹⁸ The signs presented in the “Gallery” allow the visitor to view these particular artifacts in a more authentic context, fully lit and appropriately placed within the composition of the landscape, closer to how they were originally meant to be seen. These signs, however, are still divorced from the properties they once served and subsequently embody the characteristics of artifacts at a traditional museum. They exist as an assemblage of objects handpicked for display that are difficult to understand without appropriate recontextualization. The bulk of the collection is housed in the museum’s “Boneyard,” an outdoor space described on the website as a “rambling park approximately two acres in size.”¹⁹ Essentially a dirt lot on the corner of Las Vegas Boulevard and Bonanza, this park is the setting for a number of decommissioned outdoor advertisements, some neon and others mixed media, all stacked together as a sort of

¹⁷ This last theme is a key aspect of the existing tour structure that has the potential to strengthen visitors’ understanding of the collection as a whole, exploiting their existing knowledge base and creating a more meaningful experience. In conjunction with developments in transportation, the pieces in the exhibit can thus also serve to illustrate the changes and trends in design and technology that range from the 1930s to the present day.

¹⁸ “Fremont Street Gallery,” The Neon Museum, accessed November 23, 2011, <http://www.neonmuseum.org/the-collection/fremont-street-gallery>.

¹⁹ “The Collection: Neon Boneyard,” The Neon Museum, accessed November 5, 2011, <http://www.neonmuseum.org/the-collection/neon-boneyard>.

“scattered jigsaw puzzle”²⁰ or palimpsest recounting the city’s eclectic history. This section of the museum exhibits only non-working pieces, and is currently in transition with a fully functioning permanent facility under construction.

Today the Boneyard is not yet accessible to the general public, but the museum offers scheduled tours of the site. These guided tours are currently the museum’s primary means of conveying information to the public, as the outdoor setting of such large objects essentially renders written panels or labels obsolete. In addition, the signs in the Boneyard are even more difficult to understand in terms of their original context than their Gallery counterparts, as they no longer light up, but must be viewed up-close – a perspective that does not match the designers’ intended effect. Finally, tours are the museum’s preferred method of disseminating information, at least while the exhibit is in transition, because the featured artifacts are an assortment of massive metal structures and glass bulbs, many of which are broken or midway through the restoration process. Guided walk-throughs offered by the museum’s volunteers thus also aid in assuring the safety of the visitors. The Neon Museum is currently rehabilitating the historic La Concha Motel lobby for use as a permanent visitors’ center, so the collection has not yet permanently settled into the exhibit space. It will, however, remain outdoors in the lot behind this new visitor building.

The physical layout of the signs and the “flow” of the exhibit are also influenced by its transitional nature. The museum is limited in space, occupying only the Boneyard and a storage lot across the street from the main area, but the staff endeavors to showcase as much of the collection as possible. The signs are currently organized with a principal

²⁰ Kate Silver, “Signs of the Times: Las Vegas’ Neon Museum offers a shine to the city’s gone-but-not-forgotten icons,” *Nevada Magazine* (May/June 2009), http://www.nevadamagazine.com/issues/read/signs_of_the_times/ [accessed November 1, 2011].

regard for facilitation of the visitor's movement throughout the space, rather than ease of information comprehension. Traffic flows effortlessly through the lot, and the museum uses its space efficiently, as most of the signs are clearly visible in their display; however, with a layout dictated by the awkward fit of signs against each other, the necessity of a guide is made even more apparent. Due to difficulties in arranging the signs, the guides are responsible for providing visitors with facts regarding individual artifacts in the exhibit, at their discretion, in a manner that often does not connect the pieces to one another or tell a complete story. Ultimately, with the current tour structure and exhibit design, the museum's overarching themes and key ideas are lost.

The current tour outline and training program offered to volunteer docents at the Neon Museum incorporates at least four broad themes in an hour-long presentation. These themes include: a timeline of Las Vegas growth and development, a discussion about the company responsible for producing the signage and the technological processes involved, information regarding the individual properties represented in the collection, as well as the change in design over time with relation to travel patterns. Again, with no overarching premise, the tour often has a natural tendency to lapse into a recitation of short stories about each sign, or its respective property, and both the guide as well as the visitors can lose sight of a "bigger picture" to which a diverse audience can relate. While the information presented is enjoyable and engaging, most literature on museum education suggests that tours are more effective when developed around a single or common theme, as themes are able to "cut across time periods and remove ideas from their usual contexts."²¹ Focusing on a thematic presentation and object-associated conversation as opposed to object-directed discussion of pieces independent of one

²¹ Grinder and McCoy, *The Good Guide*, 49.

another has the potential to make Las Vegas' neon signage more culturally relevant to the visitors' individual lives.²²

Docents are recruited through the museum's website and a third party system called Volunteer Match.²³ Many, however, became interested after taking a tour at the museum or finding out about opportunities through friends already involved with the institution.²⁴ The museum has previously featured a former showgirl docent who told stories about dancing in *Lido de Paris*, as well as a former district attorney who told stories about the mob; however, the vast majority of docents range in age and background, the group consisting of historians, artists, and Las Vegas enthusiasts.²⁵ Training for the volunteer brigade of docents involves an informal meeting with the staff, the acquisition of a small pamphlet of reading material and a tour outline, followed by three or four visits to the museum where the new docent shadows a more experienced guide on his or her tour. After three or four observations, the new guide leads his or her own tour while the more experienced docent follows. Upon completion of this supervised tour, the docent is declared a graduate of the training program and added to the rotation. The materials offered provide a brief overview of Las Vegas history and some of the signs in the collection, but the pamphlet is poorly edited and includes some factual errors. In addition, no information is provided regarding the informal learning environment of the museum, various types of visitor interests and learning styles, or suggested places to seek this information. Finally, the museum sometimes faces a

²² Grinder and McCoy, *The Good Guide*, 50.

²³ "The Neon Museum," Volunteer Match, accessed March 9, 2012, <http://www.volunteermatch.org/search/org38793.jsp>.

²⁴ The current Volunteer Coordinator, Justin Favela, began his career with the Neon Museum after taking a tour of the exhibit space. Similarly, the researcher filled out a volunteer application after visiting the museum and not through the more formal recruitment channel.

²⁵ Renee LiButti, "Exploring the Neon Boneyard," Vegas.com, accessed March 15, 2012, <http://blog.vegas.com/las-vegas-attractions/exploring-the-neon-boneyard-10018/>.

shortage of guides and struggles to attract new, enthusiastic volunteers as no formal recruitment and training program is in place. This thesis presents relevant museum education theory that could be used in creating a structured training and development program. Further suggestions for improving the volunteer program are highlighted in the final chapter of this project proposal.

Beyond focusing on the issue of showmanship versus scholarship, it thus seems beneficial to develop a program for the museum that focuses on the conveyance of a single, strong theme throughout the tour that most easily connects to visitors' existing body of knowledge and provides a framework to which they might relate new information. In doing so, this museum has more potential for success in the realm of retention and learning among a diverse public, and in more effectively meeting its established mission. Because the evolution of transportation is both a national and international phenomenon that influenced broader changes in the landscape all over the world – including, but not limited to, sign design – this subtheme of the current tour provides an excellent framework for a more meaningful reorganization, especially for the museum's varied audiences. By reinforcing existing visitor understanding of changes in modes of transport, a new tour outline has the potential to enlighten guests more than a series of specific, but perhaps unrelated facts.²⁶ It is also important to note, however, that although learning is one of the most important elements in museum experiences, many museum education scholars argue that it can be overemphasized. Streamlining the tour into a structure that focuses on one general theme might thus also protect educators from falling into a “cognitive trap” that tends to neglect many other valid experiences the

²⁶ Grinder and McCoy, *The Good Guide*, 60.

public takes away from their visits, including discovery, reminiscence, exposure to the extraordinary, pleasure, and awe.²⁷

With a clear picture of the Neon Museum in hand, the reader has a sense of some of the issues this institution faces. Those problems will be further explored in the following pages, accompanied by possible solutions; however, the key focus will be the reorganization of the museum's tour presentation around a solid, general theme of transportation and changes in sign design. By working on producing a more comprehensive, relatable tour outline, it is the researcher's hope that other issues might be remedied or positively affected by this change. For instance, a more relatable and meaningful experience might enhance visitor satisfaction and, in turn, attract both publicity and audience growth. A larger audience would generate increased revenue through admissions sales, creating a larger budget with which to address environmental and atmospheric improvements, such as a retractable awning for shade and visitor comfort, a more structured training program, additional smart devices available for loan, or other improvements requiring a larger budget. It is conceivable that the recasting of current Neon Museum educational programming will ultimately have far reaching effects and aid in the overall improvement of the institution's ability to fulfill its mission.

²⁷ Grinder and McCoy, *The Good Guide*, xiv.

PART I: THEORY
- Chapter One -
Museum Education: Theory and Practice

“A good museum attracts, entertains, arouses curiosity,
leads to questionings – and thus promotes learning.”

- *John Cotton Dana*¹

For years, scholars have debated the appropriate ways of creating meaningful visitor experiences in museums. Despite sometimes competing ideologies in the realm of museum education, theory plays an important role in determining guiding principles to improve museum practices. As assistant director for public programs at the Yale Museum of Natural History, Kenneth Yellis is in a position to comment on the importance of museum education theory. In his essay, “Paradigms Shifted: Comprehending the Meaning from Without,” Yellis stresses the value of theory as opposed to general research, stating that “Research without theory would be mere data, lacking the structure that would make it information susceptible of translation into action, or even intelligibility. Theory without research, on the other hand, is mere metaphor.”² Theory ultimately grounds the work of the educator and informs the professional programming decisions in the museum environment. It gives meaning to the efforts of museum staff in developing and implementing innovative ways of reaching the audience, as well as interpreting material for the visitor in a significant and comprehensible manner. To this end, an analysis of current museum education theory will necessarily guide this project’s later investigation into visitor satisfaction and means for improvement at the Neon Museum.

¹ John Cotton Dana, cited in Alexander, E., *Museum Masters* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1983).

² Yellis, “Paradigms Shifted: Comprehending the Meaning from Without,” 182.

Museum education theory is a more current trend in the scholarship pertaining to museology, emerging only in the last century as a significant topic of discussion. In the early years of American history, museums dedicated themselves to amassing collections in the European style. The first museums began as the private collections of wealthy individuals or families of art and rare or curious natural objects and artifacts. These institutions tended to focus on the objects themselves rather than any attending public, and access was typically limited to friends and acquaintances, or those considered “respectable.”³ Once collections were established and these institutions became more accessible, however, museums then began to focus on education rather than simply acquiring and conserving artifacts and raising funds. As a result, literature on the topic of museum education proliferated. While the “education” initially offered at these institutions focused on “improving” and “uplifting” visitors by providing a venue for the humanization, education, and refinement of the general populace, it eventually evolved into the communication of information and cultural significance of artifacts.⁴ Scholarship continued to flourish and the American Association of Museums (AAM), founded in 1906 as a forum for scholarly debate over museum philosophy and practice, began publishing a monthly magazine for the dissemination of new theories. As the focus turned from collecting, preserving, and conserving to the practice of educating visitors, the extent to which museums should pursue an active educational intervention emerged as the field’s primary topic of discussion.⁵

³ Stephen Weil, “Collecting Then, Collecting Today: What’s the Difference?” in *Making Museums Matter* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 141-155.

⁴ Grinder and McCoy, *The Good Guide*, 11-13.

⁵ Nancy Berry and Susan Mayer, ed. *Museum Education History, Theory, and Practice* (Reston: The National Art Education Association, 1989), 40-41.

Although the topic of conversation finally shifted to education, museum professionals could not agree on the level of involvement an institution should have in visitors' learning experiences. Three of the earliest proponents of museum education, Benjamin Ives Gilman, John Cotton Dana, and John Dewey, all advocated their own individual views on appropriate instruction methods and levels of interpretation. Benjamin Gilman, secretary of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts from 1893 to 1925, sought to promote a more traditional view of museum education, viewing the museum as "primarily a seat of culture and only secondarily a seat of learning."⁶ In his 1918 publication, *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method*, he argues that a museum is a collection of objects responsible for providing opportunities for aesthetic experience through visitors' personal inspection.⁷ Gilman reasoned that museum artifacts were cultural objects not usable as they once were, rendering any extended explanation or contextualization as futile. His opinions were particularly prevalent in early educational programming, especially at those institutions specializing in art, as many museum professionals believed in the merit of the collection, its distinctiveness, and its authenticity above all else.⁸

Conversely, John Cotton Dana, director of The Newark Museum from 1909 through 1929, felt that the primary importance of a work of art was as a "carrier of ideas and information; the work was to be valued as much as a social document as an aesthetic object."⁹ Dana believed that the visitor could not be expected to ascertain an object's

⁶ Benjamin I. Gilman, *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1918), xi.

⁷ Benjamin I. Gilman, *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method*, xii.

⁸ Berry and Mayer, ed. *Museum Education History, Theory, and Practice*, 32-33.

⁹ A. I. Bay, "Practicality in the light of perfection: museum education then and now," *Roundtable Reports: The Journal of Museum Education* (1984), 4.

many ideas without proper instruction in examining and analyzing objects. In his own publication, *The Gloom of the Museum*, Dana argued against Gilman's noninterventionist philosophy, claiming museums that did nothing to interpret exhibits "did not make much impression on the taste, manners, or activities of those who visited them" and that a museum, in order to "make itself alive," must unreservedly teach and advertise.¹⁰

Although, ironically, Gilman was the first to implement a docent program, it was Dana who advocated an approach beyond socializing, urging museums to communicate information and perspective, thus giving the objects meaning.

Furthering the ideas of Dana, John Dewey published *Art as Experience* in 1934. Dewey also opposed the notion that objects should be separated from everyday life and instead sought restored continuity between works of art and commonplace events.¹¹ He also recognized the importance of "learning by doing," or complete involvement in the educational process, asserting that active participation as opposed to passive rote memorization of disseminated facts ensured successful internalization.¹² Learning in an informal museum environment, according to Dewey, was thus more than simply visiting an exhibit, but a personal immersion in the workings of an object and its cultural significance. Together these three educators built the foundations for current models of museum education, structuring their ideologies from the fundamental psychological theories of contemporary learning theorists.

Early museum educators relied on the findings of psychologists Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky to inform their own work, and these learning theories ultimately pushed museum education into the realm of more active interpretation. Swiss developmental

¹⁰ John Cotton Dana, *The Gloom of the Museum* (Woodstock: The Elm Tree Press, 1917), 24.

¹¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1934), 3.

¹² Berry and Mayer, ed. *Museum Education History, Theory, and Practice*, 156-159.

psychologist Jean Piaget's stages of development¹³ served to divide the public into more exclusive audiences, encouraging educators to focus on instructing particular age groups in a manner that focuses on their unique abilities.¹⁴ Specifically, Piaget found that children, adolescents, and adults all learn and understand concepts differently, dictating the need for educators to tailor their programming to several different individualized publics. Similarly, Russian thinker Lev Vygotsky's focus on notions of internalization of knowledge and his zones of proximal development¹⁵ furthered Piaget's initial ideas regarding the particular needs of various groups.¹⁶ Vygotsky's zones describe the potential of human cognitive development, which he believed could be realized through an auxiliary theory of cultural mediation or intervention in the learning process. According to Vygotsky, interpersonal communication plays a vital role in the transfer of knowledge, as guided participation supports internalization. Significantly, Vygotsky's findings specifically called for active intervention and interpretation in education. Piaget's and Vygotsky's ideas thus clearly influenced the perspectives of Dana, Gilman, and Dewey, and they have together formed the cornerstone of today's predominant philosophy guiding practice in the field of museum education: constructivism. Building on these earlier ideas, constructivist theory is predicated on the notion that visitors' prior knowledge is integral in the internalization process and that all new information must

¹³ Piaget's stages of cognitive development include: the sensorimotor, from birth to age 2, when a child experiences the world through movement and senses; the preoperational, from age 2 through 7, when a child acquires motor skills; the concrete operational, from age 7 through 11, when a child begins to think logically; and the formal operational stage, from age 11 through 16 and onward, when a child develops abstract reasoning. For more information on Piaget's theories, see his publications *Origins of Intelligence in the Child* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936) and *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (London: Heinemann, 1945).

¹⁴ Berry and Mayer, ed. *Museum Education History, Theory, and Practice*, 156.

¹⁵ Vygotsky's zone of proximal development refers to the range of tasks a child can complete independently and those they can complete with the appropriate assistance. The zone is the distance between actual developmental level and level of potential development that can be bridged with the aid of collaboration with capable peers.

¹⁶ George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 176.

somehow connect to an existing body of knowledge in order for an individual to comprehend it.

As the history of museum education reveals, the concept that museums serve an educational function has established historical roots, yet the methods of educating museum visitors have changed over time. Museum professionals have gradually sought to develop more successful educational programming for their institutions, an effort partially influenced by the need for more federal funding, and scholars have increasingly enlisted various methods to attract more visitors and convey their messages more effectively.¹⁷ It has long been assumed that the way museums address public education is through exhibits, a format through which the curator or educator spells out a lesson in such a way that the visitor will have understood a portion of, if not the entire intended message. This method of instruction involves the clear explanation of new technical concepts to the visitor through panels, brochures, audio guides, tours, or any other method that might successfully disseminate new information. Essentially, the curators assume the role of elucidating and imparting complex, specialized material to the uninformed public; however, by the mid to late 1990s, museum professionals were beginning to understand that learning and retention occur under very different circumstances than they initially believed. Beyond reading and memorizing the curator's

¹⁷ Museums seeking federal funding must demonstrate that they perform educational services for the community. The government's tendency in evaluating museums' performance in this category has been to measure efficacy in terms of increasing the institution's number of visitors. Attracting immense crowds has most often involved the creation of "blockbuster" exhibits and the expansion of museum services to the general public. Historically, little research has been conducted in the realm of public benefit of these initiatives. See Kipi Rawlins, "Educational Metamorphosis of the American Museum," *Studies in Art Education Vol.20 No.1* (1978), 4-17, or "Results of the 2004 Smithsonian-wide Survey of Museum Visitors," Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy and Analysis (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, October 2004), 5.

presentation, visitors were found to learn, internalize, and retain the most information when encouraged to participate and actively engage with the new material.

In a 1996 publication, Smithsonian Director of the Office of Institutional Studies, Zahava Doering, determined that, “rather than communicating new information ... the primary impact of visiting a museum exhibition is to confirm, reinforce, and extend the visitor’s existing beliefs.”¹⁸ According to Doering, visitors ultimately find exhibits to be most rewarding when they resonate with their experiences and provide information in ways that confirm or enrich their own view of the world the most rewarding.¹⁹ Russel J. Ohta of Arizona State University West similarly found that exhibitions are “a looking glass for visitors [when those attending] experienced ... who they were.”²⁰ These ideas have completely changed the way educators approach their assignments in a museum setting. Professionals presently believe that while visitors may walk away having had “rich moments filled with deep personal meaning,” none of those meanings would resemble the ones felt by others.²¹ These sentiments echo Piaget’s notions regarding human stages of development, Vygotsky’s zones of proximal development, and the importance of social interaction set forth by both Dewey and Dana – not to mention the notion of the significance of the collection and its ability to resonate with the public – a central aspect of Gilman’s methodology.

Early museum educators and developmental psychologists thus recognized the active nature of learning and its potential to engage the visitor, leaving a lasting pedagogical legacy. It is also important to note that contemporary museums’ current

¹⁸ Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 206.

¹⁹ Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 206.

²⁰ Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 206.

²¹ Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 206.

efforts to incorporate constructivist philosophies in their educational programming not only parallel, but also strongly connect to, more recent developments in the industry of tourism and destination branding. Museums are only one element of a city's tourist product, and in a post-industrial world where destinations seek to differentiate themselves and sell their distinctive culture as a "comparative advantage," tourist attractions have changed their emphasis from the physical resource to the "story" or meaning behind a service or amenity.²² For example, it is no longer enough for a hotel to sell accommodations or a restaurant to market a meal, as these products can be found everywhere in a global economy, but it is now necessary for these businesses to promote unique product aspects to consumers who must be made to understand that their genuine cultural offerings could never be found anywhere else in the world. As larger local economies seek to revitalize themselves based on their own cultural capital, museums have become significant in these strategies due to their ability to attract consumers to a fixed point of consumption where they can find their desired authentic experiences.

Constructivist philosophies mirror these new tourism campaigns, as both museums and their locales seek to initiate a more inventive leisure experience based on active consumption in environments where visitors are free to explore in their own way,

²² Much has been written on tourism and destination branding. For an overview on place branding, see Keith Dinnie, *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier, 2008) or his other work, *City Branding: Theory and Cases* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). For more on the idea of national reputations, see Simon Anholt's *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Bill Baker's *Destination Branding for Small Cities: The Essentials for Successful Place Branding* (Portland: Creative Leap Books, 2007) applies similar ideas to smaller locales and notes the need for branding beyond images of larger cultural and national identities. Philip Kotler's *Marketing Places: Attracting Investment, Industry and Tourism to Cities, States, and Nations* (New York: The Free Press, 1993) discusses branding with regard to drawing the attention of businesses as well as tourists, and Robert Govers, *Place Branding: Glocal, Virtual and Physical Identities, Constructed, Imagined and Experienced* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) covers place branding in a global economy. Finally, the notion of competitive advantage in branding is set forth by Greg Richards, "The Experience Industry: The Creation of Attractions," in Richards, Greg, ed. *Cultural Attractions and European Tourism* (New York: CABI Pub, 2001), and advanced in Simon Anholt's *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

make meaning, and develop their creative abilities through active participation.²³

Tourists are encouraged to make meaning out of a cumulative build up of coherent personal experiences characteristic of a particular destination, resulting in a holiday that will change them as opposed to simply filling them with random memories.²⁴ These ideas echo the sentiments of constructivist museum professionals who desire to promote learning, as well as visitors' comprehensive internalization of presented materials.

Similar goals thus place museums, city boosters, and marketing executives on the same team. As leisure and tourism professor Awoniyi Stephen has come to find in his tourism research, much contemporary museum visiting "takes place during time which may be described as leisure time, draws upon discretionary income and often occurs with an attendant expectation of a pleasurable experience – the same conditions which, among others, describe the contexts of many other forms of recreation and amusement."²⁵

Rather than competing directly against each other for tourists' time and money, museums are working collaboratively with promoters of the area's other leisure time activities in an effort to attract visitors to the city and all of its unique offerings.

The city of Las Vegas is no stranger to these techniques. The "entertainment capital of the world" has prided itself on providing visitors with one-of-a-kind experiences that reflect its distinctiveness of place; this is part of the reason why gambling destinations such as Atlantic City, New Jersey, and Biloxi, Mississippi, have not negatively impacted the Las Vegas economy by stealing away East-coast clientele. The most recent adaptation of this type of promotional strategy is currently taking shape

²³ Greg Richards, "The Experience Industry," 65.

²⁴ Greg Richards, "The Experience Industry," 65.

²⁵ Awoniyi Stephen, "The Contemporary Museum and Leisure: Recreation as a Museum Function," *Museum Management and Curatorship* Vol.19 No.3 (2001), 300.

in the city's Downtown revitalization project. The year 2012 has been dubbed "The Year of Downtown Las Vegas," featuring landmark project openings of the Smith Center for the Performing Arts, a new City Hall, The Mob Museum, the new Lied Discovery Children's Museum, and the official debut of the Neon Museum.²⁶ These project completions are in addition to the ongoing revitalization of the area, including the Symphony Park development, the construction of high-rise residential complexes, and the relocation of the Zappos Company from suburban Las Vegas to this more central location. Adopting a new tagline, "Every city has a soul," downtown boosters now hope to convey the distinctive essence of the "heart" of Las Vegas, its history, and the city's future.²⁷

Las Vegas' urban regeneration should not be considered as something separate from the Neon Museum's existing practices and operations. A rebranding and revitalization of the museum's surrounding community presents an opportunity for the institution's reinvention, especially in relation to the downtown area's changing image. Reintegration into the community will enable the museum to remain relevant and ensure that its product meets visitor expectations as well as citywide aspirations for developing real cultural capital. By working together with the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, other Downtown businesses, and the area's related cultural attractions, the Neon Museum can participate in a larger campaign for creative tourism and ultimately

²⁶ "Timeline: 2012 – The Year of Downtown Las Vegas," FaisFoleyWarren Public Relations and Government Affairs, accessed January 13, 2012, <http://www.ffwpr.com/2012/01/04/timeline-2012-the-year-of-downtown-las-vegas/>.

²⁷ Caitlin McGarry, "Downtown Las Vegas gets new motto," *Las Vegas Review Journal*, October 12, 2011, accessed March 15, 2012, <http://www.lvrj.com/business/downtown-las-vegas-gets-new-motto-131576403.html>.

find itself hosting visitors who have specifically sought out the experience of walking the Boneyard upon their arrival into town.²⁸

Significantly, this new focus on creative leisure and tourism, while both cultural and developmental, still holds entertainment and enjoyment at the forefront. Because museums compete with other amusements and attractions for discretionary time, these institutions find success when they emphasize informal and non-didactic benefits of attending exhibits; this is especially true for those events that the community perceives as principally social.²⁹ Several tourism scholars see museums of the future as places that attract those who want to “learn and enjoy recreational activities ... [they] will be hybrid places, combining recreation and learning, allowing visitors diversions from the intense stimuli of strolling through galleries and viewing multitudinous objects.”³⁰ Thus, entertainment is not the enemy, but a crucial element in the future museum’s strategy sanctioned by the tourism industry for attracting visitors and remaining relevant. In these combined creative leisure and tourism experiences, tourism scholarship suggests that what the public most desires is the intersection of education and entertainment in the creation of meaningful experiences.³¹

²⁸ Julia Harrison, “Museums and Touristic Expectations,” *Annals of Tourism Research Vol.24 No.1* (1997), 23-40. In this article Harrison notes that museums no longer operate as destinations in themselves, but have more recently become part of a number of attractions or places that tourists seek out once they get to a destination. As a result, collaboration now gives museums the opportunity to support and promote one another while offering a distinctive aspect of a community’s larger cultural experience.

