

Museum Exhibit Design Project: Memorializing the Memorial Day Massacre

An exhibit dedicated to the events of the Memorial Day Massacre should have two intentions: to explain the history and events of the massacre itself, and to evoke a strong sense of emotion surrounding the dynamics of right vs. wrong. The proposed museum exhibit will do just that, specially focusing on a visual and audio experience. The ideal location for this exhibit would be in a museum dedicated to Southeast Chicago (or life in the mills in general) that would provide guests with context on the conditions in the mills before they get to this specific exhibit.

The first portion of the experience will be structured in a way that does not give the participant