²⁹ Julia Harrison, “Museums and Touristic Expectations,” 37. Social events could include new member breakfasts, picnics, Christmas parties, themed flea markets, singles nights, photo contests, film screenings, or other events associated with the museum and its content that do not consist of a more traditional type of visit.

³⁰ Neil Kotler, “New Ways of Experiencing Culture: The Role of Museums and Marketing Implications,” *Museum Management and Curatorship Vol.19 No.4* (2001), 423.

³¹ Awoniyi Stephen, “The Contemporary Museum and Leisure,” 304.

Applying Constructivist Theory to the Neon Museum

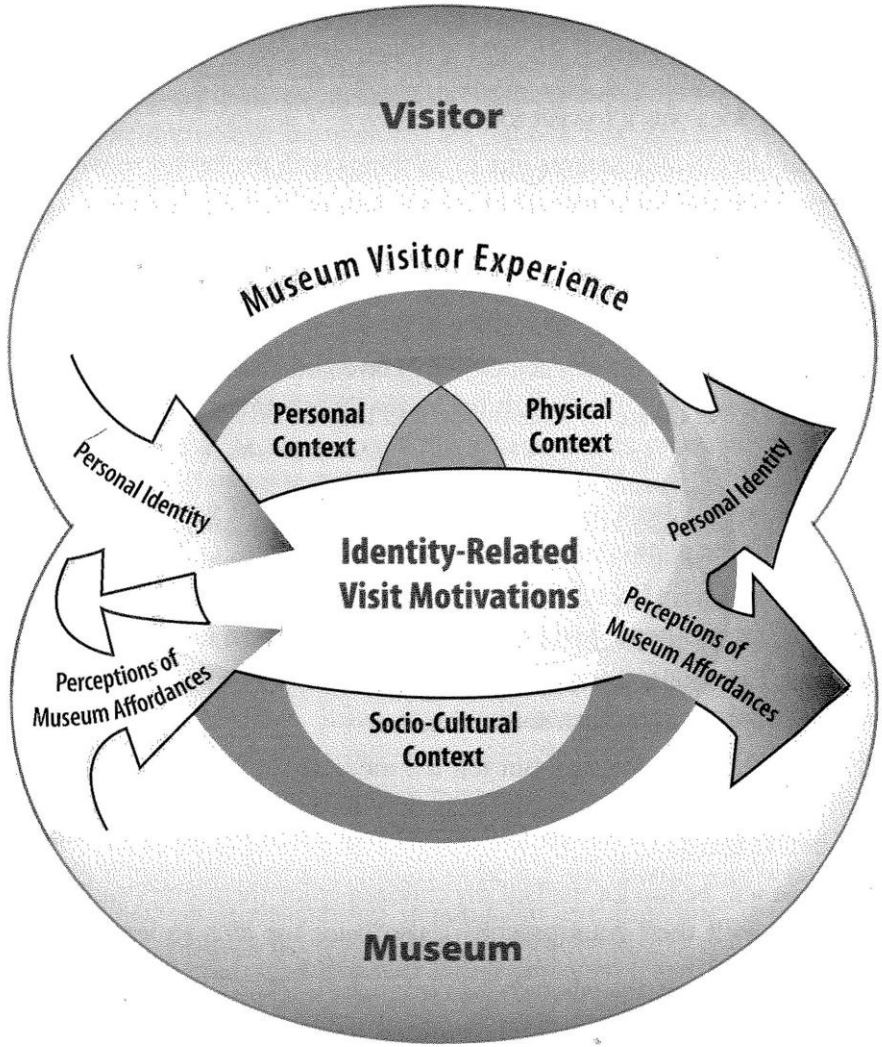
One helpful way of deconstructing the unique aspects of the Neon Museum in relation to the visitors' needs, desires, and perspectives is to frame it within one of the most respected museum models to date: Falk and Dierking's *Museum Visitor Experience Model*. Leading scholars in the field of museum education, Falk and Dierking initially developed this model in the early 1990s as the *Interactive Experience Model* and refined their theory over the course of a decade. Considered an important milestone in museum research, Falk and Dierking's model is based on the ideas of Dana, Gilman, and Dewey, and establishes the need for researchers to take into account not only what happens during a museum visit, but also where it happens and with whom.³² Notably, the *Interactive Experience Model* redirects educators' attention from a sole focus on content. It reintroduces other variables of a museum visit that also play a role in how a varied audience, attending museums in differing circumstances, contextualizes their learning at an exhibit.

Falk and Dierking's approach focuses on the intersection of three visitor contexts that together shape the individual visitor experience: personal, social, and physical. The personal context encompasses "the visitor's own background, his or her previous experiences, interests, social skills, and current understandings about the information on display,"³³ all factors that influence what the visitor ultimately takes away from the museum. The social context refers to the visitor's interactions with others at the museum, including the within- and between-group interactions that occur while in the museum, as

³² Leonie J. Rennie and David J. Johnson, "Research on Learning From Museums," in John H. Falk, Lynn D. Dierking, and Susan Foutz, ed. *In Principle, In Practice: Museums as Learning Institutions* (Plymouth: AltaMira Press, 2007), 60.

³³ Rennie and Johnson, "Research on Learning From Museums," 60.

well as the social and cultural features associated with the artifacts and exhibits. Finally, the physical context relates primarily to the physical aspects of the museum environment, including the architectural features, the ambiance, the atmosphere, and the layout.³⁴ Understanding the intersection of these three contexts, and the visitor's interaction with each, allows the apt museum educator and program designer to target audiences in a compelling and effective manner.



The Museum Visitor Experience and the Role of Identity-Related Visit Motivations.

³⁴ Rennie and Johnson, "Research on Learning From Museums," 60.

In 2009, Falk refined the model, arguing that the key to really understanding the personal context, and thus the overall museum visitor experience, is the concept of identity. According to Falk, visitors justify and organize their visit around a series of specific reasons, or identity-related motivations, and ultimately use these reasons to order and make sense of their experience.³⁵ Thus, Falk renamed the original model the *Museum Visitor Experience Model*, and began exploring individual visitor goals. Based on this interpretation, museums are now thought of in terms of the numerous benefits they afford the public, and the museum visit experience is viewed as a “synthesis of the individual’s identity-related needs and interests ... [and] how the museum can satisfy those needs and interests.”³⁶

Determining that education is part of each visitor’s agenda, as learning is an implicit aspect of the museum experience and almost universally understood to be part of attending an exhibit, Falk sees these institutions as settings that allow visitors to play the role of one or more of the following: explorer, facilitator, the experience seeker, professional or hobbyist, and recharger.³⁷ Falk identifies the explorer as a visitor primarily interested in discovering new and interesting places, and the facilitator is one who arrives at the museum with a strong desire to support what is best for his/her loved one or companion. Experience seekers are defined as those looking to see and do

³⁵ John H. Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2009), 35.

³⁶ Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, 36.

³⁷ Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, 64. Falk considers these roles as little ‘i’ identities, arguing that while situations sometimes arise where nationality, gender, religion, and race or ethnicity could directly influence someone’s decision to visit a museum, most people do not view their leisure experiences through the lens of these types of big ‘I’ identities. Other scholars echo this sentiment; see Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, “Counting Visitors or Visitors Who Count,” in R. Lumley, ed., *The Museum Time Machine: Putting Cultures on Display* (London: Comedia/Routledge, 1988), 12 and Gordon Fyfe and Max Ross, “Decoding the Visitor’s Gaze: Rethinking Museum Visiting,” *The Sociological Review Monograph Vol.43 No.2* (1996), 127-150.

whatever is considered important to see and do, while professionals or hobbyists are single-minded in their motivations and consider the visit a job to complete rather than an excursion. Finally, the recharger is described as an individual looking for a peaceful, aesthetically pleasing, and relaxing experience from his/her visit. Falk's research establishes that these entering conditions collectively predispose the visitor to interact with the setting in relatively predictable ways.

Under this new standard, a visitor perceives his or her museum experience to be satisfying if perceived identity-related needs and museum affordances prove to be well-matched.³⁸ Falk finds that visitors are typically content with their experiences in part because the public has a fair understanding of museums and relatively accurate expectations, but also because humans have a propensity to want expectations to be met, even if it means modifying observations of reality to match expectations.³⁹ Regardless, visitors begin constructing meaning from their experiences during and immediately following the visit, the specifics of which are largely shaped by their identity-related motivation and the realities of the museum. Factors such as choice and control, the emotional nature of the experience, and the physical or social contexts of the museum also influence the meaning visitors take away from their visit, as well as the memories they carry with them.⁴⁰ According to Falk, the resulting meanings fall into two general categories: identity building or an enhanced understanding of museums and what they afford.⁴¹

³⁸ Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, 159.

³⁹ Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, 159.

⁴⁰ Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, 159-160.

⁴¹ Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, 160.

To the existing model's framework, Falk and Dierking also added the dimension of time, asserting that the concept of learning is a continuous integration and interaction of these three contexts over time.⁴² Consequently, it is difficult to assess visitor learning in a museum during the course of one experience because different visit situations and milieus may connect to the information presented in an exhibit in a variety of ways over the course of a visitor's lifetime. In addition, the process and product of visitor interaction is always changing because these three contexts are never stable. A number of studies and surveys pertaining to research on free-choice learning and retention from a museum visit subsequently dictate that research design and methods of data collection must extend beyond the immediate visit to include follow-up surveys over the course of many years, if possible.⁴³ Because the Neon Museum is relatively new and has not had the opportunity to collect any substantial audience information such as a visitor profile or a learning survey, it is helpful to analyze the institution in terms of this model in order to customize an effective and engaging educational program. By understanding the visitor's personal, social, and physical contexts, educators have the opportunity to consider "the complexity and richness of the learning process without significantly compromising either precision or generalizability,"⁴⁴ and thus take a more thoughtful approach to individualized programming design.

The methodology for dissecting each context in this section, as well as the application of these concepts specifically to the Neon Museum's environment, is based on a similar endeavor by Christina Goulding of the Marketing and Economics Department at Wolverhampton Business School to develop a quality "product" or

⁴² Falk and Dierking, *Learning From Museums*, 11.

⁴³ Falk and Dierking, *Learning From Museums*, 10-13.

⁴⁴ Falk and Dierking, *Learning From Museums*, 147.

delivery of service in the museum as a method for attracting visitors and increasing funding.⁴⁵ In an article entitled “The Museum Environment and the Visitor Perspective,” Goulding outlines three approaches that museum professionals have incorporated into their studies of visitor behavior, all similar to those set forth by Falk and Dierking: the social, the cognitive, and the environmental perspective. Moving away from uses and visitor satisfaction studies, Goulding sees merit in exploring these “forces that shape responses.”⁴⁶ While on-site observations inform much of her source-base, she also incorporates recorded visitor comments, contemplations, and suggestions, as well as environmental factors such as sense of orientation or lighting and crowding levels. The methods adopted for this project are similar to Goulding’s in that they include observations as well as visitor commentary extracted from third-party collectors, analyzed for recurring actions among similar individuals or groups. These observations and insights will ultimately serve as the basis for a more comprehensive interpretation of visitor behavior, as well as provide the foundations for researcher recommendations to improve the Neon Museum’s existing programming in an effort to address diverse visitor needs.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Christina Goulding, “The Museum Environment and the Visitor Perspective,” *European Journal of Marketing* Vol.34 No.3/4 (2000), 261.

⁴⁶ Goulding, “The Museum Environment and the Visitor Perspective,” 265.

⁴⁷ Goulding, “The Museum Environment and the Visitor Perspective,” 265.

- Chapter Two - The Neon Museum: A Resource Analysis

The Neon Museum has several distinctive characteristics that impact the creation and implementation of effective educational programming. As an outdoor museum, the Boneyard is akin to a sculpture garden in that it presents previously decommissioned neon signage to the public, sans traditional museum labeling, in an effort to convey the city's unique history as well as to inspire



educational and cultural enrichment. The exhibit space consists of roughly 120 signs arranged half chronologically, half thematically, interpreted through the efforts of a volunteer tour guide. Currently, the museum operates on an appointment only basis and the guided tour lasts approximately one hour. A typical visitor experience involves the



online reservation of spot on the tour in advance, complete with payment of admission directly on the website due to the lack of facilities on site, for one of two available time slots. Upon arrival, visitors are escorted through the exhibit space while the guide shares

information with the crowd of roughly 25 visitors. The staff encourages the guests to ask

questions and take photographs throughout the duration of the visit, as they are not permitted to revisit signs or linger on site upon the conclusion of the tour. All information is delivered orally and the museum does not currently offer any brochures or supplemental written materials. Once construction is completed on the new La Concha Visitors' Center, the museum will have regularly scheduled hours of operation and the structure of the visitor experience will change. In light of this change, a new program outline is necessary for the successful interpretation of the collection.

The following outline offers insights into visitor behavior at the Neon Museum, fashioned from personal observations as a tour guide during the Summer 2011 season and from posts left on public travel ratings websites where visitors can rate, report, or recommend travel and leisure sites to other website browsers. By utilizing both existing education models put forth by museum professionals and candid visitor responses to the current programming at the institution, this portion of the project is intended to simulate a collaborative process in establishing a line of interpretation.



When tailored to the individual needs of the Neon Museum, these theories have the



potential to highlight the “best practices” for this specific organization and shape successful programming at this budding institution. This resource analysis also has the potential to provide educators and exhibit developers with a sense of visitor expectations of the Neon Museum and knowledge of the efficacy of their current

practices. With this information, museum professionals, particularly those employed by the Neon Museum, will better be able to address the needs of their target audiences and subsequently market their “product” more successfully. A focus on the visitor will also aid in attracting new groups to the institution and might help in the facility’s efforts to acquire additional public funding.

Researcher Observations of the Museum

Observational research took place over the course of summer 2011. At this time, the museum was and is still currently operating on an appointment-only basis.¹ Consequently, the museum has a need to keep visitation to a relative minimum and typically refrains from posting excessive advertising or signage. It would be problematic if the museum openly promoted itself and then limited access to a couple of 20-person groups per day; however, the lack of signage can also be an issue for the visitors who have secured an appointment time. The museum operates on a fenced-in dirt lot off of Las Vegas Boulevard North, and guests are asked to park in a lot across the street, then walk up to the fenced area. Often visitors appear confused or as though they might be in the wrong place, not noticing any directional markers or obvious crowds. The fence seems to indicate a closed-off or blocked space, and it clearly does not serve to welcome scheduled visitors to the museum. Upon checking in with an employee at the gate, visitors pay \$15.00 per person to enter the space and are asked to sign a waiver prohibiting the sale of personal photos taken at the site; however, most groups have already paid the fee online as part of the scheduling process. Once these tasks are completed, most guests promptly move to a shaded area underneath the institution’s

¹ Observations were made over the course of a 3-month period when the researcher volunteered as a docent. Providing several tours a week during this time, many repeated behaviors were noticed and the researcher was able to synthesize these recurring actions into a succinct analysis.

future lobby area. Some lawn chairs are provided for a few guests, but most people stand and chat with their other group members. Other visitors opt to take photographs of the few signs placed in the front lot, not knowing that the tour will include a discussion of these pieces later. The tour typically starts under the shaded area and guests are given information about the museum, their donations, and the institution's current undertakings.

Visitors are given a brief orientation once they move into the main part of the Boneyard, a lot behind a second fence. Security and safety are discussed, and visitors are made aware that if they do not adhere to these rules, they will be asked to leave. The principal part of the tour officially begins inside the interior lot. At this juncture, standard behavior patterns emerge. Guests immediately seek shade underneath any of the signs along the tour route, whether they can see or hear the guide's presentation of a particular piece or not. Photography is essential to the group and at any given time roughly half the group will be taking pictures of other parts of the space rather than listening to the guide. In nearly every group, one or two people will prove exceedingly interested in the information and ask questions or offer personal stories regarding their experiences at a particular property represented in the space. The current tour outline includes a few questions for the guide to use in engaging the group, but depending on the level of participation or interest, the guides sometimes eliminate these. At the end of the tour, most guests typically ask to revisit earlier signs along the route, however, backtracking is not permitted for safety reasons and guests usually take final pictures in the area closest to the exit. Most then thank the guide individually, occasionally following up with questions or stories they might not have felt comfortable sharing in front of the group, and exit through the gate from which they entered.

Observation of Behavior

Summarizing the findings of these observations, there are a few key patterns that emerge. The museum is lacking appropriate directional signage for their visitors, a problem which will hopefully be resolved once the facility opens to the public. The parking lot is separate from the museum and part of another building complex that has recently closed. This means that the lot will likely be redeveloped in the future. Should this occur, the Neon Museum will be lacking adequate parking facilities for its guests, especially after the museum moves away from its regulated, appointment-only operation system to one where it will no longer be able to control the volume of visitation. Additionally, weather conditions are extreme and guests seek shelter wherever and whenever they can. The need for protection from the elements is strong enough to impact the delivery of information and audience ability to learn from the exhibit. The opening of the institution's new reception area is greatly anticipated, as it will provide guests with a degree of shelter from outside conditions and will house a sorely lacking restroom facility.² Finally, photography is of the utmost importance to visitors, even to those interested in the guided tour presentation. While the guided tour will still be an option when the museum officially opens, the nature of the experience will change, as visitors will be welcome to attend the exhibit without a scheduled appointment and participate in a self-guided visit. Understanding the visitors, their personal contexts, and their identity-related motivations will thus prove integral in developing programming designed to accommodate multiple outcomes and goals.

² The historic La Concha Motel lobby building is currently under renovations and is expected to open mid-2012. This building will serve as the visitor center, featuring a reception area, event facilities, administrative offices, and interactive exhibition capabilities.

According to Justin Favela, the museum's Volunteer Coordinator, tourists come to the Neon Museum "because they love Las Vegas history and a lot [of them] want to take photos of the old signs."³ Favela draws the same conclusions found in the researcher's observations; however, these evaluations only provide a secondary assessment of public interest or value in the museum's presentation, as opposed to a firsthand explanation of individual motivation, personal agenda, and overall visitor experience after attending the exhibit. Thus, beyond these general observations, it is helpful to thematically analyze and summarize actual visitor commentary regarding an exhibit and their experiences. As the Neon Museum is a developing organization, and they have not yet incorporated any type of visitor survey or systematized manner for collecting guest feedback, a lack of organized institutional research necessitates some creativity on the part of the researcher in determining appropriate methods for relaying exhibit objectives through nontraditional, informal sources that record visitor responses.

A number of public travel websites exist so that users might post comments and responses to travel and leisure experiences for the edification of other readers planning a future trip to the same destination. TripAdvisor and Yelp are the two leading websites in the collection of public reviews of various amenities in a specific locale.⁴ Review of the posts on these third party company sites responsible for amassing visitor commentary is critical for the Neon Museum, especially since the museum lacks any procedure for acquiring feedback of its own, and it allows the museum's staff to gain insight into the public's assessment of their current practices and suggestions for improvement.

³ Justin Favela, e-mail message to author, September 7, 2011.

⁴ Working in the service industry, the researcher has had experience in monitoring these websites in an effort to determine company success in meeting guest expectations. Many major companies, particularly in the Las Vegas area, evaluate their performance based on ratings posted to these travel websites and take the public's general opinions rather seriously in assessing customer service strategies.

Additionally, the Neon Museum boasts its own social networking profile on Facebook where guests can provide comments and feedback to the museum staff.⁵ All three sources are helpful, as the first two constitute impartial reviews of the institution and the third acts as an appropriate venue for expressing particularly enjoyable aspects of the visit or ideas on how the staff might better the experience.

The method of examining this data in particular is imperfect, as voluntary response surveys which visitors must seek out on their own often attract either very satisfied customers or rather disgruntled guests. Second, the source base is rather small, especially considering that Yelp and TripAdvisor collectively provide only 187 responses over the course of several years of visitation, a majority of which were provided by American visitors as opposed to the museum's many international guests. Finally, it is unlikely that multiple individuals from the same visiting group will post their own comments, prohibiting the in-depth examination of intra-group dynamics. Regardless of the biases inherent in the data, recurrent reactions can be found on the website that might be successfully analyzed for the benefit of the museum. The following outline presents this data, thematically organized, in the format recommended by Falk and Dierking's *Museum Visitor Experience Model*.⁶ The goal of this exercise is to extract information from the public that might be useful in producing a more effective tour outline and

⁵ While Yelp, Trip Advisor, Facebook, and other public posting sites contain biases in their data, as voluntary response surveys often do, they provide some insight into visitor experience at the Neon Museum. These comments also comprise some of the only recorded visitor feedback or reaction that this museum currently has to work with. Thus, in terms of understanding the Neon Museum's clientele, the 89 Yelp reviews, 98 Trip Advisor ratings, and numerous Facebook postings from many of the institution's 6,118 followers prove essential in gaining some understanding of visitor personal context and overall "interactive experience." This research takes into account reviews posted through the end of 2011.

⁶ Outlined in the first chapter, the *Visitor Experience Model* moves beyond the traditional examination of visitors in terms of demographics, but looks at the motivations behind museum visitation. Falk divides the larger public into several distinct visiting types, and then examines the visit within the context of personal identity-related needs, as well as the physical and social contexts of a visit.

overall museum experience, complete with methods of appealing to various interests and differing learning styles through the integration of innovative technological resources and related public programming.⁷

Personal Context

Museum scholars agree that the personal context associated with museum visitation is an incredibly influential factor in the making of an overall experience. Personal context encompasses motivations for visiting, expectations of the museum, prior knowledge, interests, and beliefs, and even an individual's feeling of choice and control over their experience. Identity-related goals also factor into personal context, as visitors utilize the museum setting for fulfilling specific needs that must be addressed during their leisure time, such as curiosity or relaxation. Because visitors are all "the sum product of [their] own personal experiences ... [and] have backgrounds rooted in various cultures and differing levels of educational experience,"⁸ understanding differences in perception can help museums facilitate experiences that are more positive for everyone. This section explores various aspects of Neon Museum visitors' personal contexts, as expressed through several social media outlets.

1. Visitor Motivation

Visitor motivation refers to the public impetus for attending a particular exhibit or museum, as opposed to selecting another activity or attraction, within the confines of limited leisure time. Reviewers on Yelp, a customer evaluation website, have collectively posted 89 comments about the museum, the highlights of which include, "the

⁷ Quotes from these travel websites appear as written. The researcher has not corrected spelling, grammar, or punctuation in an effort to retain the integrity of visitors' responses.

⁸ Carole Henry, *The Museum Experience: The Discovery of Meaning* (Reston: National Art Education Association, 2010), 17.

Boneyard speaks for itself,” “lots of cool old signs that used to light up Las Vegas,” and “the Neon Museum is a must see if you are in Vegas.”⁹ Customers on the site recommend the Neon Museum to those looking for “curiosities or oddities, or rare excursions for the curious or adventurous,” and for individuals “interested in Las Vegas history, not just spending hours... in smoky casinos.”¹⁰ For others, this museum seems to offer a unique collection of artifacts not readily accessible elsewhere, as well as a respite from some of the other popular activities in the city. Many reviews note that their interest originated from the recommendations of others and they had not previously heard of the institution. Still others report that they were aware of the collection and became interested in visiting the museum after seeing images of the collection in films and music videos, such as The Killers’ “All These Things That I’ve Done.”¹¹ A few visitors are self-proclaimed “Vegas history buffs,” touting the “vintage” or nostalgic aspects of the collection as well as the potential for excellent photographs.¹² Significantly, photography is one of the most mentioned intentions and benefits for visiting the Neon Museum. The desire to take pictures of old, decommissioned signage seems to suggest some other, deeper connection or interest in the content of the exhibit as well, since photographers have the opportunity to capture images of neon up and down Las Vegas Boulevard, without the \$15.00 surcharge.

⁹ “Neon Museum,” Yelp, accessed December 2, 2011, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas>.

¹⁰ Uncle Fishbits, August 27, 2011, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas> and Sara C., June 3, 2011, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas>.

¹¹ Hong V., April 28, 2011, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas>. The 1996 film *Mars Attacks* features scenes filmed at the Neon Museum, as do a couple of episodes of the popular television shows *Storage Wars* and *CSI*.

¹² Scott H., May 24, 2011, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas>.

Another public review site, Trip Advisor, boasts 91 reviews of the Neon Museum and, based on these reviews, currently ranks the institution 26th of 484 recognized attractions in the city.¹³ Several of the comments posted reveal that visitors attempted to schedule a tour numerous times before they were able to secure a spot, and one woman, ChristinaConcierge, asserts that a special “36hr ‘day trip’ over from San Francisco [was made], with the Neon Museum as the most important agenda item.”¹⁴ Although Christina from San Francisco does not reveal her primary reason for wanting to see the collection enough to attempt on multiple occasions to book a tour, she recommends the museum to “anyone into folkart, art, or local history.”¹⁵ Perhaps the perceived exclusivity or the word-of-mouth advertising serves as impetus for visitors to plan a trip to the Neon Museum. Her username, “ChristinaConcierge,” also suggests her visit might have had some connections to her profession aside from any personal interest, perhaps indicating a desire to become more knowledgeable about activities in the Las Vegas area or the western United States in general. Christina was not the only visitor to report difficulties in securing a spot on the tours. Because the museum allows only a limited number of visitors into the Boneyard at any given time, requiring advanced booking from all guests, the tours often sell out.

Some of the same motivations appearing on Yelp’s website also appear on TripAdvisor. Once again, another visitor reports having seen a television show that featured the Neon Museum, and subsequently attempted to schedule a tour on two

¹³ “Neon Museum – Las Vegas – Reviews of the Neon Museum – TripAdvisor,” TripAdvisor, accessed January 12, 2012, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html. Ranking and number of postings calculated from comments and ratings listed prior to January 1, 2012.

¹⁴ ChristinaConcierge, November 10, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

¹⁵ ChristinaConcierge, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum.

occasions.¹⁶ In fact, television programming appears in several comments; perhaps due to the fact that a short appearance on a TV show is one of the only ways the Neon Museum really markets itself to the public. One reviewer admitted that his interest in the museum originated after viewing a program that mentioned the Boneyard on the History Channel, deciding, “it might be fun to check out.”¹⁷ Those who saw the signs featured in music videos were also exposed to the museum through television, and one visitor cited a *CSI* episode that featured the Neon Museum as a backdrop for the storyline in her comment as an initial motivator.¹⁸ One visitor remarked, “The guide was very engaging, but the real stars are the signs - we were surprised how many we recognised [sic] from films.”¹⁹ A *Mars Attacks* reference appears only once, on the Yelp website, a visitor commenting that she, “kept thinking about *Mars Attacks* the entire time.”²⁰ Although television programming informs the public of the existence of the Neon Museum, it seems to be more of a secondary motivation for visitation, as guests necessarily perceive certain benefits from scheduling a tour that matches their leisure-time identity-needs.

¹⁶ Alex S., October 13, 2010, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas>.

¹⁷ BrownsboroRed, November 2, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS. An episode of *CSI* featured a corpse sprawled out on one of the signs and a storyline revolving around this murder in the Boneyard.

¹⁸ sixersgirl, August 16, 2007, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

¹⁹ GrandTJO, October 31, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

²⁰ Carrie A., November 16, 2009, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas>. Released in 1996, *Mars Attacks* is a comedy about alien invasion and features a storyline in which the city of Las Vegas and its residents play a significant role.

These identity-needs also appear in some of the website postings. Comment headers such as “great trip down memory lane,”²¹ “nostalgic and artistic,”²² and “Remember when...”²³ suggest that most visitors, or at least most of those who submit reviews, are attracted to the museum because it provides a forum where they can experience “Old Las Vegas” or revisit properties that hold some personal meaning for them. Those visitors claiming “Must See in Las Vegas,”²⁴ “The Best Overlooked Gem in Vegas,”²⁵ and “Go! You haven’t seen anything like this before”²⁶ find the Neon Museum a crucial element of any planned visit to the city, and a necessary stop for anyone wanting a comprehensive vacation experience. Some visitors remark that their trip to the museum has much to do with the interests of a member traveling in their party, but they too found it interesting and enjoyable, especially because their loved one had a good experience. Finally, numerous postings indicate that the museum addressed their individual need for an activity that enabled their party to escape the fast-paced environment of the Strip and other tourist corridors. Significantly, needs indicated on the travel rating websites match several of Falk’s categorized identity-related museum

²¹ TO_Trips, April 10, 2009, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

²² bazing55, October 27, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

²³ CarolM, September 28, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

²⁴ DetrioterGuy, October 30, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

²⁵ NeonFan, September 28, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

²⁶ Shmees, August 17, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

motivations referenced in the previous chapter, including explorer, facilitator, experience seeker, and recharger.²⁷

Visitor comments posted to the museum's social networking site on Facebook also give some indication of motivation for visiting. Perhaps due to Facebook's incredible popularity, the Neon Museum's page boasts over 6,000 fans and countless comments, making it the richest resource of these nontraditional and unofficial visitor surveys. These comments also convey similar sentiments to those found on Yelp and TripAdvisor. Facebook fans urge those who have "friends and family in from out of town [that] this has to be on the list of things to see and do!"²⁸ Others remark on the importance of the preservation work they do, and the historical importance of the signage, such as local Michelle's comment, "The Stardust sign was always my favorite!! I think they should really sell this museum much more as a To Do in Las Vegas. It's basically all the history we have as far as something tangible goes here in this valley we call home."²⁹ TV again appears as a factor, as users remarked, "I didn't realize this existed until I saw it on Extreme Vegas,"³⁰ "I have been a mad neon collector for years, have seen your work on many film and TV shows over the years,"³¹ and "We just

²⁷ To reiterate, Falk's categories refer to the needs that visitors have during a museum visit, as well as their perceived abilities to satisfy those desires at this type of informal learning institution. The explorer is defined as a curious individual who values learning and has a general interest in seeing or experiencing new things. The facilitator is one looking to satisfy the needs and desires of others in their care, and the experience seeker is a "collector of experiences" who values seeing the iconic or the highlights of a particular destination. Last, the recharger visits the museum to reflect, rejuvenate, or to simply enjoy the special nature of this type of environment.

²⁸ StardustFallout, December 6, 2011, comment on Facebook, The Neon Museum, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Neon-Museum/197976420753>.

²⁹ Michelle Shoop-Fikes, March 6, 2011, comment on Facebook, The Neon Museum, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Neon-Museum/197976420753>.

³⁰ Cheryl Kunasek, November 7, 2010, comment on Facebook, The Neon Museum, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Neon-Museum/197976420753>.

³¹ Heath Williamson, April 12, 2010, comment on Facebook, The Neon Museum, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Neon-Museum/197976420753>.

stumbled upon a Travel Channel show showing the tours now.”³²

Beyond the posts that express gratitude for an enjoyable experience, and those that simply ask logistical questions, many users share creations influenced by what they saw on their visit, or stories about their tour. For example, one visitor commented, “I took a few of us to Vegas for my 30th birthday ... I made them come to the museum with me. No one was looking forward to going ... However, on the way home, I asked what the highlight of their trip was and they said it was the visit to your museum.”³³ Several Facebook fans have posted their comic strips, photo shoot reels, videos, paintings, and various other creative endeavors inspired by the collection or the information gained through the guided tour. This speaks volumes to the museum’s success in instilling interest and connection with the material for visitors, at least within a specific niche of the visiting public. Those who share these sentiments, in line with Falk’s descriptions of identity-related needs, fit within the category of hobbyist or professional. Although typically a smaller crowd, these visitors often have significant influence on and strong relationships with the museums they attend. While the museum is striking a chord with a key group of individuals, adjusting some of the programming to address all of the visitors’ unique identity needs will aid in creating strong, lasting memories of the experience throughout a broader section of the visiting public.

³² Danae Rae Hall Simetz, January 7, 2010, comment on Facebook, The Neon Museum, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Neon-Museum/197976420753>.

³³ Sarah Curtis, June 14, 2011, comment on Facebook, The Neon Museum, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Neon-Museum/197976420753>.

2. Prior Knowledge, Interests, and Beliefs

Museum scholars have come to the conclusion that “the more familiarity [a visitor] has with [the subject], the easier it is to make a personal connection.”³⁴ Visitors want meaningful experiences, ones that have relevance in their own lives; therefore, they often structure a great deal of their own experiences within the museum. Some visitor postings give glimpses of prior knowledge of Las Vegas history, or at least the type of material presented at the Neon Museum. For example, one of the self-proclaimed “Las Vegas history buffs” expressed having previously “checked-out” all of the “old casinos, restaurants, and bars.”³⁵ History was a common theme in the reviews, mentioned 84 times in 98 reviews on TripAdvisor.³⁶ In fact, one reviewer seemed particularly knowledgeable of Las Vegas history, noting, “This outdoor boneyard ... spans ... the colorful background of Vegas past, from Dam workers to Gangsters to Paranoid Billionaires through the casinos made famous by movies.”³⁷ Several other reviewers were also able to recall some facts about the museum, the artifacts in the exhibit, and the information provided, suggesting that the Neon Museum has, to some extent, accomplished an education goal of promoting meaning-making among visitors. Whether these individuals acquired this information from the tour presentation or it already existed in their knowledge banks, posted recollections of these key ideas is revealing.

³⁴ Carole Henry, *The Museum Experience*, 18.

³⁵ Scott H., comment on Yelp, Neon Museum.

³⁶ “Neon Museum – Las Vegas – Reviews of the Neon Museum – TripAdvisor,” TripAdvisor, accessed January 12, 2012, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html. The word “history” also appears 45 times in the 89 reviews posted on Yelp and frequently in comments left on the museum’s Facebook page.

³⁷ Atl_mermaid, December 26, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

Several other visitor-professed interests also prompted reviewers to schedule a trip to the Neon Museum. One reviewer specified an interest in “typography and design” that the tour succeeded in addressing.³⁸ Many referenced nostalgia, or desire to relive their memories, many having past experiences with the signs or properties represented. One visitor praised the museum for being “interesting and informative,” following up his assertion with a note that he “had stayed at one of the hotels that they have a sign for.”³⁹ Another reviewer expressed, “The whole experience made me think a lot of the Vegas of old ... I recommend the tour to anyone who wants to feel Vegas history - and can imagine a Strip that had these signs blinking overhead as dolled up people drove their Caddies through town.”⁴⁰ Artists, architects, and graphic designers are urged to see the gallery and assured that it provides incredible inspiration. Anyone interested in doing “Something different from the same old same old casinos and shows”⁴¹ is also encouraged to attend, as the experience is evaluated as a nice break from the traditional activities of gambling, shopping, and pool lounging most normally associated with Las Vegas.

Finally, photography seems to be one of the primary interests influencing a tourist’s decision to visit the museum. Capturing images of the signs featured in the Boneyard was a goal of an overwhelming majority of reviewers posting comments, the

³⁸ Vanessa P., November 9, 2010, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas>.

³⁹ tim2tyler, November 23, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html.

⁴⁰ SunMonkey61, November 7, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html.

⁴¹ bazinga55, October 27, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html.

word “photo” appearing 78 times in 98 reviews.⁴² Specific instances of this interest mentioned include a reviewer’s comment, “Mitch was our very informative tour guide, though he said no harm if we didn't want to listen to him, as long as we remained within his view while taking our photos :).”⁴³ Another visitor remarked, “Our guide was a bit of a windbag, and eventually my friends and I wandered off on our own to take tons of pictures.”⁴⁴ Importantly, however, these photographs seem to serve as more than just a souvenir of their trip, as visitors freely express that they find meaning and significance in the exhibited artifacts. One TripAdvisor contributor commented, “The craftsmanship and artistry involved in the design of these signs is fascinating. As we made our way around the boneyard in hushed reverance for these magnificent artifacts, we almost expected to see Frank or Dean or Elvis pop up around the next corner.”⁴⁵ Another reviewer shared that he was so captivated by the experience that “A lot of stuff from our guide I followed up more extensively online after the tour. My interest was stoked. Particularlry the Moulin Rouge Casino. Fascinating! I hate tours! I loved this tour! Best tour ever!!!”⁴⁶

3. Choice and Control

According to museum education scholars, freedom of choice and control play a vital role in forming the visitor’s personal context. For example, if people feel as though

⁴² “Neon Museum – Las Vegas – Reviews of the Neon Museum – TripAdvisor,” TripAdvisor, accessed January 12, 2012, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html. This was also the observation of the researcher during her time spent as a guide for the museum. In addition, 29 of 89 reviews on Yelp also feature the word “photo,” while 18 use the word “picture.”

⁴³ lialu, November 9, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html.

⁴⁴ SunMonkey61, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum.

⁴⁵ hg6649, September 17, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html.

⁴⁶ Antony T, March 2, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html.

they have been forced to attend the exhibit by other members of their group, or are confined to experience the museum in a prescribed manner, they may find the visit less meaningful, enjoyable, or fulfilling. One reviewer indicated that his trip to the Neon Museum did not live up to his initial expectations, asserting, “The tour guides seemed a lot more enthusiastic about these old technology lighted signs than they deserved. Yes, they did represent notable places in Las Vegas history, but that was about it. Dullsville.”⁴⁷ He even went so far as to warn other TripAdvisor users that the museum is “only for neon sign aficionados.”⁴⁸ This rather unpleasant experience that resulted in a negative review suggests that the visitor had little control over the information he received or obtained from the exhibit and that the information provided did not match the type of discussions he might have chosen to pursue at the museum if given the opportunity.

Other visitors, however, found that the museum’s highly organized structure for touring the exhibit matched their personal contexts in terms of choice and control. For instance, one reviewer reported, “The tour was less than an hour but much is crammed into it. We heard a lot of history and saw a lot of the old signs that would have been destroyed ... It was one of the most interesting things we have ever done in Las Vegas.”⁴⁹ For this group of visitors, the museum provided pertinent information and meaningful discussion of artifacts they might not have ever had otherwise. Another visitor commented, “I personally had a good time with the tour. The guide was funny and

⁴⁷ J3Pilot, December 23, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html.

⁴⁸ J3Pilot, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum.

⁴⁹ therogerAustin_Tx, December 15, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html.

knowledgeable in answering questions, and while you have to stick with the group, there is some leeway to take some great photos.’’⁵⁰ Because the tour is presently the museum’s only method of conveying information to the public, most comments suggest that the experience of viewing the exhibit with the aid of a volunteer guide was both enjoyable and eye opening, not necessarily as a hindrance that may have negatively impacted their sense of choice or control.

A majority of visitors attending the exhibit with group members who had the primary interest found their experience enjoyable, regardless of the fact that it was not their idea to visit. It seems that most of the complaints with regard to choice and control hinge upon the fact that the museum is not yet open to the public, and scheduling an appointment is a necessity not readily apparent to all. In addition, several reviewers on all three sites comment on photography restrictions. Many lament the limitations that restrict the sharing of photos, or the fact that they are unable to stroll through the lot at will, taking time to photograph signage from various angles or in some desired order. Some of this will change once the Neon Museum opens, yet these complaints seem to have only minimal impact on the visitor’s evaluation of his or her overall experience.

Sociocultural Context

People visit museums alone, with friends or family, or as part of an organized group. Their decision to attend an exhibit in a specific social context can directly affect the quality of their experience.⁵¹ The needs of small children, older relatives, and interested or uninterested friends, as well as the desire to entertain, interact, or converse with group members can all influence the direction and outcome of a museum visit. Until

⁵⁰ Guy C., March 14, 2009, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas?start=40>.

⁵¹ Carole Henry, *The Museum Experience*, 17.

the official opening of the Neon Museum, visitors are compelled to visit the Boneyard as part of a scheduled tour group. Within these organized groups, smaller sub-groupings are the norm, as individuals typically travel with friends, family, or significant others.

Despite the more restrictive nature of this condition, it is helpful to explore two aspects of visitors' sociocultural context at the Neon Museum as a means of understanding the difference in experience for those traveling solo or within a group, as well as the effect of the facilitated mediation that the museum has most often employed in its interactions with the public.

1. Within-Group Sociocultural Mediation

Within-group sociocultural mediation is perhaps one of the more difficult aspects to dissect of the three contexts, as the necessity to take a guided tour throughout the space limits smaller groups' interactions with one another. It is uncommon to witness group members assisting their friends or family members in learning about the signage, mainly because there are no explanatory materials provided. Additionally, it is almost equally uncommon to observe group members carrying on lengthy conversations with each other, as their visit is quite structured and they can only gain information about the exhibit through the guide's reflections, provided that the visitors are able to hear the guides. As the museum transitions into a new presentation structure, more research in the realm of inter-group communication will be essential to really understand how it affects the visitor's meaning-making and overall experience.

Regardless of these limitations, it is still possible for the researcher to gain some sense of within-group sociocultural mediation through the abovementioned methods. A majority of the reviewers utilize the pronouns "we" and "our" in their comments,

suggesting they also traveled within a group context, not just as part of a larger, museum-constructed tour group. A few key postings on the travel and ratings websites provide small clues as to the social composition of these groups and a more specific evaluation of the museum within the context of smaller sociocultural units. One visitor noted that she and her group, “eight of us, ranging from 11 to 70 years of age) recently visited the Las Vegas Neon Museum and Boneyard, and recommend it! ... It's not a great spot for little kids - lots of rusty metal calling out to them, and probably a little boring. But our 11yo and 15yo loved it.”⁵² It is worth mentioning that the Yelp website does not consider the Neon Museum a kid-friendly activity.⁵³ Other reviewers echo this same sentiment, stating, “I saw people dragging their kid. Not a kiddie attraction by any stretch”⁵⁴ and, “Not the safest for little kids with broken glass everywhere.”⁵⁵ Groups consist not only of those traveling as families, but couples, friends, convention or conference attendees, and organized tourist groups. From the researcher’s experience as a tour guide over the course of one summer, couples were the predominant sociocultural context of museum visitors.

Personal relationships are also mentioned in perceptions of various individuals who might find the museum compelling. For instance, after visiting themselves, individuals expressed the desire to return with their parents, significant others, and friends. Perhaps, upon their return, they will be able to share some of their memories

⁵² SuzeePee, December 19, 2007, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html.

⁵³ “Neon Museum,” Yelp, accessed January 20, 2012, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas>.

⁵⁴ Rufus Q., December 27, 2008, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas?start=40>.

⁵⁵ Kalli S., October 13, 2008, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas?start=40>.

from the tour with their group members, aiding the museum staff in understanding the efficacy of their programming and visitor learning in their museum. Past observations lead the researcher to believe that many social interactions that will occur at the museum under future self-guided visiting conditions are likely to involve the sharing of personal stories about the changes in the city, or about the properties these signs represent, especially amongst those visitors who are returning Las Vegas tourists or longtime locals. Previously, when participating in the tour presentation, guests have offered up comments to the guide about where they have stayed, properties they visited, signs they remember seeing, and how much growth the city has witnessed since their last trip to Las Vegas.

2. Facilitated Mediation by Others

Facilitated mediation by others, in this case volunteer tour guides, is currently the norm at the Neon Museum. Despite the high level of control that the museum exerts over guests during their visit, mainly due to the format of this structured and directed experience, most comments on TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Facebook provide favorable feedback. Visitors are often impressed with their tour guide's breadth of knowledge, friendly demeanor, and helpful attitude. A common thread in many of the posts is that the visitors learned a lot from their guides – although this information is not necessarily recounted in the comment. Some of the remarks about guides include, “the museum itself is very well put together and well worth a visit while in Vegas. ... the tour of the park is hosted by some pssionate and well-informed Las Vegans. These are truly knowledable people on the history of Vegas and are happy to answer questions,”⁵⁶ and “It was very interesting to hear about the history of the first neon signs and how the

⁵⁶ itinerary, October 20, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or20-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

companies lease them to the hotels.”⁵⁷ These experience evaluations suggest that guests of the museum are pleased with the current format of the visit.

As the museum moves away from utilizing “knowledgeable,” “passionate,” “friendly, funny, and informative” tour guides to “teach you more about Vegas than you would believe,”⁵⁸ it will be interesting to see how the public responds. Already there are some indications of public desire to move around the space, and to absorb information on their own, and at their own pace. One visitor commented, “The guide is pretty detailed but nothing on how much any of them cost to make as a completed project. They told us about how much a neon bend costs but nothing about how much neon gas costs. Nothing on how or why some of these casinos went out of business.”⁵⁹ From this post, it can be inferred that the visitor had some topics in mind regarding what sort of information she might like to gain from attending the museum. It seems that this tour guide was unsuccessful in answering some of the visitor’s key questions, suggesting that a self-guided experience with supplemental materials might be a preferred method for guests visiting the museum with their own agendas. As Falk asserts in his work, the reality of catering to visitors with their own agendas is not uncommon – it is, perhaps, the norm.

Another reviewer mentioned, “our guide was very knowledgeable and happy to answer all our questions and discuss tangential history as it came up.”⁶⁰ His use of the term “tangential” could imply the ability of the guide to move beyond the prescribed tour

⁵⁷ BlackBite_rowEn, September 8, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or30-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

⁵⁸ Adjectives taken from several reviews on Yelp featuring the word “guide.” “Neon Museum,” Yelp, accessed January 21, 2012, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas?q=guide>.

⁵⁹ Christine H., October 16, 2011, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas?q=guide>.

⁶⁰ chuck r., September 13, 2011, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas?q=guide>.

agenda to answer particular questions that the audience poses, or it could indicate a desire to hear more in-depth discussion of specific topics. A second Yelp user noted, “our tour guide ... was energetic, filled with neat trivia,”⁶¹ suggesting that the information conveyed throughout the tour was not uniform, and did not necessarily address his main interests in the signs. The creation of a more comprehensive, self-guided experience will allow for further exploration of topics various individuals find engaging, while enabling them to skip over information they find less intriguing. Finally, there are those completely uninterested in any supplemental material regarding the collection. One visitor expressed, “the boyfriend and I were kind of disappointed because of the extremely boring tour guide who seemed to be a bit annoyed everytime people wanted to take photos.”⁶² Another “docked a star” on the rating of her overall experience “for the barely audible boring tour guide.”⁶³ The option to access information, or not access it depending on the goals of the visit, has the potential to make the overall experience more enjoyable for all, specifically by acknowledging that all visitors come to the museum with a particular identity-related goal in mind, and ultimately perceive their experience to be successful if it has resulted in a strong match between their motivations and the realities of their actual visit.⁶⁴

Physical Context

The final key component of the museum experience is the physical context.

Physical context refers to the visitor response to the museum’s material environment,

⁶¹ aldo b., December 26, 2010, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas?q=guide>.

⁶² Ali R., May 5, 2011, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas?q=guide>.

⁶³ Rosemarie Y., April 7, 2011, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas?q=guide>.

⁶⁴ Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, 117.

including architecture, space, layout, lighting, and arrangement. It also includes advance preparation, organization, and orientation, as well as the reinforcement of events and experiences outside of the museum itself. In theory, “the museum staff creates the setting in which it is most likely the visitor can have a meaningful experience ... an environment free of distractions in which the [subject material] is the central focus.”⁶⁵ In practice, however, this seemingly simple context can prove difficult to address, as physical context is often something that hinges on funding, or becomes problematic when issues arise that are entirely out of the museum’s control. As an outdoor museum in the heart of Las Vegas, understanding visitor response to the physical environment of the Neon Museum is crucial for improving overall experience, and thus the success of a visit.

1. Advance Organizers and Orientation

Posts regarding the advance organization and orientation all relate to the transitional nature of the Neon Museum. Because the visitor center is just now nearing completion, many of the comments on Yelp, Facebook, and TripAdvisor comment on the lack of a permanent facility with restrooms and other guest conveniences. Some lament the confusing and somewhat secretive procedure for securing a tour appointment. Others note the lack of directional signage discussed in the researcher’s observations. These issues will be remedied once the new visitor’s center is finished for the museum’s official opening, as the museum will move away from its appointment-only procedures and will no longer find itself concerned with having to turn visitors away. In fact, one visitor is

⁶⁵ Carole Henry, *The Museum Experience*, 18.

especially confident that the new La Concha visitor center will create a “better organized space” that will “lift the Boneyard’s prominence up a little higher.”⁶⁶

Similarly, orientation has also posed some problems for the museum that are largely associated with the semi-operational status of the facility. It is not entirely clear to all visitors where the museum is located, how to find transportation there, and where to meet the guides. Additionally, once visitors have checked in, they are directed to sit underneath the canopy of the future visitor center where there is no further interaction with museum employees or exhibit-related materials until the start of the tour. This will change for the better once the museum opens; however, some aspects of orientation will actually become more of an issue once arranged visits are no longer the norm. For example, the staff currently sends e-mails to all scheduled visitors providing some tips for their upcoming trip to the museum, including suggestions for wearing sunscreen and closed toed shoes, as well as bringing along a hat, a bottle of water, and maybe an umbrella. When the facility opens and staff members are unable to reach guests prior to their visit, these suggestions will be relegated to a section of the website, left for individuals to discover on their own. Perhaps the museum will have water available for sale in the visitor center, as well as loaner umbrellas to keep guests out of the sun.

Once the tour begins, there is a typical welcome presentation that the guides give to their group, which will almost flawlessly transition into the new museum’s operations.

A Yelp user describes the current exhibit space orientation in detail:

We arrived early, but only had a 10-15 minute wait until we gathered up for some instructions before beginning our tour. Guests need to make sure that they wear close-toed shoes and don't bring bags (or extra camera equipment) on the tour. Our tour guide also explained that we

⁶⁶ Rob O., September 29, 2011, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas?q=organization>.

needed to stay together on all times on the tour. There is also no touching the signs and our guide encouraged us to take great caution when taking pictures with signs not to back up into broken bulbs, rusted metal, etc. If you plan on taking photos you will be asked to sign a release stating that the photos you take will be for personal use only (not to be used for a profit).⁶⁷

It is possible that this presentation, or a similar welcome orientation to the museum without reference to the tour group, can be offered to all visitors upon purchasing a ticket to the exhibit. Complaints regarding the photography policy are not likely to subside, but it should not be considered an issue that affects visitor's overall satisfaction, especially since the museum uses the money they receive from selling their own photos to finance future projects, and because they offer separate photography bookings to professionals at a fee that compensates them for similar purposes.

According to Danielle Kelly, the museum's chief operating officer, the new visitor center will provide more than just waiting areas and restrooms. The facility will house space "for meetings, weddings, parties and other festivities, and the new structure will house administrative offices. There also will be a multipurpose room available for lectures and a space for archived items, including artifacts, videos and documents in a collection that Kelly said will continue growing over time."⁶⁸ This will aid in the more comfortable reception of visitors and improve the overall experience for a diverse audience looking to fulfill a variety of identity-related needs.

⁶⁷ aemalone, March 2, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html.

⁶⁸ Lisa Carter, "Neon Museum facility taking shape to preserve local history," Review Journal Nov.8,2011, <http://www.lvrj.com/view/neon-museum-facility-taking-shape-to-preserve-local-history-133420108.html>.

2. Design

The design of the exhibit space is difficult to change, as size of the artifacts and cost of moving dictates they be positioned a certain way. In addition to the opening of the visitor's center this year, the Boneyard is also expected to undergo renovations; however, it is unclear what type of changes will be made and how it will affect the general flow of the tour or the larger visitor experience. Some notice the constraints the museum must work within order to display the signs, remarking, "Apparently, they've made more space and are showing more of the signs, but some are still stacked on top of each other making them difficult to see sometimes."⁶⁹ Other mentions of the space include, "the yard ... [is] in a bit of dis array in a fenced in parking lot,"⁷⁰ and "I felt the layout could have been a little more spread out. There are signs on top of signs."⁷¹ The fact that the Boneyard is not a "museum in the traditional sense"⁷² comes up several times on the Yelp and TripAdvisor websites as well. The current arrangement of the signs was conceived as a set of groupings – motels, casinos, and wedding chapels – that seems to have more of a design plan than a narrative. Despite the museum's perception of its organization, it seems that the narrative has been lost on the audience.

The most difficult aspect of the design seems to have more to do with the outside nature of the museum as opposed to the layout, and a majority of visitor complaints regarding the physical context of the exhibit have to do with their exposure to the harsh elements while touring the space. For example, heat and overexposure to sunlight seem

⁶⁹ Holly C., December 18, 2010, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas?q=space>.

⁷⁰ Adam M., April 7, 2010, comment on Yelp, Neon Museum <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas?q=space>.

⁷¹ Christine H., comment on Yelp, Neon Museum.

⁷² Adam M., comment on Yelp, Neon Museum.

to be the two primary concerns, as one reviewer sent out a “warning” to other website users, stating “we went in December and it was very comfortable ... that will not be the case in the summer heat while strolling between metal signs. If you can go when the weather is cooler then I would highly recommend it.”⁷³ Another reports, “There is no shade, and sensible footwear is a good idea.”⁷⁴ One woman even went so far as to title her post, “Great History, photo shoot but bring WATER.”⁷⁵ The terms “sun,” “shade,” “hot,” and “heat” are mentioned a total of 38 times in the 89 reviews posted on the Yelp website, suggesting that harsh conditions are on the forefront of visitor’s minds when they reflect upon their trip to the museum.⁷⁶

While the collection and the individual pieces are much too large to be moved indoors, the new visitor center facility will hopefully provide some relief for tourists from the extreme outdoor conditions. It will be necessary for the museum to offer water, and perhaps some other refreshments, in a gift shop or from a vending machine in order to ensure that the visitors do not become dehydrated or sick from the heat. The museum’s staff and board of trustees have a desire to maintain the “raw feeling of the space,” so it is unlikely that any endeavor will be made to adequately shelter the space in the near

⁷³ therogerAustin_Tx, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum.

⁷⁴ GandTJo, October 31, 2011, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

⁷⁵ lizzyrizzi, July 24, 2010, comment on TripAdvisor, Neon Museum, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45963-d110193-Reviews-or10-The_Neon_Museum-Las_Vegas_Nevada.html#REVIEWS.

⁷⁶ The word “water” is mentioned a total of 14 times. Neon Museum, Yelp, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/neon-museum-las-vegas>. Many learning studies suggest the need to address people’s basic comfort needs before learning can really take place. This is a principle aspect of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in which the physiological and safety needs serve as the foundation for the remaining human desires for belonging, love, self-esteem, and self-actualization. For more information, see Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper, 1954).

future.⁷⁷ Eventually it might enhance the learning experience to stretch some sort of covering over the Boneyard in order to minimize the effect of the sunlight and heat on the ability of guests to make meaning from their tour, as well as the impact of the physical context on their memories of the visit.

3. Reinforcing Events and Experiences Outside the Museum

The aspect of reinforcement of Neon Museum events and experiences has great potential in the expanding cultural district of Downtown Las Vegas. With the opening of the Mob Museum, the Smith Center, and the official opening of this institution the first half of the year, the museum is uniquely poised to benefit from and offer support to its surrounding cultural institutions. One aim of this project is to associate the information presented at the Neon Museum to that of the other museums and arts centers in the area in an effort to strengthen this facet of the museum visitor experience and further promote learning. Providing visitors with an opportunity to make connections with information they have acquired at the Mob Museum or the Smith Center to new concepts presented at the Neon Museum might aid in achieving this goal. For instance, in moving through the exhibit free of the confines of a guided tour, guests will have the chance to explore the information and themes that are of particular interest to them. Some might pursue a visit that includes more science-related discussion, such as technology and design, while others might desire an experience that leaves them with a better understanding of the signs' historical context. For those visitors fresh off a trip to the Mob Museum, the option to view the signs within the context of their newly acquired mob knowledge might aid in the forging of connections and the internal contextualization of the material. An

⁷⁷ Renee LiButti, "Exploring the Neon Boneyard: Las Vegas' historic signs get a second life," Lights. Vegas Action, <http://blog.vegas.com/las-vegas-attractions/exploring-the-neon-boneyard-10018/>.

entire tour might be centered on the signs in the collection that best convey the story of Las Vegas' involvement with the mob and its role in growing the city. Similarly, with the opening of the new Smith Center for the performing arts, a tour might center on the city's history of hosting shows or headliner concerts that put Las Vegas on the map as the "entertainment capital of the world." These ideas will be revisited in-depth in the final chapter of this research project.

Ultimately, in considering these visitor comments with regard to Falk's five outlined identity-related needs, it appears as though individuals from each category come to the Neon Museum to fulfill one or more leisure-time goals. Explorers seem to comprise a large segment of the visitor profile, finding the museum an interesting and compelling daytime activity as opposed to more traditional options of shopping, gambling, or lounging. Experience seekers are seemingly the second largest grouping of visitors to the Neon Museum, many on the websites asserting that their interest originated after hearing from others that a scheduled tour of the Boneyard was a "must see." This might be especially important for visitors who have had an interest in visiting Las Vegas for quite some time, but are making their first visits to the city and desire to see the "highlights." As the new "highlights" of the city are bound to include institutions in the redeveloped Downtown area, the Neon Museum is poised to receive a growing percentage of these types of visitors. Last, facilitators likely characterize the remaining bulk of visitors looking to take visiting family or friends around the city.

By addressing visitors in terms of their changing identity-related needs, the Neon Museum will be able to further ensure enjoyable experiences for all while simultaneously promoting learning and deeper meaning making. Recognizing the strengths and

weaknesses of the three key contexts comprising the visitor experience empowers the museum and its staff to work on remedying those issues that are easily fixed in order to create a comfortable environment that promotes effective and educational experiences. Likewise, ascertaining more information about the visitor and his or her unique museum visit motivations, interests, beliefs, choices, and sociocultural traveling preferences will similarly aid in the conception of a more successful learning environment where visitors can deploy their own interpretive strategies in order to fulfill their own identity-driven goals.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

PART II: APPLICATION

Building on the ideas of Falk and Dierking, as well as the research conducted in the first chapter of this project, the following chapter explores the idea of creating a new tour program outline based on a more universal overarching theme that gives visitors an opportunity to connect their own knowledge to new concepts presented at the Neon Museum. Because scholars believe that experiences catering to the individual identity-related needs of visitors are the most successful in promoting learning, this tour concept will ultimately serve as one option of many, functioning as a general possibility geared specifically toward experience-seekers looking to see the exhibit's "highlights." This chapter will develop a more comprehensive framework for the Neon Museum's existing tour-stops through the elaboration and expansion of an idea that ties changes in sign design to revolutions in modes of transportation. It is the researcher's hope to retain much of the Neon Museum's original information detailed in the current tour outline, but to reimagine it within the broader context of an international phenomenon both understandable and relatable to a large audience having individual, personal experiences with or perceptions of various modes of travel.

The following chapter reviews Las Vegas' history through the lens of transportation. Originally a railroad outpost in the middle of the Mojave Desert, Las Vegas grew over the last 100 years into one of the most famous and recognizable metropolitan areas in the southwest United States. The city now welcomes tourists from all over the world to its world-class gaming, hotel, and restaurant establishments. While those now arriving would have once come by train, or commonly by car, today's Vegas vacationers typically deplane at McCarran International, the seventh busiest airport in the

United States according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics. As tourists' preferences for particular modes of transportation have changed, so have business' methods of attracting their dollars. This is the story of Las Vegas commercial signage.

- Chapter Three -
Neon Sign\$: One Bright Idea

“One can look at Las Vegas from a mile away on
Route 91 and see no buildings, no trees, only signs...”
- Tom Wolfe¹

Neon is an integral part of the Las Vegas landscape. A uniquely receptive environment, the desert setting of Las Vegas possessed the necessary combination of relatively inexpensive electric power from the Hoover Dam, a flat and monochrome backdrop, and a target audience of motorists arriving along the old Los Angeles Highway, creating a perfect home for the distinctive appearance of these hypnotizing bright lights. Thus, neon signs emerged on the Vegas scene relatively early in the city’s history, following the construction of highways and automobile-centered infrastructure in the area. Although the original signage of the 1930s and 1940s has since undergone decades of refinement and enhancement, these marketing marvels remain one of the most iconic features of the city. Growing larger, more complex, and increasingly more thematic in design, the evolution of commercial signage in the last century, particularly in Las Vegas, has paralleled the changes in preferred modes of transportation. Beginning with the rise of automobile travel, followed by the development of more affordable airfare, the size, shape, placement, and larger physical features of Las Vegas signage has been noticeably influenced by broader changes in preferred means of travel.²

¹ Tom Wolfe, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965), 8.

² The focus of this chapter is the impact of larger changes in preferred modes of transportation on commercial sign design. While advertising often hinges on trends and fads, this chapter analyzes these shifts in technology and modes of travel, as their gradual nature of development and larger implications on marketing correspond with the lengthy time properties signed leases for these rather expensive creations. Rapid changes and the adoption of new, trendy advertising techniques in neon signage were thus both cost prohibitive and restricted due to a company’s lease terms. For example, the Stardust property opened in 1958 and had only three different neon signs during its existence. Similarly, the Flamingo opened in 1947, and commissioned only four different signs in its lifetime, the last of which is still present on site.

This relationship between design and modes of transport is evident even today. As Downtown Las Vegas and the Strip have grown saturated with properties, tourists, and traffic, the evolution of sign design has come full circle, echoing the efforts and techniques of earlier advertising campaigns. Properties are again positioning signs along sidewalks and corridors, increasingly directional in function and closer to eye level, in an effort to attract the substantial flow of pedestrian traffic that has more recently resurfaced. With the re-emergence of a walking culture in conjunction with increased automobile and affordable air travel, Las Vegas' contemporary neon signs and themed pylons no longer solely operate as an "architecture of persuasion" that establishments employ in competition with one another. In order for today's businesses to succeed, it has become necessary for them to really differentiate themselves from rival companies with similar offerings. Today's sign has thus transcended its original role of conveying a property's services or facilities in an attractive manner, functioning now with a new post-modern meaning as a mode of transport itself. Signs no longer announce a business' amenities that may also be found elsewhere, but promise a unique experience, inviting visitors to enter into a singularly fantastical world accessible solely to patrons of that property through the vehicle of themed signage.³

Astoundingly, the Normandie Motel maintained the same sign for 60 years, and the Society Cleaners never once replaced their original. While secondary reader boards may have changed to advertise current shows, dinner specials, or jackpots more often, the general structure of a business' larger neon sign did not.

³ Literature on the changing nature of neon sign design is limited. Several publications focus on the use of neon as a medium and art form, including Rudi Stern, *Contemporary Neon* (New York: Retail Reporting Corp., 1990), Michael Webb's *The Magic of Neon* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1984), and Rudi Stern, *Let There Be Neon* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1979). Others concentrate on the technical aspects of the signage, such as Samuel Miller's *Neon Techniques* (Cincinnati: ST Media Group International Inc., 1997) and Randall L. Caba's *The Neon Superguide Complete How-To Manual* (Neon Press, 2001). Catherine Gudis' *Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 2004) details the rise of outdoor advertising and its connection to automobile culture, but does not mention the incorporation of neon technology into roadside signage. Scholarship pertaining to Las Vegas' changing landscape deals mainly with Strip and Downtown architecture, as well as city planning. One of the cornerstone studies on this subject is Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and

A brief history of neon gives insight into the hopes and aspirations the inventor and his audience had for the new medium. Neon lighting was invented in Paris at the turn of the century after French engineer Georges Claude conducted a series of experiments designed to create a practical alternative to incandescent lighting. Inspired by the Geissler nitrogen-based light tubes, Claude developed neon tube lighting as a subsidiary project of his primary business in the liquefaction of air.⁴ Through his experiments, Claude inadvertently found that the manufacture of large quantities of hospital-grade oxygen produced a byproduct in the form of sizable amounts of rare gases, namely neon and argon. In an effort to utilize these leftover gases, he discovered that filling older Moore tubes with neon and bombarding them with electricity produced a colorful, long lasting, highly visible light source.⁵ From its inception it was immediately recognized for its capabilities in enhancing early electrical advertising.

Claude's work with neon tubing drew considerable attention at a 1910 exhibit at the Grand Palais in Paris, prompting him to market his new invention as "the latest and

Steven Izenour's *Learning From Las Vegas* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1972), which argues that Las Vegas architecture is really a collection of more common design elements and a precursor for suburban development. While there are a number of existing publications that highlight some Las Vegas signage, most are photographic in nature and contain little commentary regarding the evolution of design. These books include Judy Natal's *Neon Boneyard Las Vegas A-Z* (Chicago: Center for American Places, 2006), Su Kim Chung's *Las Vegas Then and Now* (San Diego: Thunder Bay Press, 2002), and Sheila Swan and Peter Laufer's *Neon Nevada* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1994). There are, however, two valuable studies in the changing nature of Las Vegas signs, which prove particularly informative in the conception of this chapter: Alan Hess' *Viva Las Vegas: After Hours Architecture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993) and Charles F. Barnard's *The Magic Sign: The Electric Art/Architecture of Las Vegas* (Cincinnati: ST Books, 1993), both completed in 1993. Finally, two other publications closely resemble the trajectory of this examination, and subsequently inform the methodology and organization of this essay. These titles include Lisa Mahar's *American Signs: Form and Meaning on Route 66* (New York, The Monacelli Press, 2002), which focuses on Route 66 roadside signage, and Tama Starr and Edward Hayman's *Signs and Wonders: The Spectacular Marketing of America* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) which looks at outdoor advertising in Times Square, New York. This chapter thus seeks to explore relatively uncharted territory, examining the evolution of sign design in conjunction with existing literature on modes of transportation in Las Vegas, in an effort to fill a gap in the scholarship.

⁴ Claude was famous and incredibly successful for his process of liquefying industrial quantities of air, co-founding L'Air Liquide, S.A., presently a large multinational corporation with headquarters in Paris, France.

⁵ Webb, *The Magic of Neon*, vii.

most artistic forms of electrical advertising and illumination... [as] the light given is continuous, very distinctive, and peculiarly attractive... a ‘living flame.’”⁶ Widespread interest in the new technology resulted in the establishment of Claude Neon, a business he franchised all over the world, with locations in cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Boston.⁷ Despite its incredible early popularity in Paris, neon did not find its way to the United States until 1923 when Packard automobile dealer in Los Angeles purchased the first Claude Neon sign in America.⁸ The sign was so attractive and novel to passersby that it was known to have stopped traffic – a likely indication of success for Claude and other proprietors interested in acquiring their own electric advertisements. While Los Angeles was busy lighting up the night sky, however, Las Vegas was just coming into its own. In 1923, the residents of this desert outpost were scarcely decided upon exactly what types of businesses and services they would later be marketing in that famous vibrant orange and hazy lavender-blue.

Significantly, today’s “Neon Metropolis,” was not always known for its intense concentration of avant-garde electric signage.⁹ In fact, prior to the introduction of neon onto the American landscape, Las Vegas was little more than a railroad town; its architecture, building materials, and gridiron plan reminiscent of boomtown predecessors

⁶ Georges Claude, “There is More to it than Just Neon,” *Claude Neon Advertising Brochure* cited in Rudi Stern, *Let There Be Neon*, 16.

⁷ Stern, *Let There Be Neon*, 24.

⁸ Marcus Thielen, “Happy Birthday Neon,” *Signs of the Times Magazine* (August 2005), <http://signmuseum.org/histories/happybirthdayneon.asp>.

⁹ Las Vegas’ relationship with the medium of neon is so ingrained in popular culture that many publications written about the city often reference the technology in their titles. Hal Rothman’s *Neon Metropolis*, Trish Geran’s *Beyond the Glimmering Lights: Pride and Perseverance of African Americans in Las Vegas*, and Rothman and Davis’ *The Grit Beneath the Glitter: Tales from the Real Las Vegas* are three examples of this tendency to associate the city with the art.

in Kansas, Arizona, and Colorado at the height of Western expansion.¹⁰ The town was founded in 1905, after U.S. Senator William Clark of Montana purchased the 2,000 acre Las Vegas Rancho from its early proprietor, Helen Stewart, for a mere \$55,000.¹¹ Clark's primary interest was in connecting the transcontinental Union Pacific railroad through Las Vegas along his own San Pedro, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake line (SPLA&SL) in an effort to support the area's growing mining industry and aid in the transport of his own copper yields.¹² Clark intended for SPLA&SL to serve as a passenger and freight rail as well, shuttling travelers from the larger mining towns of Tonopah and Goldfield to California and the other parts of the Southwest, all the while generating additional revenue. He recognized the economic viability in this part of the Mojave Desert, rich in artesian wells and abundant in cheap land, but the establishment of Las Vegas as a successful, permanent townsite was long and arduous.¹³

Near the completion of his railroad project, Clark made known his intentions of selling off the surrounding land to entrepreneurs interested in settling the area and providing ancillary services to railroad travelers passing through. Consequently, from the start, Las Vegas existed primarily to provide for the needs of transients, who, at this point in time, were merely on their way to and from other destinations.¹⁴ For Clark and his

¹⁰ Hess, *Viva Las Vegas: After-Hours Architecture*, 10-12.

¹¹ *Pioche Record*, October 24, 1902 quoted in James W. Hulse, "W.A. Clark and the Las Vegas Connection." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History Vol.37 No.1* (Winter, 1987): 48-55.

¹² Eugene P. Moehring and Michael S. Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005), 9-36.

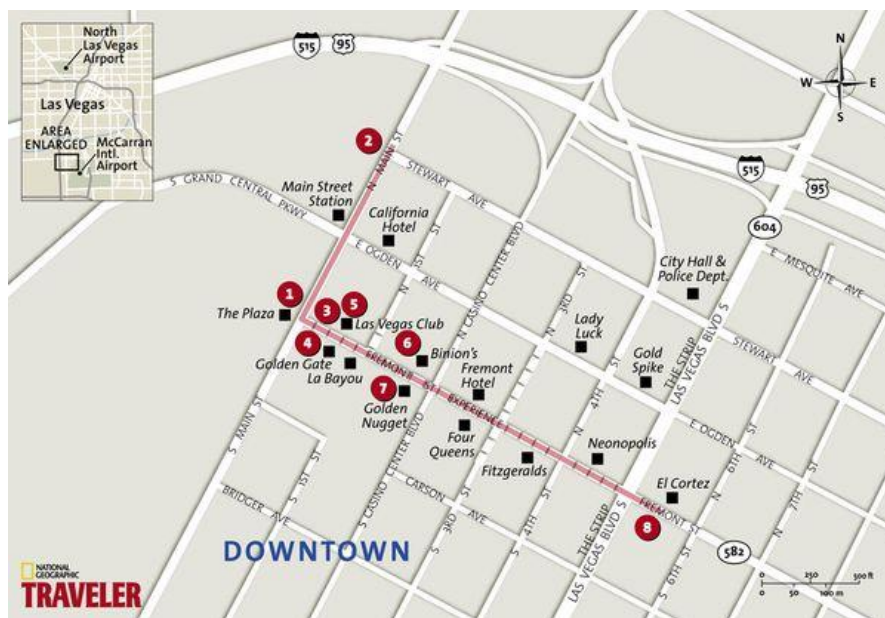
¹³ "Vegas will Blossom with Homes of Men: Fertile Valley of Great Commercial Promise," *Las Vegas Age*, April 21, 1905, <http://digital.lvcclid.org/lvccg/image/2806.pdf> [accessed January 2, 2012]. It was also widely believed that the land in the area would prove fertile and could sustain population growth in the Valley, but dreams of large scale farming were never realized.

¹⁴ The SPLA&SL Railroad, owned by William Clark, was responsible for laying out the town in conjunction with the depot. Designed to cater to transients passing through the area, Las Vegas' buildings and stores were oriented toward the depot rather than the town's residents living behind the central commercial area.

railroad, the town served as an ideal division point along the line with enough available water for steam engines, repair shops, and worker residences.¹⁵ Nearly half the available lots sold in a matter of days, marking the official founding of the town.¹⁶ Hard times fell on the heels of a successful land auction in May 1905, however, and Las Vegas struggled in its early years to meet the initial aspirations of the senator and area entrepreneurs. Due to excessive heat and economic difficulties, many business proprietors returned their licenses a few months after the auction, and Fremont Street failed to develop fully into the prosperous commercial district that everyone had anticipated.¹⁷

The initial lackluster development of Las Vegas, in conjunction with the precarious nature of a desert outpost wholly reliant on the railroad industry in the underdeveloped southwest, ultimately lent a sense of impermanence to the Valley. The town's form thus

sprouted out of its function as a rest stop, embracing a more ephemeral and bazaar-like organization of semi-permanent storefronts in



¹⁵ H.M. McCartney to J. Ross Clark, January 16, 1902, pg. 2, *Southern Nevada: The Boomtown Years, Digital Collection*, Lied Library at University of Nevada, Las Vegas, snv_002388. <http://digital.library.unlv.edu/u/?snv,4857> [accessed January 2, 2012].

¹⁶ C.O. Whitmore to J. Ross Clark Telegram Reporting Townsite Sales, *Southern Nevada: The Boomtown Years, Digital Collection*, Lied Library at University of Nevada, Las Vegas, snv_002418. <http://digital.library.unlv.edu/u/?snv,4857> [accessed January 2, 2012].

¹⁷ Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 15.

close proximity to the sidewalk, all focused on the railroad depot at the head of the street.¹⁸ The original layout of the town reflects business desires to attract railroad and pedestrian patrons, an observation evident in city planning and bolstered by the careful positioning of various proprietor advertisements. Fremont Street, the downtown area's main road situated perpendicular to the railroad station, created an axial focus on the depot from the main street, both visual and symbolic.¹⁹

Civic boosters acknowledged the potential of a strong gridiron pattern framed around the railroad station, the "portal" to the city where people stepped off the train, consequently the lots located nearest to the station were considered the most valuable of those sold during the 1905 auction.²⁰ The town's basic plan functioned as a guide for the traveler, and this organization enabled the pedestrian to both familiarize himself with the area and recognize the town's available amenities. In fact, the effect of positioning these main streets parallel and perpendicular to the depot in an effort to guide visitors into the town ultimately proved successful, especially since it attracted the construction of the city's earliest permanent structures, including the Hotel Nevada, Hotel Overland, the Arizona Club, and the Las Vegas Drug Store.²¹ Notwithstanding some struggle, the town grew. By 1910 it boasted six hotels, several lodging houses, two churches, five general stores, four clothing stores, three barbershops, and six restaurants, not to mention a growing population including five attorneys, two doctors, and two dentists.²²

¹⁸ The area surrounding Fremont and Main eventually proved to be the key business district due to its proximity to the passenger depot; however, new businesses established themselves along the side streets as well. One of the more infamous side streets, Block 16 along First and Stewart, was initially the only section of town where liquor could be sold. It housed the city's most notorious bars and brothels, contributing to the city's debauched reputation.

¹⁹ Venturi, Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 25.

²⁰ Hess, *Viva Las Vegas: After-Hours Architecture*, 16.

²¹ Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 21.

²² Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 34-36.

Prior to the erection of more permanent timber, block, and brick buildings, however, most businesses occupied makeshift edifices, such as tents and small structures with “false fronts.”²³ Contributing to the town’s sense of impermanence, the most permanent structure in the Valley in the early 1900s was the train depot, housed in a re-appropriated train car.²⁴ Despite the provisional nature of these earlier storefronts, they were carefully designed with particular attention to facilitating pedestrian movement and patronization. As a result, Las Vegas’ streetscape and sign design consisted of typical western “boomtown” construction, setting bigger and taller facades against the interiors they fronted. This practice of constructing a more impressive facade was designed to “communicate the store’s importance and to enhance the [order and scale] quality and unity of the street.”²⁵ Lining Fremont with more ornamental facades thus created visual continuity and the feel of an urban atmosphere, while at the same time reflected the hesitancy of shopkeepers to establish permanent structures in the face of uncertain boom and bust periods.



To potential customers, a business’ impressive or substantial appearance denoted stability and success. A boomtown facade subsequently incorporated several features that enhanced this perception, including a better grade of material than the bulk of the structure, and additional ornamentation.²⁶ Although the facade itself might have featured many decorative elements, signage was a key component of the frontage and

²³ Chung, *Las Vegas: Then and Now*, 14.

²⁴ Hess, *Viva Las Vegas: After-Hours Architecture*, 16.

²⁵ Venturi, Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 12.

²⁶ Sara E. Quay, *Westward Expansion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 81-83.

predominantly served a directional or informational purpose. Early signs were thus simple and unadorned, often featuring hand-lettered signs positioned over the entry or painted directly onto the surface of their building's front facade.²⁷ One popular example of this type of signage was known as the "fascia sign," placed on the horizontal band on the building's facade between the storefront and second floor of a structure. Because of the narrowness of this space, sign makers were limited in terms of what they could include; therefore, "fascia signs" usually gave little more than the name of the business or the address.²⁸ In the event the structure was even more impermanent, such as the many early stores that occupied tents in Las Vegas' downtown area, proprietors often mounted wood panels in front of the tent's thin framing.²⁹



Sign types,

however, did not appear in isolation, and a business might feature numerous small-scale signs. For example, owners might employ freestanding banners situated in front of tent entrances, or exterior sidewalls of more permanent facilities as additional advertising space.³⁰

²⁷ Melissa Johnson and Carrie Schomig, *The Neon Museum: An Illustrated History and Catalog* (TEC Inc., 2008).

²⁸ Michael J. Auer, "Preservation Brief 25: The Preservation of Historic Signs," *National Park Service Technical Preservation Services*, accessed October 23, 2011, <http://www.nps.gov/hps/tps/briefs/brief25.htm>.

²⁹ See "Sign indicating tailor shop in tent" and "Postcard showing tent house with humorous sign in Goldfield," *Southern Nevada: The Boomtown Years, Digital Collection*, Lied Library at University of Nevada, Las Vegas, snv_000655 and snv_000801. <http://digital.library.unlv.edu/u/?snv,4857> [accessed January 2, 2012].

³⁰ Michael J. Auer, "Preservation Brief 25: The Preservation of Historic Signs," *National Park Service Technical Preservation Services*, accessed October 23, 2011, <http://www.nps.gov/hps/tps/briefs/brief25.htm>.

Two early Las Vegas businesses, the Arizona Club and The Gem, incorporated these false fronts, featuring signs that informed people what service could be obtained inside. The Arizona Club, for example, featured three different facade signs positioned above the entryway, advertising itself as the “headquarters for fully matured re-imported



straight whiskey.”³¹ Many local businesses adopted the multi-sign approach to advertising, employing some sort of information piece on each side of a structure and

engaging traffic patterns from all directions. The importance of multi-directional signage is evidenced in a 1906 photograph taken from the front of the train depot, looking down Fremont Street. This image depicts the Hotel Nevada across the road from Hotel Overland, two structures situated on opposite corners, oriented in such a way that each addressed both Fremont and Main and provided more of a fluid transition between the two street side facades. The deliberate selection of this location and placement suggests a desire to attract pedestrians from all angles, substantiated by the continuous balcony and facade running along both sides of the structure. Additionally, the property clearly directed signage toward pedestrian traffic emerging from the train station. The back of the hotel, however, is situated toward the main residential areas of the city, again signifying the importance of tourist traffic. On the opposite side of the street, Hotel Nevada mirrors this focus. Downtown properties today still engage the corners and intersecting pathways in a similar manner. Golden Nugget and Binion’s are two

³¹ Chung, *Las Vegas: Then and Now*, 14.

examples, indicative of the importance placed on the pedestrian consumer, as well as the propensity of city developers to overwhelmingly favor a grid pattern.³²

The moderate success of these fledgling businesses, mostly due to their ability to communicate with the railroad depot and its patrons, prompted other owners to erect more lasting structures. Following in the footsteps of the Las Vegas Drug Store, the Arizona Club completed their concrete block building in late 1905.³³ The Hotel Nevada later opened a permanent concrete structure on the southeast corner of Main and Fremont, well within the line of vision of train travelers. The Overland Hotel enjoyed similar success across the street, likely due to an ideal location, and subsequently established longstanding roots in the area.³⁴ Not only did existing businesses find themselves in a position to profit by remaining in the area, but new establishments were also opening in an effort to cater to a growing clientele. The Lincoln Hotel opened down the block in 1910, a testament to the area's strengthening economy and budding tourism industry. Thus the town survived its first few difficult years, despite the state's decision to temporarily ban gambling in 1909, perhaps due to its ability to attract visitors with liberalized divorce laws allowing couples to separate after just six weeks of residency.³⁵

³² The signage used today to engage the corner of two intersecting streets is known as a "bullnose." It is characterized by rounded, convex trim used to provide a smooth, rounded edge.

³³ Chung, *Las Vegas: Then and Now*, 14, and Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 31. Concrete blocks were the chosen building materials because they were considered a stylish building material at the time. The Club also featured leaded glass windows and a hand-carved mahogany bar, lost after Block 16 shut down in 1942 and it was moved to the Hotel Last Frontier.

³⁴ "Hotel Building," *Las Vegas Age*, September 1, 1906, <http://digital.lvcld.org/lvccg/image/7034.pdf> [accessed December 12, 2011], and "Many New Buildings: Much Money to be Invested in Vegas Improvements During the Summer," *Las Vegas Age*, March 12, 1910, <http://digital.lvcld.org/lvccg/image/24318.pdf> [accessed January 27, 2012].

³⁵ "History," City of Las Vegas Website, <http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/factsstatistics/history.htm> [accessed January 31, 2012]. This new law gave travelers a reason to remain in the area, likely aiding in the creation of a more permanent tourism industry.

Between 1910 and 1920, the population of Las Vegas more than doubled, and in many ways, a new city was taking shape.³⁶

At the turn of the century, the railway was the dominant form of transportation in the American West, and the development of Las Vegas' main business area and early advertising strategies reflect it.³⁷ Because the railroad guaranteed travelers would arrive in the Valley and stop there for a predetermined amount of time, the physical landscape of Las Vegas was completely oriented toward that specific traffic pattern and its complementary pedestrian movement. Development was concentrated in this area for the better part of 30 years, and the city took shape around the needs of the railroad. By the 1910s, however, railroads were beginning to give way to automobiles as a major mode of transportation. As Las Vegas matured and entered into the 1920s, the city found itself face to face with a new breed of traveler.³⁸ Americans were



increasingly purchasing their own private automobiles, celebrating a new freedom and the opportunity to travel “whenever and wherever they choose,” and many chose Las

³⁶ United States Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910: Population by Counties and Minor Civil Divisions* <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1910.html> [accessed January 2, 2012] and United States Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920: Population by Counties and Minor Civil Divisions* <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1920.html> [accessed January 2, 2012].

³⁷ Roger D. Launius, “Planes, Trains, and Automobiles: Choosing Transportation Modes in the Twentieth-Century American West,” *Journal of the West* 42 (Spring 2003), 45-55.

³⁸ As early as 1914, Las Vegas' Chamber of Commerce initiated efforts to build a federal highway that would connect southern California with Salt Lake City with a route through Las Vegas. Talks with Arizona and Utah commenced, as Las Vegans also wanted neighboring states to improve their own sections of the highway. The town recognized the economic advantages of easing automobile travel into the area, and by 1916, the Southern Nevada Automobile Club organized to promote highway building. Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 46.

Vegas.³⁹ Democratized by Henry Ford, car ownership skyrocketed in the '10s and '20s, ushering in an era characterized by the “recreational automobile.”⁴⁰

The rise of automobile culture coincided with an important, serendipitous opportunity for Las Vegas that would change the course of the town's development and economy: the federal government's selection of Black Canyon as the site for the new Hoover Dam.⁴¹ The ability to travel met with an impetus for Americans to journey to Southern Nevada, prompting the construction of complementary infrastructure and creating an advantageous climate for the maturation of Las Vegas' nascent tourism industry. Recognizing the prospect, boosters in the Chamber of Commerce began working with the Automobile Club of Southern California and placed an advertisement in *Sunset Magazine* in an effort to attract eastbound drivers.⁴² Just as the officials worked to advertise Las Vegas and its new amenities, proprietors followed suit and sought innovative new ways for marketing their businesses. Completed in 1935, the Hoover Dam ultimately served as a catalyst in the area's growth and development, transforming Las Vegas from a small town into a burgeoning city. This man-made marvel of national significance was ultimately responsible for pushing the city in the direction of a tourism economy, stimulating new roadway connections with neighboring states, as well as an

³⁹ Peter O. Muller, “Transportation and Urban Reform: Stages in the Spatial Evolution of the American Metropolis” in Susan Hanson and Genevieve Giuliano, ed., *The Geography of Urban Transportation* (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 70.

⁴⁰ Muller, “Transportation and Urban Reform,” 70. According to Muller, American roads accommodated over 2 million cars in 1916, a number that quadrupled by 1920.

⁴¹ Black Canyon was selected after much deliberation in Congress over the scope and potential locations of the project, see the Colorado River Basin hearings before the Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation, House of Representatives, *Hoover Dam Digital Collections*, Lied Library at University of Nevada, Las Vegas, http://digital.library.unlv.edu/u/?lv_water,2289 [accessed March 1, 2011]. See also *Boulder Canyon Project Act of 1928*, HR 5773, 70th Cong., <http://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/pao/pdfiles/bcpact.pdf>.

⁴² Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 41.

influx of jobs and wages that simultaneously necessitated new advertising techniques and provided businesses with the crucial element – affordable electricity.

In 1931, a *Time Magazine* article claimed, “In anticipation of this flood of cash, the little desert town . . . has been swelling and swelling like a toad stool.”⁴³ The same article reported that people were streaming in from everywhere, and that the town was bursting at the seams: “There is no room in hotels. The town needs 1,000 more homes and 150 more stores. There isn't a gas plant in town. . . . All post office boxes have been rented and the general delivery line is a block long all day.”⁴⁴ In 1932 over 100,000 tourists visited Southern Nevada, trumped significantly in 1933 when 132,000 visited the dam alone and over 230,000 made their way to Las Vegas.⁴⁵ The presence of such a technological marvel in Southern Nevada and the attention it garnered indicated to community leaders that the city's future lay in tourism, or retaining visitors rather than catering to transients in order to capitalize on their expendable income. Thus, in addition to supplying the necessary essentials, Las Vegas recognized other opportunities for economic benefit in the form of visitor entertainment.⁴⁶ A historic reputation for debauched behaviors prompted residents to promote increased tolerance toward prostitution, quick marriage, even easier divorce, gambling, and an essential disregard for

⁴³ “National Affairs: Las Vegas Made Safe,” *TIME Magazine*, June 1, 1931, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,752883,00.html> [accessed December 2, 2011].

⁴⁴ “National Affairs: Las Vegas Made Safe,” *TIME Magazine*, June 1, 1931, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,752883,00.html> [accessed December 2, 2011].

⁴⁵ Mark Gottdiener and Gloria Collins, *Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All-American City* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1999), 10.

⁴⁶ Gottdiener and Collins, *Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All-American City*, 10. By the late 1930s, more than a quarter million tourists a year were visiting Las Vegas, a city with a population of 8,000.

prohibition in an effort to attract clientele.⁴⁷ By 1931, the scandalous activities that had long characterized the “Wild West” found a permanent home in Las Vegas.

Inventive marketing was the key to presenting new visitors with these scintillating new amenities; however, when Las Vegas finally began constructing its iconic lighted-signage, other parts of the country were already well acquainted with the technology. The signs in other growing cities at the turn of the century had been increasing in size, scale, and technological capability in response to the construction of larger buildings, the introduction of elevated trains and electric trolleys, and the faster pace of city life.⁴⁸ It was the pioneer character of Las Vegas that caused the city’s signage to evolve in a distinct manner, ultimately growing out of earlier nineteenth century billboard and poster traditions. The maturation of the outdoor advertising industry and billposting tactics of the nineteenth century, originally characterized by a ferocious entrepreneurial drive to cover every bit of available space with posters, led to the formalization and standardization of billboards as a method of presenting a more palatable product to the public.⁴⁹ Billboards mounted in “permanent steel structures, secured by leases and safely maintained” became the norm in urban areas by the 1890s in a majority of large American cities.⁵⁰ The billboards that became a mainstay in other U.S. cities eventually

⁴⁷ “Nevada: One Sound State,” *TIME Magazine*, March 8, 1937, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,930880-1,00.html> [accessed March 4, 2011]. In the 1930s, Nevada also promoted itself as “One Sound State,” a campaign that emphasized the state’s lack of corporate tax, income tax, and inheritance tax, as well as the greatest per capita wealth in an effort to attract affluent investors.

⁴⁸ Times Square was home to a number of giant animated signs known as “spectaculars,” which began appearing as early as 1904. In fact, this part of New York City was so saturated with brightly lit electrical advertising signs that it earned the nickname “The Great White Way.” For more information, see Tama Starr and Edward Hayman, *Signs and Wonders: The Spectacular Marketing of America* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), and David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940* (MIT Press, 1990).

⁴⁹ Starr and Hayman, *Signs and Wonders*, 17-37.

⁵⁰ Starr and Hayman, *Signs and Wonders*, 27.

found their way out west, as these stipulations set the stage for later outdoor advertising and the “imminent birth of the electric sign,” the future trademark of the Las Vegas landscape.

While electricity became available in Las Vegas as early as 1907, and most signs thereafter were subsequently illuminated by small electric incandescent streetlights, the city’s signage remained relatively “primitive” in comparison to other areas.⁵¹ This was due, in part, to Las Vegas’ youth and its reliance on one form of transportation. With the growth of automobile culture and the establishment of a more permanent economy, sign design began to shift and advertising techniques became more elaborate. Las Vegas business proprietors began incorporating neon into their signage around the 1930s as a means of creating enticing advertising images that deferred to the car. To this end, neon signs became an extremely effective way to attract attention. A neon light has five times greater visibility but requires less wattage than an incandescent lamp; thus it offered proprietors an economical option in terms of added features.⁵² The “bang for your buck” nature of neon signs contributed to their proliferation along the main business corridors of cities and towns, and more specifically, in Las Vegas. When first introduced, however, this technique was considered expensive, as Hoover Dam did not start generating affordable electricity until 1936; thus, the initial application of this medium occurred as an addition to or embellishment of existing signage. As such, “neon, the medium that was to make Las Vegas famous was ... hardly exceptional... in the 1930s Fremont Street was, like other Main Streets, still a distant provincial cousin of Times

⁵¹ Starr and Hayman, *Signs and Wonders*, 17-37.

⁵² Michael F. Crowe, “Neon Signs: Their Origin, Use, and Maintenance,” *APT Bulletin Vol.23 No.2* (1991): 30-37.

Square.”⁵³ Only the number of signs, and the fact that they advertised roulette and keno, served to distinguish Fremont’s neon from the signs in urban entertainment districts elsewhere in the United States.

Creative and innovative application of neon in the downtown area was also initially hindered by the simplicity of the city’s construction and its rigid gridiron pattern. The original layout of the townsite was meant to cater to pedestrian and railroad traffic, and consequently operated within a smaller radius. Space was at a premium, and signs continued to be constructed in ways that allowed businesses to capitalize on the room they had.⁵⁴ For example, the new Apache Hotel, opened in 1932, constructed a single horizontal sign extending from the third floor. Similarly, the Frontier Club, Boulder

Club, Las Vegas Club, and the Sagev Hotel all featured very large vertical signs in the moderne design. Once the car began competing



intensely with the railroad after 1920, however, the city began expanding its vision, both physically and figuratively. The 1920s brought influential turning points in Las Vegas history, including the completion of the federal highway connecting California with Salt

⁵³ Hess, *Viva Las Vegas*, 22-24.

⁵⁴ Johnson and Schomig, *The Neon Museum*, 14.

Lake, the arrival of daily passenger air service, and transportation improvement projects to aid in the initiative of promoting the city as a tourist destination.⁵⁵ In the years following these developments, as well as the completion of the dam, there was a noticeable shift in the city's economy from relying on the railroad and auxiliary services to consciously attracting tourists. The resulting growth extended well beyond the boundaries of the original Clark townsite.

With the completion of these Depression-era projects, the number of paved roads in the country doubled, and gave way to new patterns of living and consumption.⁵⁶ It was the combination of these new highways, byways, and roadways that eased travel, along with the abundance of electricity, which ultimately ushered in Las Vegas' "Age of Neon." These changes were most significant because they began to alter the city's image and appearance. Although automobile sales were down 75% during the Depression, gasoline sales remained steady and demonstrated Americans' commitment to cars and auto travel.⁵⁷ Existing hotels in the downtown area subsequently expanded and new ones opened. There eventually came a point when auto tourists could no longer secure accommodations for themselves or their vehicles in the downtown area, and a new type of building emerged: the motel. A "new typology of roadside vernacular," the motor court became "a common one in the Las Vegas Valley for the following three decades."⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 66. It is worth mentioning that the first automobile dealership opened in Las Vegas in 1923, on the site of today's Las Vegas Club, selling Cadillacs, La Salles, Pontiacs, Buicks, Oldsmobiles, and GMC trucks.

⁵⁶ *America on the Road*, Films Media Group, 1984. *Films On Demand*. Flash, <http://digital.films.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?aid=9942&xtid=42065>, (accessed February 4, 2012). See also James Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988).

⁵⁷ *America on the Road*, Films Media Group, 1984. *Films On Demand*. Flash, <http://digital.films.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?aid=9942&xtid=42065>, (accessed February 4, 2012).

⁵⁸ Johnson and Schomig, *The Neon Museum*, 31. On changes in automobile travel accommodations, see Warren Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Auto Camp to Hotel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

The introduction of car-oriented architecture called for additional space, thus development pushed out away from the town nucleus and along the new highways.⁵⁹ Businesses increasingly moved away from the city center and out onto autonomous strip land, advantageous for its ability to accommodate parking lots and its freedom from city taxes.⁶⁰ The 1930s and '40s were ultimately significant because it was in those decades that Las Vegas recognized that gaming-tourism would be their main industry, and began transforming the landscape.

The 1933 opening of Young Electric Sign Company (YESCO) in Southern Nevada was another important factor that influenced Las Vegas' growth beyond the initial townsite. Neon gave these new buildings presence along the highway, and Thomas Young creations enabled these new businesses to "shine." Founded in 1920, YESCO first opened shop in Ogden, Utah.⁶¹ The company gained notoriety selling hand-gilded and "neonized" signs in various western states, including Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, and Nevada in the early to mid 1920s. Because of their incredible popularity and success, YESCO began manufacturing its own neon tubing in 1927, effectively shifting the focus of its business for the next half century.⁶² The company's earliest signs utilized more traditional technologies of sheet metal cabinets and "gin-pole" installations, adding novelty to recognizable patterns of form, material, shape, and symbol to ensure that signs

⁵⁹ Clark's initial townsite was characterized by its rigid gridiron plan; however, when proprietors began moving their businesses along Highway 91 – the future Las Vegas Strip – the city transformed from a pedestrian based landscape to a carscape, and the roadway became the city. For information on the evolution of auto-related development, see numerous books by Jakle and Sculle, especially *Signs in America's Auto Age: Signatures of Landscape and Place*, *America's Main Street Hotels: Transiency and Community in the Early Auto Age*, and *Remembering Roadside America: Preserving the Recent Past as Landscape and Place*.

⁶⁰ Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 109-110.

⁶¹ YESCO was originally known as the Thomas Young Sign Company.

⁶² Young Electric Sign Company, "Historic Timeline-Chronology," YESCO Website <http://www.yesco.com/yesco-timeline2.html>.

maintained meaning and relevance.⁶³ Successful through the Depression years, YESCO also employed an innovative business strategy that allowed them to expand to Las Vegas in 1932 and to Salt Lake City in 1934. This strategy hinged on the company's decision to lease their creations and offer routine maintenance on existing signs rather than relying on struggling businesses to spend significant amounts of money to continually replace old signage to stay current in a competitive market. This option proved especially popular during the Depression years and sustained business during the war period when the company experienced a labor shortage.⁶⁴

At first neon signs were attached to existing buildings, but by the 1930s and '40s, neon signage and tubing were being used as an integral part of the building design. This



method of decorating the structure was especially popular for movie theaters and commercial buildings that began featuring marquees and vertical signs integrated creatively with their

⁶³ Mahar, *American Signs*, 13, 74 and Young Electric Sign Company, "Historic Timeline-Chronology," YESCO Website <http://www.yesco.com/yesco-timeline2.html>. Mahar notes the tendency of early sign designers to incorporate well-worn and well-known patterns into their signs, integrating new technologies while still reinforcing existing traditions. She asserts, "innovative sign compositions were arrived at not through the introduction of new forms but through the modification of existing ones."

⁶⁴ Young Electric Sign Company, "Historic Timeline-Chronology," YESCO Website, <http://www.yesco.com/yesco-timeline2.html> and Johnson and Schomig, *The Neon Museum*, 17. Additionally, during WWII, neon sign production all but stopped due to the prohibition of the use of sheet metal.

facades.⁶⁵ It was again a popular option for those downtown businesses with limited space, especially those restricted by the depth of the sidewalks that extended between 10 and 14 feet wide.⁶⁶ Businesses on the Strip, however, benefitted from large tracts of land and subsequently steered architecture and sign design in whole new directions. These new hotel-motel architectural patterns called for a new sign type, the freestanding sign attached to a tall pylon, also known as a super-ylon.⁶⁷ The pylon sign was visible from long distances and became increasingly common along Las Vegas Boulevard, evidence of businesses' desires to cater to highway travelers. Under the guidance of YESCO's artists, Strip businesses ultimately pioneered the creative use of neon in large-scale advertising, and built a national reputation for creativity while simultaneously fostering Las Vegas' identity as a "neon metropolis."

Thomas Hull's El Rancho was the first lavish motor hotel on Route 91, introducing both the architectural form of the motel to the Valley and the notion of



architectural theming. The El Rancho set the precedent for the typical low-rise, western, sprawling resort-architecture that was to

dominate the Strip in its early years. Constructed in the new style, the El Rancho was

⁶⁵ APT Bulletin, 32

⁶⁶ Johnson and Schomig, *The Neon Museum*, 16.

⁶⁷ Johnson and Schomig, *The Neon Museum*, 14.

also the progenitor for the ubiquitous feature of all motels: the identifying road sign, often neon, frequently with an image depicting a theme associated with an attraction in the area.⁶⁸ While embracing the notion of the theme, none of El Rancho’s signage was particularly large. As the only hotel on the highway in 1941, it did not have to be. The two signs that stood at roadside, outlined in neon, “lacked the flamboyance that came to be associated with Las Vegas, but they had started something.”⁶⁹ Nearby establishments Thunderbird and Desert Inn joined the El Rancho along Highway 91 in 1948 and 1950, respectively, but their signage and architecture also appeared in balance. Without much competition, large, attention-grabbing signage was unnecessary. Once the Strip filled in with more hotels, however, signage became the ornament for the roadside



hotel looking to keep up with the size, eye appeal, and stylistic sophistication of their neighbors. Neon served as the medium that gave these buildings presence along the highway, and thus became closely associated with the character of the city.

Significantly, the “Cowboy,” “Western,” and “California Gold Rush” themes permeated all aspects of Las Vegas business and advertisement in the 1930s and 1940s. Initially, the theme matched Las Vegas’ proud heritage as a frontier town and celebrated

⁶⁸ Hess, *Viva Las Vegas*, 17.

⁶⁹ Hess, *Viva Las Vegas*, 31.

its more libertarian roots. In 1939, the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce adopted the slogan, “Still a Frontier Town,” highlighting a generic American identification with the budding Southwestern part of the United States.⁷⁰ Ironically, the city’s identification with the “Old West” was more than anachronistic in nature, as Las Vegas was founded in 1905; therefore, the city was established a full fifteen years after the 1890 U.S. Census announced the “closing” of the frontier.⁷¹ Perhaps in response to Las Vegas’ limited connection to the historic concept of frontier, the theme also embraced the city’s southwestern heritage, incorporating Hispanic or Spanish-American facets of the Valley’s culture. Businesses adopting names such as El Portal Theatre, El Rancho, El Cortez, Boulder Club, Apache, Golden Nugget, the Frontier, and Last Frontier are just a few of the earliest properties to promulgate Las Vegas’ “Old West” premise. The frontier and cowboy theme remained popular through the first half of the century, experiencing a resurgence of interest with the rise of automobile culture.

Incidentally, when automobiles began to replace trains as the preferred mode of travel, signs focused not on the progressive nature of the new technology, but began to reflect a new symbolic identification with the past. Cars were hailed as the modern versions of the stagecoach, re-introducing notions of privacy, independence, and freedom temporarily lost to the rigorous timetables and dictated travel patterns of the railroad.⁷² Even the challenges of automobile travel were compared favorably to the “passivity of train travel, which divorced one from the physical experiences and choices of auto

⁷⁰ Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 92.

⁷¹ The Paiute Indians occupied the Valley long before the 1905 founding, but this official date marks the creation of a township. Frank Wright, *Nevada Yesterdays: Short Looks at Las Vegas History* (Las Vegas: Stephens Press, 2005), 103.

⁷² Gudis, *Buyways*, 42.

travel.”⁷³ This identification with historic ideas of independence and adventure led to the incorporation of colonial and western motifs in signage as a symbol of rediscovered liberty. Many Las Vegas hotels and other businesses adopted a western theme for this reason, including the Pioneer Club, Last Frontier, Sassy Sally’s, and Binion’s Horseshoe. Moreover, with the increased affordability of automobiles and the availability of leisure time, more tourists were traveling greater distances into far-away, unfamiliar regions. As a result, Las Vegas’ adoption of a western motif also served as a method for addressing the public’s generalized expectations of regional identity.⁷⁴ Catering to visitors unfamiliar with more local nuances in southwestern culture, business owners adopted less culturally specific names, such as that of the Bow and Arrow Motel or the Desert Inn, making their product more recognizable to out-of-towners.⁷⁵

In 1946 the Flamingo changed the direction of Las Vegas’ more traditional



trajectory of development. Conceptually similar to the El Rancho in plan and form, it was stylistically dramatically different. In the creation of the hotel, architects and builders manipulated imagery to invent a new, exotic world modeled after Miami and Monte Carlo— a sophisticated, urban aesthetic

⁷³ Gudis, *Buyways*, 42.

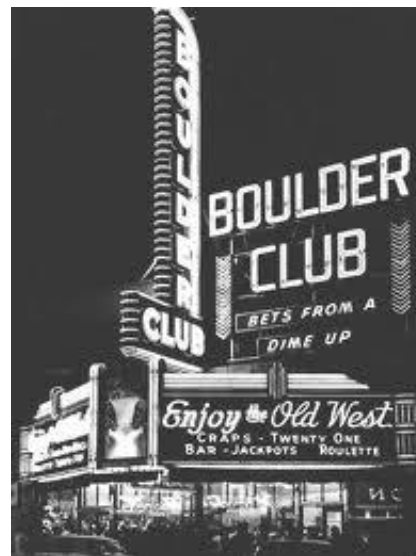
⁷⁴ Mahar, *American Signs*, 74.

⁷⁵ In Las Vegas, sign design shifted away from local identifiers such as the names of proprietors or neighborhood features to more thematic regional identifiers in order to provide travelers with a sense of place. A business with a less culturally specific name made a sign more accessible to out-of-towners, a majority of the clientele, and could be used in more than one region; therefore, properties opted for references to Apache and saguaro cacti, rather than the area’s indigenous Anasazi population or yucca plant.

yet unseen in the desert Valley.⁷⁶ The Flamingo featured private bungalows, a restaurant, theater, health club, gymnasium, steam rooms, tennis courts, a swimming pool, and trap shooting range, a nine-hole golf course, as well as stables to house forty horses.⁷⁷

Beyond the hotel's incorporation of a new theme, its signage was both innovative and influential. The tallest freestanding pylon on the Strip in 1953, the Flamingo's updated cylindrical 60-foot pillar, or "champagne tower," featured animated neon rings.⁷⁸ The new "champagne tower" spectacular was largely responsible for prompting the neon competition among Strip neighbors for taller and more visually imposing sign improvements.⁷⁹ With the Flamingo pushing the envelope, it was clear sailing in any stylistic direction.

Las Vegas' architectural and signage evolved in unexpected jumps, as the El Rancho colonized the Strip, and the Flamingo paved the way for new and exciting themes; however, trends in the downtown area would also show up along Las Vegas Boulevard, and vice versa, fueling competition between the two in an effort to attract visitors. Packed "cheek by jowl," advertising options for the Fremont Street casinos seemed reduced.⁸⁰ Establishments could



⁷⁶ The Flamingo was the first property to introduce some of Las Vegas' key design features, including the lack of windows or clocks on the walls, and a floor plan that requires guests to walk through the casino to access the hotel. The property also featured the first golf course associated with a casino in the city. For more information, see the *Online Nevada Encyclopedia 2010*, "Flamingo Hotel," http://onlinenevada.org/flamingo_hotel.

⁷⁷ Robert D. McCracken, *Las Vegas: The Great American Playground* (University of Nevada Press, 1997), 63.

⁷⁸ Johnson and Schomig, *The Neon Museum*, 26.

⁷⁹ Barnard, *Magic Sign*, 48, 86-88 and Hess, *Viva Las Vegas*, 53-54.

⁸⁰ Hess, *Viva Las Vegas*, 68.

continue to build up and around with streamlined pylons, along the lines of earlier traditions, but competition grew fierce in the post-WWII period and up until the 1960s. In 1955 the Dunes opened and became the 10th resort on the Strip.⁸¹ Significantly, “signs were conceived through competition for auto-borne tourists, but casinos fought each other fiercely for the privilege of boasting the biggest or tallest.”⁸² In response to the increasing competition, YESCO created the city’s first “spectacular” in 1945, a striking vertical marquee for the Boulder Club. The sign was really a collage of three separate pieces positioned in close proximity, but the effect was astounding and the grouping made it the largest sign on Fremont Street.⁸³

For all the Boulder Club’s magnificence, it was quickly outpaced by even larger and more complex lighted advertisements for many of the other downtown casinos. Assuring downtown relevancy necessitated new techniques, and the results were attention-grabbing sensations of a grandiose scale: neon embellishment concealing older, outdated facades. The Pioneer Club achieved this by incorporating pictorial symbolism



in its signage, yet this was insignificant compared to the updates made to the 1946 Golden Nugget. Designed by YESCO’s Kermit Wayne, the Golden Nugget added

sheathing with metal, neon, and incandescent bulbs to its two front facades in 1950, turning the building’s fascia into a new plane of sign design. This new method of a total

⁸¹ “Timeline,” *Las Vegas Sun*, <http://www.lasvegassun.com/history/timeline/>.

⁸² Gottdiener, Collins, and Dickens, *Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All American City*, 86.

⁸³ Barnard, *Magic Sign*, 68.

display resulted in the first coordinated, unified blend of architecture, theme, and advertisement that foreshadowed later Las Vegas sign design changes.⁸⁴ It also marked a shift in material composition, where after years of creating signs that only employed neon tubing, sign designers began incorporating both colored incandescent bulbs and neon in new their new creations.⁸⁵ This new multi-medium presentation allowed for an energetic display of chasing or flashing bulbs to complement neon's steady glow.⁸⁶

Even more significant to the city's architectural development were the giant super-pylon signs that grew along new high-rise towers. The high-rise was a response to the popularity of the sprawling resorts that had proliferated along Las Vegas Boulevard, reasserting the role of the casino in driving the city's hotel and motel business by again moving visitors closer to the casino. This change in Las Vegas' main architectural



concept, in conjunction with the appearance of more substantial interstate highways carrying motorists along at increasing speeds, called for a new logic and grammar for sign design. As a result, signage increasingly broke away

from the dated streamline style and became the architecture itself. Artisans employed by companies like YESCO utilized this new method for ornamenting and distinguishing

⁸⁴ Barnard, *Magic Sign*, 70. The Mint Hotel and Casino opened in 1957 and featured a sculptural sign that also raised the bar in terms of combining three dimensional signage and architecture. It featured a large, arched canopy that began at ground level on one side of the building, swept across the façade in a broad arch, and turned skyward into a vertical blade sign on the opposite side. Lettering for "The Mint" appeared in vertical stacked form with a 6-point star at the top.

⁸⁵ Johnson and Schomig, *The Neon Museum*, 27.

⁸⁶ In the immediate post-war years, Las Vegas was full of enthusiastic expectations of opportunities, much like the auto industry, home-building industry, and the economy generally. See Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

businesses to “create indelible images in a cohesive aesthetic that integrated architecture, advertising, and culture.”⁸⁷ The signs of the late 1950s and 1960s thus concentrated the symbolic function of architecture into single roadside pylons, and buildings, larger than ever, were sculpted into symbols. The Stardust provides an excellent example of this strategy, as the massive 216-foot pylon exhibited three-dimensional planets, comets, and cosmic rays, appealing to popular imagery of the space race. The sign also featured an angular style of lettering that came to be called the “Atomic” font, further promoting the notion of theming. Notably, it was the first sign on the Strip to be incorporated into the architecture of the building facade itself – the start of an important trend in Las Vegas sign design.⁸⁸

With the continuing popularity of automobile travel, businesses persistently employed advertising tactics meant to capture the attention of these fast-moving consumers. The full maturation of this practice occurred with the introduction of a third sign-type: the lighted porte-cochere.⁸⁹ This technique involved the extension of an automobile canopy on the street-facing side of a building in an enormous, dramatic lighted display.⁹⁰ Caesars Palace, opened in 1966, was one of the first properties to employ this technique and provides one of the most emblematic examples of car-oriented architecture. Pushed back from the street, Caesars today still features the famous fountains,

... leading up to the main entrance... shadowed by the massive porte-cochere. The Porte-cochere is a hulking collection of levels, stacked

⁸⁷ Hess, *Viva Las Vegas*, 80.

⁸⁸ Johnson and Schomig, *The Neon Museum*, 29. Stardust also commissioned a smaller sign along the roadway. Observers reported being able to see the signs from almost three miles away, across the desert landscape.

⁸⁹ The porte-cochere is a passage way used to allow vehicles to pass from the street into the interior courtyard.

⁹⁰ Johnson and Schomig, *The Neon Museum*, 14.

upon one another, but grow in size as each level steps upward... The edge of each level is lined with brass treatments... From behind this treatment and pushed further back beyond the human eye, a rose colored glow is produced by intense lighting.⁹¹

The MGM Grand hotel similarly featured a grandiose porte-cochere as the focal point of the hotel's sleek Hollywood-glamour glass-faced architecture. The ornamentation included a "gridded ceiling of gold bulbs and reflective bronze finishes illuminat[ing] the space, and the area underneath became an extension of the interior of the casino."⁹² The spectacular porte-cochere coincided with the height of popularity in automobile travel, and although the trend did not last long, it influenced later developments that followed on the heels of growing airline travel and the city's completion of its modern jetport.



While the railroad and the highway played a critical role in the early rise of Las Vegas, airplanes gained importance after 1950 and this mode of transportation grew to surpass the automobile as tourists' preferred mode of travel. An airport designed to accommodate commercial flights opened December 9, 1948, and coincided with key architectural developments.⁹³ Not only did commercial airlines use the new McCarran airport, but several hotels also regularly chartered flights to bring patrons to their

⁹¹ UNLV Center for Gaming Research, "Neon Survey: Sunset to Sahara," accessed February 16, 2012, http://gaming.unlv.edu/v_museum/neon_survey/surveys/caesars_palace.html.

⁹² Johnson and Schomig, *The Neon Museum*, 40.

⁹³ Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 147.

properties.⁹⁴ Still a new and essentially cost-prohibitive form of travel, flight did not begin to really influence the development of the town until the arrival of the jet plane in 1963 and the rise of the convention business.⁹⁵ Jet service meant faster flight times and Las Vegas knew that these faster and safer jets would bring millions more visitors to Las Vegas.⁹⁶ Coupled with Nevada's Corporate Gaming Act of 1969 that welcomed major corporations into the world of casino ownership, the subsequent development of a more modern corporate architecture, and the waning popularity of neon across the country, the city once again experienced a shift in sign design.

In the 1970s, a difficult economy slowed hotel and casino development, and few of the establishments that were built carried on the tradition of neon spectacular. A few exceptions to this decade's trend of unadorned buildings of concrete and steel with plain



facades were the Flamingo's addition of three-dimensional feathers in 1976 and the construction of "Lucky" the clown for Circus Circus that same year.⁹⁷ High-rise towers

⁹⁴ The Frontier and the Hacienda were two of the earliest properties to fly guests into Las Vegas specifically to visit their hotels. In 1959, Hacienda Airlines had more scheduled daily flights to the city than United, American, and TWA combined. This was just one aspect of a larger campaign to promote Las Vegas as a destination. Four years earlier, the Chamber of Commerce established the Live Wire Fund, a collective initiative through which chamber members pledged between 1 and 5 percent of their profits and resorts agreed to match those figures for the purpose of advertising Las Vegas. It was out of the Live Wire Fund that Vegas Vic was born, Las Vegas' iconic cowboy, continuing the tradition of promoting the Valley's western heritage; however, evident in the appearance of the Flamingo and followed by the Stardust, Sands, Sahara, Dunes, and Riviera, resort theming was following a new exotic trend.

⁹⁵ McCarran International Airport opened in 1963. While many California and Arizona tourists still travel to Las Vegas by car, flight has quickly become the dominant mode of transportation for visitors. The city's passenger railroad, however, met its end in the 1960s when it was razed to make room for the Union Plaza Hotel.

⁹⁶ Lanius, "Planes, Trains, and Automobiles," 51. According to Lanius, "The airplane, Western boosters recognized, could be used effectively to tie the local economy together and to make it more a part of the national mainstream."

⁹⁷ Johnson and Schomig, *The Neon Museum*, 41.

were ultimately the most commonly developed properties moving into the 1980s, a reflection of the new corporate culture. This denser, urban form also unintentionally created a more pedestrian-oriented experience perhaps than ever before. Simultaneously, however, the rise of the passenger-jet and the growth of the airline industry influenced the nature of the city's architecture, as distinctive symbols and themes that served to define individual casinos transformed into larger-than-life iconic environments that attracted tourist dollars from even further away. Some properties were even built in the shapes of the products they sold in an effort to capture the attention of fast-moving, more distant consumers.⁹⁸ Thus, paradoxically, as traditional signage moved closer to ground level in response to consumers' decisions to walk along the Strip, casinos were coming up with even more creative ways to differentiate their establishments from neighboring competitors.

In a manner similar to the automobile that had dominated earlier modes of transportation, democratized airline travel served to introduce the idea of marketing to the masses. The new tourism economy depended on volume in addition to high rollers. The result of these efforts produced an innovative architecture that was characterized by integrated theming and by the 1980s, the importance of signs diminished, replaced by



⁹⁸ This type of “novelty architecture” can be found in the main section of the Excalibur, a hotel shaped like a medieval castle. Excalibur’s design indicates to visitors that the property’s entertainment is Camelot-themed, while the Luxor’s Egyptian-themed entertainment is advertised in its pyramidal shape.

massive pictorial architecture as a new device to attract tourists.⁹⁹ In a way, Caesars Palace was the forerunner of this new tradition with its blended Ancient Greek and Roman motifs that evoked popular imagination. This technique reached its height with the opening of the mega-resort Mirage in 1989 and the Excalibur, Treasure Island, Luxor, Stratosphere, Paris, Bellagio, and Venetian-themed resorts that followed.

In this more sculptural signage, the “emphasis is on kineticism, not the particular product being advertised. The viewer is credited with enough sophistication to ‘read’ the visual excitement and to thereby remember the sponsor.”¹⁰⁰ Beyond remembering the sponsor, the new signage was designed to “recreate the look and feel of exotic places far away, places to which many people will never be able to go ... the buildings have to some degree provided an extraordinary opportunity within the fabric of popular culture.”¹⁰¹ As Alan Hess notes, “In the great signs, the Strip had developed an urban aesthetic that proved both practical and expressive. They were conceptual gateways, guiding drivers down the Strip while telegraphing the experience to be discovered inside ... in a total environment intended to transport them from reality to fantasy.”¹⁰²

Entering into the 21st century, some might argue that these signs have evolved because of maturing advertising strategies and a need to mass market in a city saturated with travel options, and advertising certainly plays a role. LED, an exceedingly popular sign technology for many current Las Vegas businesses, offers the opportunity for properties to change their signs more frequently; however, these businesses, more often than not, incorporate LED technology into larger sign structures that have more

⁹⁹ Hess, *Viva Las Vegas*, 102.

¹⁰⁰ Stern, *Contemporary Neon*, 30.

¹⁰¹ Nancy B. Reed, “The Classical Heritage in Neon Lights: Las Vegas, Nevada,” *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures Vol.24 Issue ½* (Spring/Summer 2001), 152.

¹⁰² Hess, *Viva Las Vegas*, 83-84.

permanency. As a result, the LED phenomenon parallels the supplementary reader board addition to older signs and does not actually function as a full-fledged replacement for larger, themed signage. The adoption of both techniques is evident in the new signage adopted by the Aria and City Center complex that features structures that convey a sense of modernity and technology on which their properties base their identities. In recognizing this distinction, the changes in architecture, sign design and technology have undoubtedly been influenced by shifts in transportation – beginning as ranch areas and railroad outposts, Las Vegas’ businesses evolved into markers for highway travelers, later became beacons for airline passengers, as evidenced in Luxor’s beam of light aimed at the sky, and finally, transformed into modes of transportation themselves. The city’s eclectic architecture provides clear evidence of that influence: the Roman palaces, medieval castles, Venetian canals, and international cityscapes that remain are a celebration to Las Vegas’ commitment to illusion, escapism, and leisure.



**- Chapter Four -
Program Outline Proposal**



TRANSPORTATION & DESIGN PROGRAM OUTLINE

Objectives:

- **To reintroduce local history into a broader context**, ultimately aiding in visitor “meaning-making” through the connection of new information about the signs to their existent knowledge base.
- **To foster a connection between visitors and the neon signs**, helping guests to understand how the signs work together to tell a story about Las Vegas history specifically, and understand how they reflect a larger national narrative of technological development in general.
- **To promote “meaning-making” through interactive measures**, encouraging visitors to engage in a dialogue with the signs, guides, and other associated materials, as well as inviting visitors to share personal experience and memory of the artifacts, locale, or larger themes.
- **To encourage visitors to compare the signage with the current physical landscape**, noting similarities and differences in design and technology today, as well as supporting continued interaction and contemplation of the artifacts and historical context beyond the completion of the visit.

Preface:

The following pages outline a new tour program for the Neon Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada. Based on the recommendations of Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord in their publication, *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions*, as well as those found in Anna Johnson and company’s *The Museum Educator’s Manual: Educators Share Successful Techniques*, this curatorial brief includes a thematic structural plan, a basic storyline chart, a resource plan listing the signs and artifacts to be incorporated, and a public programming plan explaining supplemental curriculum designed to promote the new

overarching theme of transportation and design for the exhibit.¹ The conception of the tour outline and its content is largely influenced by the writings and recommendations of museum education scholars John H. Falk, Lynn D. Dierking, George E. Hein, Carole Henry, and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, a 2004 Smithsonian-wide Survey of Museum Visitors conducted by the Smithsonian, the work of Christina Goulding, as well as my own visitor research. This brief also includes an aerial photograph of the floor plan, an itemized list of signs to be included in the presentation, as well as a selective exhibit research bibliography for further development of this outline and other related tour materials.

The primary aim in outlining a new tour is to bring the Neon Museum in line with the current practices in museum education. As most of the literature promotes constructivist learning models, meaning making, and relating new material to visitor's existing bodies of knowledge, the old tour presentation did little to encourage a broader conceptualization of local history, or make Las Vegas history in particular relatable or meaningful to the international visitor.² Current theories stress the importance of promoting an overarching theme, as visitors might find broader and more comprehensive

¹ Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord, eds., *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002). This outline format is also based on the outlines utilized at the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side of New York City, suggestions found in Anna Johnson, et al., *The Museum Educator's Manual: Educators Share Successful Techniques* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2009), and the work of Tara Mastrangelo, "Curatorial Brief" [final paper submitted for the James Madison University Introduction to Public History course, Harrisonburg, VA, May 2011].

² For more information on constructivist learning theory and implementation in the museum environment see John H. Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2009), John H. Falk, Lynn D. Dierking, and Susan Foutz, eds. *In Principle, In Practice: Museums as Learning Institutions*, (Lanham: Alta Mira Press – A Division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press – A Division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington, D.C.: Whalesback Books, 1992), Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and their Visitors* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), and Anna Johnson, et al, eds., *The Museum Educator's Manual: Educators Share Successful Techniques* (New York: Alta Mira Press, 2009).

material easier to retain than a series of facts, stories, or bits of information.³ In addition, by providing visitors with a larger framework from which to structure the material presently offered in the tour, visitors might in turn find this localized and disjointed information more significant, prompting them to find ways to connect it to their own personal experiences or knowledge banks. This outline thus focuses on the changing modes in transportation, a nationwide and international phenomenon relevant to visitors from all over the country and the world, and its influence on the evolution of architecture and sign design in commercial centers – specifically Las Vegas.

This new, comprehensive tour, however, must constitute one of many visitor options if it is to really recognize and utilize the theories and ideologies of current museum educators. Beyond providing a more understandable and personally relevant framework in order to promote learning, museums must offer visitors multiple selections, as scholars have found that the classification “museum visitor” too often masks the incredible variety of motivations, needs, desires, and expectations individuals have of their museum experiences. Moreover, these anticipations or identity-related needs are not constant, but ever changing for each individual whose circumstances and situations are never exactly the same in the context of each visit. For example, an individual might conceive of a museum as a place for learning, for rejuvenation, for socializing, for “seeing the sights,” or for entertaining.⁴ Each of these perceptions may differ, depending upon the day, the time of year, the visitor’s social context, or personal needs. In order to be successful in promoting learning, engaging the public, and providing satisfactory

³ Tim Grove, “Educators on Exhibition Teams” in Johnson, et al., *The Museum Educator’s Manual*, 144.

⁴ Falk identifies the “experience seeker” as one interested in the “must see” aspects of an exhibit. In addressing this need, the tour outlined in this brief is equivalent to the type of “highlights” pamphlet an individual might receive in a large museum, such as the Louvre, the National Portrait Gallery, or the Tate.

experiences so that visitors will want to return with their friends, a museum must endeavor to address all of the potential identity-related needs their audience may have in attending the exhibit.⁵

The Neon Museum operates within a unique environment and presents a number of challenges for the museum educator. As Falk and Dierking assert in their chief publication, *The Museum Experience*, an individual's visit to a museum is influenced at all times by three factors: the personal context, the physical context, and the social context. Located in the heart of the "Entertainment Capital of the World," the Neon Museum competes with a number of other activities for which the city gained its notoriety, particularly gaming. The institution must subsequently strive to insert itself into the personal contexts of visitors who travel to Vegas, sometimes with very structured agendas. Second, the museum itself is an outdoor venue, its primary facility encompassing a dirt lot in Downtown Las Vegas. Open during the summertime to host tourists when temperature highs average in the low 100s (°F), or throughout the winter months when temperatures drop into the 30s, the Neon Museum must battle the elements.⁶ Unlike other institutions that feature climate-controlled environments, little can be done in the way of shielding tourists from extreme physical conditions that might serve to inhibit effective learning. Finally, a city that markets itself as an adult destination skews the social context of Neon Museum visitors. While families typically frequent museums, this institution receives a disproportionate number of adult visitors traveling with groups of friends or in couples. This dynamic affects the social learning

⁵ Falk outlines identity-related needs in his work, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2009). For more in-depth discussion and analysis of these ideas, see the first chapter of this project, "Museum Education: Theory and Practice."

⁶ Monthly Averages for Las Vegas, Nevada, The Weather Channel, accessed December 15, 2011, <http://www.weather.com/weather/wxclimatology/monthly/graph/USNV0049>.

environment in ways still largely unexplored, but certainly impacts the types of conversations and interactions visitors have with others during the course of a visit.⁷

In working with these concepts and aims in mind, some slight changes have been made to the curatorial brief outlined in Lord and Lord's manual in order to accommodate this project. For example, the resource plan typically lists all the objects housed within museum storage that will be used in the exhibit. Because this tour outline utilizes a collection of neon signs that are incredibly difficult to move or reposition, and the researcher has little control over the selection of the objects that are already in place, the program endeavors to work around the problems associated with the largely inescapable design and arrangement of the exhibit space in order to create the most enjoyable and successful visitor experience. For clarity, photographic examples of the signs that will be utilized in the tour discussion are provided, but their locations are scattered about the site. Visitor movement through the space for the completion of the tour will thus not follow a linear progression but proceed as more of a "total immersion" experience in which the visitor acts as the consumer, "shopping" for the type of property, location, or experience called for in the tour. This type of organization enables the visitor to become an active participant in the learning process and gain a sense of the meaning these artifacts held for contemporaries "cruising" through the city, attracting and inviting customers with unique, colorful signage. Thus the visitor is invited to partake in the learning experience and the museum has an opportunity to add a "hands on" dimension to the visit.⁸

⁷ The Neon Museum does not often receive child visitors and currently does not look to receive school groups. TripAdvisor and Yelp pages for the site also express that the museum is not particularly "kid friendly."

⁸ Saul Carliner, "Modeling Information for Three-dimensional Space: Lessons Learned from Museum Exhibit Design," *Technical Communication Vol.48 No.1* (February 2001): 66-81.

Working toward developing effective programming for a small, nascent organization, this study has also endeavored to work within the confines of an assumed limited budget. The money collected from admissions fees and donations at the Neon Museum has historically gone towards renovating and restoring physical property on the site, including both signs and facilities. Keeping this in mind, my goal is to create successful educational programming that will not require much additional funding on the part of the museum. This fact will hopefully also make this proposal more attractive to the institution, and thus more readily accepted and applied in the museum's practice. The project calls for some investment in the creation of a smart phone or smart device application, a modest sound system, and the purchase of a few smart devices to loan out in the event that a visitor is not equipped with his or her own.⁹ Following the startup expenditures, a modest budget for maintenance is expected, but would not cost the museum anywhere near the amount of money other institutions pay for changing out exhibits regularly or for the creation of related educational materials for those new exhibits. Ultimately, the costs should be viewed as a long-term investment that will yield profits in the future, especially in the event that increasing numbers of satisfied visitors return or recommend the institution to others.

The creation of a smart device application is intended to take the place of more traditional museum education tools, such as wall-text panels. The museum's unique physical context calls for more creative measures on the part of the educator in fulfilling

⁹ A smart device application is the best option for the Neon Museum to successfully convey exhibit information. This is due to the nature of the museum's physical context, discussed in the first chapter of this project, and it is economically viable for a small, developing institution. The sound system would be used to create a "soundscape" by playing mood music to enhance the "experiential" factor of the exhibit. Last, the smart devices are intended to aid in the presentation of application materials. According to Nielsen data published on PCMag.com, 44% of Americans own smartphones, up from 18% just two years ago. Leslie Horn, "U.S. Smartphone Use on the Rise, with Android Leading the Charge," *PCMag*, December 15, 2011, accessed January 26, 2012, <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2397688,00.asp>.

the identity-related needs of visitors while promoting an effective learning environment, as the outdoor nature of the exhibit space in conjunction with the extreme weather conditions prohibit the use of wall text or built in technologies. Importantly, the prohibitive environment should not necessarily be viewed as an obstacle, but an opportunity. A movement away from wall-text and other conventional exhibit elements also helps to address the identity-related needs of visitors who reported a primary desire to photograph signs as opposed to following a tour program.¹⁰ Some scholars have also found this system of presentation beneficial for the recharger or aesthetically motivated visitor interested in the museum purely in terms of its atmosphere.¹¹ In the event that these individuals find a particular sign inspiring, and wish to know more about it, they will be able to access the specific information they desire from a smart device off of small QR codes placed around the exhibit space.¹² In this manner, those visitors electing not to participate in a tour program can access certain desired information and subsequently tailor their experience to their own individual needs.¹³

Because this tour outline development is in the preliminary stages of planning, and the museum is not yet open to the public, it should be noted that there are aspects of

¹⁰ It is also important to keep physical aspects as unobtrusive as possible because the Neon Museum also acquires additional funds through photo shoot bookings and, occasionally, film shoot scheduling. The current atmosphere of the museum has proven to be attractive to photographers and has enabled the institution to raise additional monies necessary in the upkeep of the exhibit.

¹¹ Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, 230-232.

¹² QR codes are small barcodes used for mobile tagging, characterized by fast readability and large storage capacity. They are valued as a technique to increase accessibility to information and have been both implemented and tested in other museum environments. Research has shown that QR codes have high usability and are able to provide visitors with additional comfort in accessing mobile content or services. For more information on the use of QR codes in museums, specifically the Mercedes-Benz Museum, see Michael Canadi, Wolfram Hoppkin, and Matthias Fuchs, "Application of QR Codes in Online Travel Distribution," *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2010*, 137-148, <http://www.springerlink.com/content/v25j66g252312115/fulltext.pdf>.

¹³ Identity-related needs are discussed in detail in the first chapter of this project. Based on research from a number of travel ratings sites collecting commentary specifically on the Neon Museum, many visitors attend the exhibit to capture images of some of the most famous signs in Las Vegas' history.

exhibit planning not included in this curatorial brief. These elements involve a concrete budget, implementation of the tour to the public, and post-visit surveys or evaluation studies of visitor experience. Additionally, museum exhibits are typically designed through collaborative efforts and group input. While this exhibit brief has been constructed under the guidance of university faculty members, museum staff members have not yet evaluated or weighed in on its content. Consequently, the full realization of this project would require the input and feedback of other Neon Museum employees, a necessity currently unavailable to the researcher. Should the museum adopt this plan, or something similar in the future, continued research would be necessary to determine if the recommended outline in this project is successful and appropriate for the Neon Museum, or if changes should be made in order to adapt current museum education theory for more effective practice. Due to the fact that the researcher is working without the aid of a team and putting this exhibit together as part of a larger master's thesis project in museum education, the curatorial brief simply serves as an applicable model.

This particular tour outline, tracing the relationship between sign design and the evolution of transportation systems, highlights local, regional, and national history, and relates to international phenomena of changing modes of travel. The city of Las Vegas, founded in the early twentieth century, has grown and developed around these changing modes of transportation. Sprouting from a strict gridiron-based walking city focused on pedestrian traffic moving in and out of the train depot, Las Vegas expanded in all directions with the growing popularity of the automobile, most significantly along the Los Angeles Highway, the road now known as the "Strip." The pattern of growth in this desert town in relation to developments in transportation parallels the movement of

residents from historic downtown districts to peripheral and suburban areas designed to handle the needs of motorists, as it is a familiar American occurrence. This familiarity with suburbanization and changes in city planning will aid Neon Museum visitors from all over the world in connecting their own prior knowledge to new material presented, enabling an understanding of the cultural significance of neon technology, and providing visitors with a better sense of why these signs developed the way they did.

The main theme thus focuses on the link between sign design and changing modes of transportation, an idea that also strongly relates to the history of Las Vegas as a destination and tourist town. The town was founded with the transient in mind, born out of Senator William Clark's desire to connect Salt Lake City to Los Angeles via rail and make Las Vegas the rest stop situated midway to service both the engines and the passengers. Over time, train travel lost steam as the growing popularity of the personal automobile enabled tourists to explore their own routes on their own time. Mass production of the car put more Americans on the road and fewer in train cars, necessitating Las Vegas' evaluation of its single-industry economy. A reputation for debauchery and adult entertainment, coupled with the city's opportune selection as the site of the Hoover Dam, a major federal public works project, led city officials to embrace tourism as a means of economic diversification. The decision to market the city to vacationers triggered complementary infrastructural projects locally and corresponding changes in auxiliary business advertisement in an effort to attract a new breed of traveler.

As Las Vegas' economy shifted, so followed its settlement pattern and design, business signage being one of the key components of this development. Hotel lots grew bigger to accommodate parking lots, and signs grew in order to advertise those new

spaces to high-speed motorists. Signs grew to be so large that sign artists began to integrate their creations into the architecture of the buildings. Significantly, this change in design corresponded with another evolution in transportation: the jetliner. By then, architecture and advertisement were then so intertwined that it was possible for visitors to identify or recognize properties from thousands of feet in the air! With the success of the city's tourism economy came crowding and congestion, and a movement back to a pedestrian culture; therefore, signs in Las Vegas today more closely resemble the signage employed by the initial proprietors of Clark's townsite in 1905.¹⁴

Accordingly, the sub-themes of the exhibit include a brief history of Las Vegas, as well as the science behind neon signage and the artistic nature of the large-scale examples on display. Because the Neon Museum focuses on interpreting the city's past with respect to the hospitality industry, the exhibit will not provide a comprehensive discussion of more localized history that lies outside the realm of the city's leisure-centered past. Threads of suburban development and "off-the-Strip" history will be conveyed in terms of their relationship to the larger, relatable narrative of the exhibit in order to maximize visitor connection to the material. It is the researcher's hope that the visitor will find this focus most relatable and thus promote optimal retention.¹⁵ An option that will allow visitors to browse newspaper articles regarding the properties represented

¹⁴ For a more detailed explanation of this connection, see the previous chapter of this project, "Neon Sign\$: One Bright Idea."

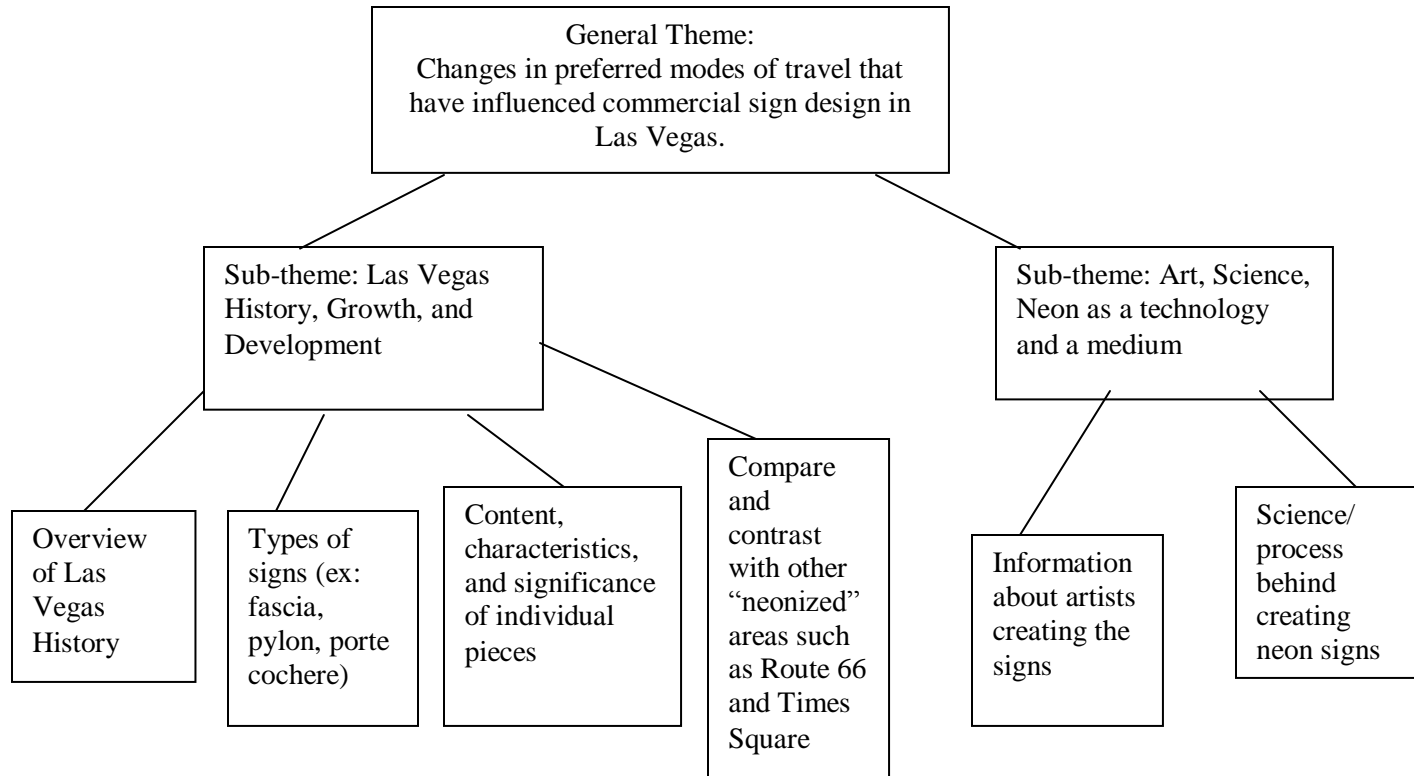
¹⁵ The Smithsonian National Museum of American history recently organized a popular exhibition, *America on the Move*, which showcased changes in transportation over time, its impact on daily life, and its impact on changes in the American landscape. According to the designer's front-end study, these were the three key themes that emerged from visitors' responses to an imagined exhibition regarding American transportation systems. Their report also details specific visitor responses that indicate Americans' general familiarity with changing modes of travel. Interviewees were knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the topic, suggesting the popularity and relevance of the topic for a broad audience. Smithsonian Institute for Learning Innovation, *America On the Move: Front-End Study*, September 2000, http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/themes/pdf/front_end_study.pdf.

by the signs and their respective historic periods will give individuals the chance to further explore Las Vegas' unique local history, while simultaneously engaging with primary source materials in order to form their own conclusions regarding the collection and its significance.¹⁶

Providing the visitors with an interactive smart device application will allow for choice and control over content, and will serve as the primary means of communicating these themes and sub-themes of the exhibit. Suggestions for supplemental public programming are also included, in order to promote further guest interaction with the material, encourage deeper meaning making, and strengthen the Neon Museum's ties to the Las Vegas community. Finally, the premise for this exhibit relies heavily on the second chapter of this project, "Neon Sign\$: One Bright Idea," which details the connection between sign design and mode of transportation within the context of Las Vegas' growth as a tourist destination. The researcher has personally selected the signs presented in this tour for their ability to illustrate concepts. While this tour is in its early stages of conception, all elements are present for its full realization and implementation.

¹⁶ The program might also appeal to visitors' general interest in photography by including historic photographs of the signs and their properties, also available through the smart device.

Thematic Structure:



Storyline:

Components	Objectives	Story Outline	Means of Expression	Sign/Structure/Area
0.0 Introduction and Orientation	To educate the audience on the Neon Museum, its history, how it functions, and provide an overview of the facility to orient visitors to the space	The Neon Museum was founded in 1996 after YESCO donated signs from their “boneyard” to the Allied Arts Council. The museum’s permanent visitor center is housed in the historic La Concha Motel lobby, built by famous AIA architect Paul R. Williams. The museum features a “boneyard,” a park, storage lot, “gallery” on Fremont Street, and is the headquarters for the National Scenic Byways Project.	Tour guide or smart-device application - photographs, video	La Concha Visitor’s Center; Neon Museum Park on Las Vegas Boulevard; storage lot across the street.
1.0 Early Las Vegas, a Railroad Town	To communicate the historic roots of Las Vegas as a turn-of-the-century railroad town. To communicate reliance of the town on the railroad and its passengers, and its effect on the growth and development of the city.	Las Vegas’ roots are in tourism, as the town was first founded as a railroad stop along the SPLA&SL Railroad. Focus on the train depot and pedestrian traffic had a strong influence on the layout of the downtown area.	Smart device application - photographs, maps, auction advertisements	Visitor’s center, view out of windows down Las Vegas Boulevard if possible

<p>1.1 Boomtown architecture and False Fronts</p>		<p>Boomtown architecture with false fronts characterized early Las Vegas architecture and proprietors' first attempts at outdoor advertisement.</p>	<p>Smart device application – photographs, perhaps a small sample reconstruction of a temporary structure with a false front</p>	<p>Images of semi-temporary structures on application and in visitor's center; optional small false-facade structure inside visitor's center</p>
<p>1.2 Economic Development Centering on the Provision of Services to Transients</p>		<p>Early businesses in Las Vegas were service-oriented, as the desert climate was not conducive to farming or food production. The small railroad outpost was thus home to a number of hotels, bars, brothels, and restaurants that catered to the needs of transients.</p>	<p>Smart device application - Photographs of early downtown Las Vegas</p>	<p>Historic photographs of early businesses, map of downtown area with types of businesses marked (ie: hotels, restaurants, bars, etc.)</p>
<p>1.3 Theming</p>		<p>Early proprietors appealed to popular conceptions of the west and the frontier by theming their businesses based on these generalized, romanticized notions.</p>	<p>Smart device application – photographs; map highlighting signs in Boneyard that fit within this theme (ex: Sassy Sally's, Binion's, Golden Nugget, etc.)</p>	<p>Walk through lot down right corridor towards the “starting point” for the examination of the collection</p>

<p>2.0 Introduction to Sign Types</p>	<p>To communicate the different types of signs utilized throughout Las Vegas history. To introduce the idea that signs changed as a result of new modes of transportation through small grouping of signs placed together for comparison.</p>	<p>The application of neon in early Las Vegas signage was rather traditional, highlighting and outlining more conventional sign types. With the introduction of the automobile, Americans began traveling in different patterns and at faster speeds, influencing the development of larger signs with way-finding aids. The signs also began incorporating resort theming until they became so large and ornate as to be recognizable without name or reference to the business it represented.</p>	<p>Smart device application; signs in the lot including the Green Shack, 24-hour cocktails, and the Treasure Island Skull</p>	<p>Green Shack, 24-hour Flame restaurant cocktails, and the Treasure Island Skull</p>
<p>2.1 Signs in the Era of Automobiles - Downtown</p>		<p>Signs were limited in terms of their scale by the congested gridiron pattern of the sidewalks and streets; consequently, signs were built up and around, sometimes enveloping entire facades.</p>	<p>Smart device application – historic photographs of downtown signage; Golden Nugget signage discussion, designer Kermit Wayne</p>	<p>Golden Nugget signs; Binion’s; Sassy Sally’s; Moulin Rouge</p>

<p>2.2 Signs in the Era of Automobiles – the “Strip”</p>		<p>The “Strip” benefitted from large amounts of relatively inexpensive land and business located along Las Vegas Boulevard began incorporating large parking lots and car-friendly architecture. Signs also became larger and were placed alongside the roadway, while the property might be pushed back to accommodate parking. The adoption of the lighted porte cochere marks the importance of automobile travelers in sustaining business.</p>	<p>Smart device application – photographs of early Strip hotels; signs in collection; photographs of early porte cocheres</p>	<p>“Motel Row,” including Yucca Motel, Desert Rose, La Concha, Tam O’Shanter, then Caesars and MGM (descriptions of property placement and porte cochere)</p>
<p>3.0 Science Behind the Sign</p>	<p>To communicate the process of creating a neon sign, including the history behind it, the materials involved, and the methods of production.</p>	<p>Georges Claude invented neon at the turn of the century in Paris, France. Claude, primarily in the business of liquefying air for hospital oxygen tanks, discovered a use for his unintentional byproduct of neon gas when he filled earlier Geissler and Moore tubes, then bombarded them with electricity. The earliest signs outlined existing signage elements, such as lettering and shapes. The first sign in the US was purchased by Packard Automobiles in 1923 and placed at their dealership in Los Angeles.</p>	<p>Smart device application – photographs of Claude and components, early neon signs</p>	<p>Early signs (Green Shack), and signs in enclave from wedding chapels (Mon Bel Ami) and dry cleaners to illustrate early application of neon</p>

<p>3.1 Creating a Neon Light</p>		<p>Neon tubes are handmade; there is no mechanized process for creating the signs. Sign makers sketch a pattern on asbestos paper and trace the outline with heated, pliable glass tubing. Once a bend is made, it cannot be corrected so skill and experience is necessary to produce a complex design. Finished tubes are filled with inert gas, either the reddish neon or the blue-lavender argon, and then bombarded with electricity. Various colors are created through the coating of tubes in order to manipulate the red or blue into other shades.</p>	<p>Smart device application – video of “bender” creating a neon tube and the process of filling it, attaching it to backing, then lighting; discussion of other materials incorporated including fiberglass, incandescent bulbs, and metal</p>	<p>Yucca motel sign and Ugly Duckling provide excellent examples of the intricacies of design</p>
<p>3.2 Artists Behind the Signs</p>		<p>The work of many sign designers was considered so innovative and creative that they became known as artists. Some of the most famous sign designers include Kermit Wayne, Buzz Lemming, and Betty Willis.</p>	<p>Smart device application – bios of sign designers, images of projects, interviews</p>	<p>Betty Willis – Welcome to LV, Moulin Rouge, City Center Motel; Kermit Wayne – Golden Nugget, Stardust; Buzz Lemming – Coin King</p>

<p>4.0 Growth and Development</p>	<p>To communicate the phases of development in Las Vegas in terms of the dominating or driving force behind growth. To give visitors a sense of the types of businesses opening, new clientele, and the changing character of the city.</p>	<p>Traffic in Las Vegas increased every year with the opening of new hotels, the expansion of roads and highways, and the city’s ability to secure new federal projects including Basic Magnesium and Nellis Air force Base. Existing properties were able to improve their signage through lease options and sought upgrades in the face of growing competition.</p>	<p>Smart device application – photographs; interactive maps depicting changes; links to newspaper articles</p>	<p>1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s signs associated with growth of this period, including El Cortez, Golden Nugget, and Flamingo. Golden Nugget signage helps illustrate the leasing opportunity, as three different signs can be compared to one another (discussed in terms of commissioning costs and sign companies’ desire to remain in business during tough economic times and wartime materials restrictions)</p>
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<p>4.1 Financial Backing – Railroad to Government, then Mob, and finally to Corporate America</p>		<p>When the city was established, the railroad was the impetus for development until the introduction of the automobile and complementary roadway systems made trains a less favorable travel option. As the railroad lost influence, the city stagnated until securing important federal projects such as Hoover Dam, Basic Magnesium, and Nellis. These projects generated interest in the area, attracting new visitors and proprietors, including the Mob. Mob funds directed development for roughly twenty years until corporations were welcomed with the Corporate Gaming Act of 1969. They have influenced city growth in conjunction with the arrival of the jet plane and continue to do so today.</p>	<p>Smart device application – timeline; newspaper headlines; signs</p>	<p>Discuss Flamingo, Moulin Rouge, Desert Inn, Sahara, Stardust (first and second)</p>
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<p>4.2 Train Tracks to Interstate to Airfield</p>		<p>Paralleling changes in dominant developer influence, the city also witnessed changes in infrastructure to support diverse modes of transportation. Las Vegas visitors arrived by train, plane, and automobile, and these methods influenced these distinct stages in sign design. More recently, air travel has coincided with deeply embedded theming that has resulted in large-scale architectural signage.</p>	<p>Smart device application – LVCVA tourism statistics; historic photographs; current photographs of signs; aerial photographs of city; possibility of a matching game demonstrating how deeply embedded theming has worked to promote brand identification, especially without the presence of earlier types of signage</p>	<p>TI skull, Aladdin lamp</p>
<p>5.0 Conclusion</p>	<p>To reiterate the importance of the Neon Museum in preserving and interpreting not only the area’s local history, but also broader national and international change that influenced the growth and development of areas all over the world.</p>	<p>Visitors can now examine their own locales with a “new eye” for growth and development changes influenced by the introduction of new modes of transportation. They should be encouraged to further pursue this topic within the context of their own neighborhoods.</p>	<p>Smart device application – suggestions for further reading and exploration; comment board for museum (in addition to the comment boards for each stop); additional museum information, etc.</p>	<p>Visitor center</p>

Floor Plan: Upon selecting this tour option, visitors will be presented with a floor plan of the exhibit complete with glowing stars that highlight the signs the tour will focus on. The stars on the screen will be numbered and will correspond to the numbers listed in the storyline chart. Flow through the space will be determined by the selected program: this particular tour introduction will begin at the visitor's center, then commence in the Boneyard on the left side of the space towards the back, proceeding in a clockwise direction around the lot and then back, ending at the massive skull.



Resource Plan:

0.0 Introduction: Photos of the historic La Concha Motel, photos documenting the relocation and reassembly of sections at the Neon Museum for reuse, and a time-lapse video depicting the process of renovating the structure.

Example photos of the La Concha:



<http://www.neonmuseum.org>

<http://www.preservationnation.org/resources/case-studies/modernism-recent-past/la-concha-motel-lobby.html>

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=8586312845241345162>

Example photos of Neon Museum projects, demonstrating institution's mission of reclaiming, restoring, and remembering Las Vegas history:

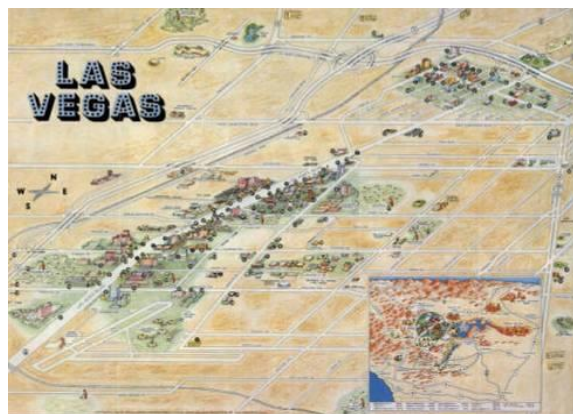
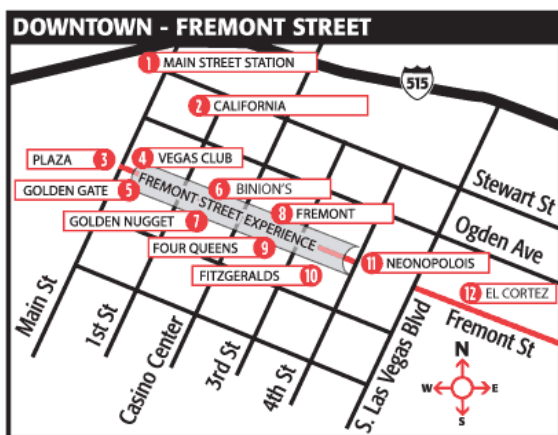


0.2 Museum Background Information: This section of the tour will also include video footage of the famous 1993 Dunes implosion that sparked interest in saving and restoring old commercial signage, leading into information regarding the founding of the museum in 1996 and the institution's acquisition of signage from YESCO's boneyard that makes up the core of the collection. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ei0q82UDHmo.

0.3 Orientation: Visitors should also find orientation information in this section of the tour, with a virtual map in the smart device application. The map should also include the ability to access Google directions within the facility to aid promoting visitor comfort with the space and ease wayfinding. <http://maps.google.com/>.

1.1 Early Las Vegas: A Railroad Town: This section of the exhibit is designed to give visitors a sense of Las Vegas' early foundations as a railroad rest-stop, and how the city's physical form followed function. The aim of this portion is to highlight the dichotomy between the grid-iron pattern of the downtown area and the auto-strip arrangement of the businesses along Las Vegas Boulevard.

Examples of images depicting difference in city planning structure:



www.vegas.com
<http://digital.library.unlv.edu>
<http://library.nevada.edu>
www.lasvegastouristbureau.com
www.gaming.unlv.edu



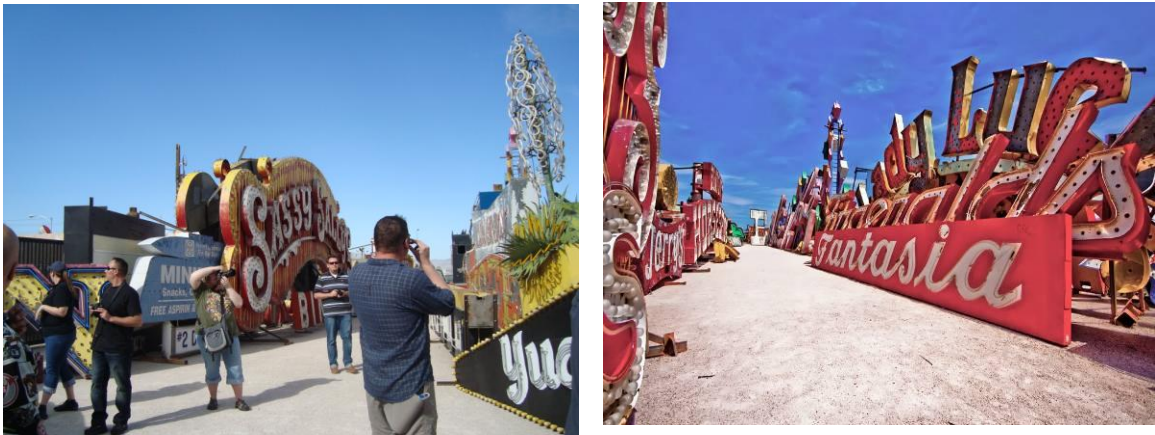
1.2 False-Front Boomtown Architecture: Photographs and information relating to boomtown architecture in Las Vegas and other western cities should be shown in an effort to provide visitors with a visual understanding of early commercial signage. This will further enable connection to the material, as visitors will have a concrete understanding of traditional façade signage on which to peg new information relating to the avante garde neon creations in Las Vegas.

Photographic Example:



1.3 Theming: For this section, visitors will be directed through the exhibit space, walking along the right side of the Boneyard toward the “start” of the collection tour. This half of the space is typically referred to as the downtown or “old” Las Vegas section, and will provide guests with a sense of the “Wild West” or “frontier” theme that predominated in the town’s early years.

Photographs of signs featured in this initial walkthrough of the space:



2.0: Introduction to Sign Types: This initial stop on the tour is to provide visitors with a quick explanation of how signs have changed over time in response to changing modes of transportation. This overview will enable visitors to look at the signs with “new eyes,” and consider how each fits within the context of this discussion. Three key signs will best illuminate this theme: the Green Shack, 24-hour cocktails, and the Treasure Island skull.



2.1 Era of the Automobile - Downtown: This section of the exhibit will focus on the application of neon in the downtown area, especially in relation to the limited space with which proprietors had to work. Discussion will center on the Golden Nugget’s revitalization of its older, less attractive facade with a floor-to-ceiling wall covering of neon tubing.



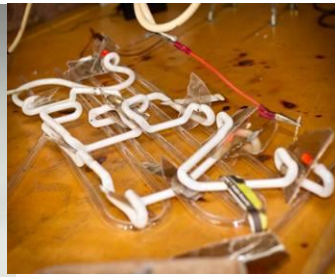
2.2 Era of the Automobile – the “Strip”: This section of the exhibit will serve to highlight the difference in terms of layout of the downtown area and the “Strip.” Photographs and signage will help convey the idea that the “Strip” was meant to accommodate tourists’ changing tastes in transportation and the introduction of a new building type, the motor-hotel or motel.





3.0 and 3.1 Science Behind the Sign and Creating a Neon Light: Videos will help illustrate the process of creating a neon tube and, ultimately, a neon sign. Visual elements in the smart device application will be instrumental in clarifying the science behind the inert gases and electrodes in a tube, as well as the coating of the glass in order to create specific colors.

<http://www.neonmona.org/flash/> provides an excellent example of the process, while <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNT2vCiQACo> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kO7JLxFfjg> demonstrate the art of bending.



3.2 Artists Behind the Signs: This section of the exhibit will introduce some of the most influential neon sign artists in Las Vegas history, including Betty Willis, Kermit Wayne, and architect Paul R. Williams, again reiterating the skill, time, and energy required to produce these spectacles.



JEFF SCHEID: LAS VEGAS REVIEW



4.0 and 4.1 Growth and Development and Financial Development: This section of the exhibit will detail the growth of the city and the parties directing development, including the railroad, federal government, mob, and corporations. An interactive map will demonstrate growth on Las Vegas Boulevard and downtown every five years, as well as the appearance of new infrastructure. Links to newspaper articles and historic photographs of signs in their original locations will supplement.

4.2 Train Tracks to Interstate to Airfield: This section of the exhibit will serve to convey the development of deeply embedded theming that has come to dominate in the Valley, demonstrating the strong relationship between theming and branding in the success of new mega-resorts. Secondarily, discussion will be provided regarding the ability of these large-scale architectural signs to “transport” visitors to a new, exotic world.



5.0 Conclusion: This part of the exhibit will reiterate the central theme of the tour and encourage visitors to explore their own communities with respect to development and changes in modes of transportation. Further reading will be suggested and comment boards where visitors can share photos, experiences, and reactions to the museum as well as related findings of their own.

Public Programming Suggestions:

Galas, demonstrations, lectures, children's art contests, art exhibits, neon bus "cruises," and convention hosting all have potential to become successful public programs that broaden the scope of the museum's educational programming, invite visitors to interact, interpret, and share memories related to the space, encourage repeat engagement from museum patrons and strengthen the Neon Museum's relationship with the community. Much of the programming will be directed at locals, as many Las Vegas tourists may not be able to (or desire to) structure their vacations around potential museum activities.

Guest Lecturers for "Brown Bag" or Evening Programs:

- **Demonstrations:** Within the tour presentation, the Neon Museum endeavors to explain the process of creating a neon sign. While video can aid in the conveyance of this information, nothing beats the experience of witnessing a glass blowing demonstration followed by a question and answer session. Visitors will have the opportunity to conceptualize the intricate and time-consuming process of making a neon sign and further comprehend the very "artisanal" nature of the museum's collection. Another demonstration might include an open invitation to the public to view the arrival or movement of signs within the exhibit (from a safe distance). This would allow for increased understanding of the museum, its mission, and its daily operations.
- **Hands-on Workshops:** The Neon Museum might find that visitors have an interest in participating in some creative workshops. Perhaps the museum might offer one-week courses each year for those individuals seeking the opportunity to

produce something of their own related to neon, such as a small neon sign for personal use.

- Scholarly Lectures: History, art history, or literature academics focusing on Las Vegas or neon signage could provide lectures on their respective topics as they pertain to the content of the exhibit space. This category might also include gallery presentations of artwork inspired by Las Vegas or the signage in the collection, as well as creative writing readings expressing viewpoints and sentiments about Las Vegas history, neon as a medium, or individual pieces in the exhibit. Artists and academics could also be available after presentations to answer questions and engage with the public.
- Neon Bus “Cruise”: Currently in operation at the Museum of Neon Art in Glendale, CA, the Neon Museum might benefit from hosting a bus tour, perhaps once a month, to explore the city’s existing neon landscape. As open top double-decker buses are already in operation on the Strip, perhaps the museum could secure the use of a bus for one evening each month as a donation in exchange for promotion of the bus company at the museum. Implementation of this program would obviously require further development, but it would give visitors the opportunity to examine neon with “new eyes,” fully lit and functional in its intended environment.

Art or Photography Competitions and Exhibitions

By inviting artists or members of the community to submit pieces influenced by the collection, the Neon Museum can promote further consideration of the information presented in the exhibit. Furthermore, by designating space in the visitor’s center to

display works of art relating to the collection, or to Las Vegas in general, the institution can bolster its connections to the community and the promotion of its community members.

Galas and Special Events

The museum already has plans to host weddings and other special events. While these occasions might not directly connect to proposed educational programming, these events have the potential to attract new, larger audiences and provide a means of unobtrusive marketing to the public. Perhaps wedding guests or convention attendees will be intrigued by the museum and its collection and plan a future visit to the site in order to learn more.

Website Programming

The key to disseminating the exhibit's information is the development of a quality, interactive application for smart devices. An important aspect of that application will be the inclusion of discussion boards for the exhibit. The discussion boards would be used as a public forum for posting personal stories relating to the properties represented in the Boneyard, discussing the themes brought up by the exhibit, continuing discussions brought up by guest lecturers, and asking questions. It will also serve to encourage or reinforce post-visit retention and internalization of exhibit information. Perhaps most importantly, these discussion boards will open up a dialogue with visitors and enable the Neon Museum to gain a sense of visitor satisfaction, as well as gauge the success of programming. Visitors to the museum should be directed to these boards through museum staff, hand-outs, or advertisements on the application to ensure that the public is aware of the opportunity for further discussion on the web

Recommendations

Looking forward to the official opening of the Neon Museum in the summer of 2012, the institution is uniquely poised to implement changes to existing programming not yet finalized or solidified after years of practice. This project has explored some of the main issues plaguing the museum and makes some recommendations for improvements in order for the institution to create and sustain an effective learning environment. The following points reiterate current issues the museum faces and possible solutions to those problems.

ISSUE: Loss of General Theme or Key Points in Tour Presentation

- Implement suggested tour outline as the “highlights” of the exhibit option, which focuses on a main topic of sign design as related to changing modes of transportation, allowing visitors to structure supplementary information around this principal framework.

ISSUE: Need for New Presentation Method

- Create and implement multiple tour outlines through the use of a single smart device application that restructures information for individualized preferences.
- Create and place QR codes around the exhibit space for unobtrusive, yet easily accessible information that will not interfere with photographic opportunities.

ISSUE: Extreme Physical Conditions

- Control the environment, as visitors would be less focused on their most immediate physiological needs and have an opportunity to learn. A removable or retractable canvas tent or awning is recommended, as it would help alleviate discomfort from some of the distracting environmental conditions while enabling

the museum to continue scheduling film and photo shoots for supplemental funding.

- Water fountains must be placed in the visitor center, and bottled water should be sold through vending machines or the gift shop. Other related amenities might be sold at the gift shop, including hats, sunglasses, and battery-powered fans.

Umbrellas should also be available for loan at the visitor center.

ISSUE: Training

- Create a comprehensive guide manual for employees and volunteers that provides information not only on the museum or the signs, but on various learning styles and the successful interpretation of information in order to provide the best assistance to visitors making their own meaning of the tour presentation.
- Pair new guides with experienced guides for one-on-one training opportunities.
- Extend the apprenticeship period to ensure guides do not just memorize facts, but have ample time to prepare and become acquainted with information so that they might interact with visitors in a more personalized manner.
- Schedule training as practicable to isolate and focus on key duties or responsibilities of guides. These training sessions will also enable guides to hone their skills as an interpreter and their understanding of informal learning.
- Recommend reading materials on a regular basis so that guides can sharpen and update their information.
- Work with UNLV on establishing a recruitment program for guides and interns to ensure a steady flow of volunteers from a reliable source.

ISSUE: Evaluation

- Implement a system of evaluation in order to determine public reaction to and success of operations and practices at the museum. Adjust and revise as necessary. See Appendix B.

Appendix A: Neon Museum Materials

The following pages include the current resources offered to volunteering docents at the Neon Museum, specifically the reading material and the existing tour outline.

NEON MUSEUM TOUR

WELCOME!

- Thank you for coming and supporting the Neon Museum.
- Not a “traditional” museum, but thanks to your support we will have a bigger, better home soon.
- Safety Spiel
- Open gate

Stop 1 (In front of the La Concha motel lobby)

- Discuss La Concha briefly:
 - stood next to Riviera, Opened in 1961
 - 1st piece of Strip architecture saved
 - brought to boneyard in pieces reassembled in 2007
 - Mention architect Paul R. Williams
- Scenic Byways Project
- Silver Slipper, Bow and Arrow Motel, Binion’s Horseshoe
- Neon Boneyard Park
 - City funded, will open with museum
 - Built by Federal Heath Sign Company
 - Letters are replicas of letters found in Boneyard
 - “N” Golden Nugget
 - “E” Caesars Palace
 - “O” Binion’s Horseshoe
 - “N” Desert Inn
- Storage Lot
 - Storage for signs that are already represented in the main Boneyard. Some of those signs will be moved over when La Concha addition is complete. Storage lot will not be open to the public and it is not safe to take tours through there.

Stop 2 Golden Nugget Signs (La Concha lot)

- Neon Museum History
 - A lot of the signs in the past were leased to casinos. Neon companies would collect there signs in boneyards to reuse them.
 - YESCO: Young Electric Sign Company, founded by Tom Young, one of the main companies that competed for neon sign contracts.
 - In the 1990s Las Vegas went through many changes. Many properties were demolished. YESCO’s boneyard filled to capacity.
 - City of Las Vegas, Allied Arts Council combined efforts and YESCO donated there boneyard to the Neon Museum.
 - The Neon Museum was formed in 1996 and became a non-profit organization in 1997

- Las Vegas History
 - Founded in 1905
 - Laws changed in 1931. Gambling and prostitution was legalized, marriage and divorce laws were relaxed.
 - Hoover Dam was completed in 1935. Southern Nevada had a tourist attraction and Las Vegas started to grow rapidly. The city had its first big boom in the 1950s.

THE MAIN BONEYARD

Part 1: Downtown Las Vegas / Fremont Street! That's where it all started.

Stop 3 Golden Nugget / Moulin Rouge

- Golden Nugget (1946): YESCO Commission (Kermit Wayne, one of the “designer-sculptor geniuses of Las Vegas” according to Tom Wolfe) monumental and influential sign because it wrapped an entire building in neon and blurred the distinction between architecture and signs (big deal because modern design of the time had divorced symbolism from architecture)
- Moulin Rouge (1955): First integrated casino. Sign designed by Betty Willis.

Stop 4 Binion's / Lady Luck / Fitzgerald's

- Binion's and Fitzgerald's still open downtown. Binion's originally the Horseshoe. Lady Luck is closed but may reopen in the near future.

Stop 5 City Center Motel / Sassy Sally's

- Sassy Sally's: Sign plays on Western themes popular in early Vegas. Was located on Fremont where Mermaids stands today.
- City Center Motel: Betty Willis Design. Located on 7th and Fremont

Part 2: Motel Row. Las Vegas Boulevard, before Las Vegas Boulevard

Stop 6 Yucca Motel

- Was located near Sahara Ave. and LVB. Great example of neon tubing as sculpture on a sign.
- Good opportunity to talk about the science and logistics of building a neon sign

Stop 7 Desert Rose/ La Concha/ Tam O' Shanter

- Desert Rose: Was located where the Monte Carlo stands today. Motel opened in the '40s, sign was built in the '50s
- La Concha: Fully-integrated theme from architecture to sign. The 'E' and 'L' missing. The original base of the sign has been restored and will be part of the collection.

-Tam O'Shanter: Family-owned motel; named after Chicago golf course; sold to Venetian in 1998 for \$12.4 million to make way for the Palazzo; design of the sign reflects the typical sign design predominant from the 50s and still present today.

Part 3: Small Business, Big Sign

Stop 8 Mon Bel Ami / Pool Player/ El Portal

- Mon Bel Ami: Was the Silver Bell Wedding Chapel. Great example of a repurposed sign.
- Pool Player - Sculpture as a sign. Belonged to Doc and Eddy's pool hall. Built in 1983. Nicknamed "The Mullet Man"

Stop 9 Green Shack / Flame Restaurant

- Green Shack: oldest sign in collection belonged to the oldest restaurant in Nevada; operated by Mattie Jones who moved to Las Vegas after her husband died; original location called Colorado opened in 1929 or 1930 served fried chicken and bootleg whiskey out of the kitchen window; 1930-32 moved and opened in a relocated, green railroad barrack and fed Dam workers.
- Flame: Great example of roadside neon, pointing the consumer in the right direction. The top of the sign is restored on 3rd and Ogden along the rest of our restored sign collection.

Part 4: The Strip

Stop 10 Flamingo / Treasure Island

- Flamingo: opened in 1946 by infamous mobster Bugsy Siegel. The first casino to stray from the cowboy/western town theme and go with an 'exotic theme'. Built on Las Vegas Blvd, is now the Flamingo Hilton.
- Treasure Island Skull: Now the T.I. Opened in 1993 during the Family Friendly era, which is now a thing of the past. The skull was taken down in 2003.

Stop 11 Aladdin / Sahara

- Aladdin Lamp: Not the original lamp from the '60s, displayed on Fremont Street with the rest of the restored collection. The silver lamp was from the remodel in the 1970s. The Aladdin used to sit where Planet Hollywood stands
- Sahara (1952): The 'H' and 'R' are from the original roadside sign.

Stop 12 Desert Inn/ Caesars

- Desert Inn (1950): Originally owned Wilbur Clark, then Howard Hughes owned it in the late '60s. Eventually Steve Wynn bought the property and built the new Desert Inn which eventually was imploded to make way for the Wynn.

Stop 13 Stardust

- Stardust (1958): legendary casino with an amazing neon façade.
 - Architecture: there was none, conglomeration of short, ugly buildings, so they covered all of the buildings with one, giant sign (217-ft long, largest sign of the time); YESCO sign by Kermit Wayne
- movie “Casino” based on Stardust
- Stardust redesigned its roadside pylon, commission went to AdArt, cost of \$500,000 in 1968. (Giant purple and pink cloud shapes)
- Atomic tourism

Tour ConclusionStop 14 Ugly Duckling/ Coin Castle King

- Coin King: Designed by Buzz Lemming (designer for Barbary Coast and Hacienda signs) ; sat next to Vegas Vic at the Coin Castle.
- Ugly Duckling Car Sales: from the mid 1990s. The sign has lots of channeling and bent neon. It is a great example of the work that goes into making a neon sign.
- Tour Wrap up: Ask if there are any final questions. Thank everyone for helping out the Neon Museum and to check the website for construction updates!

******Special Notes******

- Please make sure you get a count of people before you start the tour to ensure that no one sneaks onto your tour and to make sure you don't leave anyone behind.
- Please do not answer any questions about photo shoot or filming fees. Direct all those questions to the media coordinator.

Appendix B: Sample Forms

The following pages include a number of sample forms adapted from *The Museum Educator's Manual: Educators Share Successful Techniques* that should be utilized in conjunction with the implementation of the new tour outline, as they will prove useful in the evaluation and improvement of the program, as well as the day-to-day operations of the museum. This appendix also features forms and recommendations for the training and development of staff responsible for the successful execution of the institution's new educational programming. Adopting the procedures and suggestions put forth in these forms will help identify and resolve some of the existing issues at the Neon Museum and serve to foster a more effective learning environment.

Tools of the Trade for the Docent

1. Make sure your information is accurate. If you do not know the answer, do not hesitate to say so. Instead carry cards (like note cards) and a pencil and give one to the visitor. Have them write down their question on one side of the card, with their name, address, phone number, and email address on the other. Collect the card, and then research the answer to their question so that you might follow-up with a letter or phone call to the visitor with the correct information. This shows concern and interest while satisfying the needs of the visitor.
2. It is important to correctly pronounce names or terms and accurately explain cultural background of objects, as well as use of technical information.
3. Be able to provide information at several learning levels, considering visitors' age, knowledge, and preparation.
4. Know more about the objects than can be presented in one tour. This knowledge allows one a comfort level with the topic when answering questions as well as flexibility in responding to the interests of the group.
5. Be able to group and regroup objects together to serve a variety of objectives.
6. Remember history is meaningful when contextualized. It is necessary to explain objects in *their* time and context, not ours today.

Sample Docent Training Curriculum – The Neon Museum

Session One: 2-Hour Class

- Volunteer coordinator welcomes group, hands out notebooks (1 minute)
- Director explains how museum began (10 minutes)
- Tour of exhibit and explanation of design (45 minutes)
- Break (15 minutes)
- Introduction to Las Vegas history (50 minutes)

Session Two: 2-Hour Class

- Explanation of docent training goals and objectives (10 minutes)
- Introduction of participants (up to 15 minutes depending on number of trainees)
- Background information on neon technology and art (30 minutes)
- Break (15 minutes)
- Discussion of learning styles and visitor identities (30 minutes)
- Discussion of interpretation and interpretation techniques (20 minutes)

Session Three: 2-Hour Class

- Introduction to the tour and presentation techniques (45 minutes)
- Break (15 minutes)
- Follow a seasoned tour guide on a presentation (1 hour)

Session Four: 2-Hour Class

- Exhibit exploration and practice presenting tour together (45 minutes)
- Docent procedures and scheduling (15 minutes)
- Break (15 minutes)
- Importance of “Ask Me Docents” (15 minutes)
- Pass out take-home test, set due-date, schedule graduation, and sign up docents for segments of group tour during graduation (up to 30 minutes)

GRADUATION: 2-Hours

- Group presentation of tour (1 hour)
- Thank volunteers (5 minutes)
- Recognize graduates and pass out diplomas/name tags (15 minutes)
- Small staff pot-luck appetizer reception (30 minutes)

Docent Presentation Evaluation Form

Presenter: _____ Date: _____

1. Overall Effectiveness (circle one) 1= poor 5 = excellent

Introduction	1	2	3	4	5
Content	1	2	3	4	5
Conclusion	1	2	3	4	5
Speaker	1	2	3	4	5

2. Personal Qualities – enthusiasm, empathy, personality, style of presentation, flexibility

3. Vocal Qualities – volume, rate, pitch, word selection, pronunciation, enunciation, tone

4. Time – Goal of 1 hour

5. Nonverbal Delivery – smile, eye contact, gestures, body position

6. Communicative Techniques – audience involvement, humor, drama, props

7. An area for improvement:

8. Greatest strength:

OBSERVATION SUMMARY: Attracting/Holding/Involvement Power

Area Observed: _____

Day: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

A. Number of minutes you observed visitors _____

B. Total number of observations _____

C. Total number of visitors that viewed _____

D. Percentage of visitors that viewed C/B _____ = _____ %

E. Range of view time of those that viewed
(ex: 2 seconds to 5 minutes) _____

F. Involvement Scores of those that viewed

$$\frac{\# \text{ of level 1 Scores}}{C} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}} \%$$

$$\frac{\# \text{ of level 2 Scores}}{C} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}} \%$$

$$\frac{\# \text{ of level 1 Scores}}{C} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}} \%$$

G. Most interesting visitor comments and behaviors:

H. Suggestions for revisions regarding design, content, location, etc.

EXHIBIT COMMUNICATION POWER

Visitor Interviews Tool

Day: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

Evaluator: _____

“Hello. My name is _____ and I work here at the Neon Museum. We are gathering visitor feedback about the exhibit. Would you be willing to answer a few questions about your experience here? It will take about 5 minutes. Thank you.”

(The first few questions are meant to put visitors at ease; they can be answered “yes” or “no” and are easy to answer.)

Is this your first visit to the Neon Museum? Yes No

Where are you from? _____

Do you think the point of this exhibit is clear? Yes No

Explain:

How could we improve this exhibit so that visitors will understand and enjoy it more?

Do you have any special knowledge about Las Vegas history or neon? Yes No

Explain: _____

Do you have any other questions or comments about this exhibit?

“Thank you very much.”

Visitor gender: M F **Age:** 20s 30s 40s 50s 60+

Group size: 1 2 3 4 5 6+

Adults only

Adults + Kids

Visitor Tour Survey

The Neon Museum is dedicated to presenting quality programs for our visitors. Your answers, comments, and suggestions will be used to evaluate and improve our programs. Please return your completed survey to your tour guide or the admissions booth. Thank you for your time and your opinions.

Please circle a corresponding number to record your responses:

5=STRONGLY AGREE	2=DISAGREE
4=AGREE	1=STRONGLY DISAGREE
3=NEUTRAL	

The introduction made me feel welcome and gave an overview of the museum.

5 4 3 2 1

Comments: _____

The information presented was clear and interesting.

5 4 3 2 1

Comments: _____

The information was organized and understandable:

5 4 3 2 1

Comments: _____

Length of the tour was

Too Long About Right Too Short

Comments: _____

The smart device application was

Confusing Easy to use

Comments: _____

Would you recommend the Neon Museum to a friend? Yes No

Additional comments or suggestions:

Name:

City, State, Zip:

Guided Tours Evaluation/Feedback

Name of Guide _____ Date: _____

TOUR BASICS

Yes/Sometimes/No

Tour Introduction

___	___	___	Introduce yourself to the tour group
___	___	___	Introduce the Neon Museum and its mission/history
___	___	___	Tell length of time tour will take (stick to it)
___	___	___	Eye contact with visitors
___	___	___	State your theme and the goal of the tour

Communication of Information

___	___	___	Relate to your theme
___	___	___	Keep it simple
___	___	___	Always be accurate – say “I don’t know” rather than guessing

Tour Transitions

___	___	___	Carry the theme and relate from one object to the next
___	___	___	Give visitor something to look forward to
___	___	___	Include a transition to the conclusion

Length of Tour

___	___	___	Time: 45-60 minutes
___	___	___	Stops: 12-15 approximately

Conclusion

___	___	___	Review your theme and tie it all together
___	___	___	Ask if there are any questions
___	___	___	Thank visitors for coming and invite them to return

PRESENTATION

Eye Contact & Vocal Presentation

___	___	___	Look at visitors and talk TO them, not AT them
___	___	___	Projection
___	___	___	Face visitors, not signs
___	___	___	Wait to gather group together at the next stop before talking

Evaluator: _____

See back for additional comments.

Docent Feedback on Training Classes

1. Was this course beneficial to you?

2. Have you been well prepared to do tours of the Boneyard?

3. Do you feel you have a good overview of the museum so you can represent it in a professional manner to the public?

4. What are the strengths of this program? Explain.

5. What are the weaknesses of this program? Please include ideas on ways to improve them.

6. What programs would you like to see for the docents in the future?

7. Any other comments?

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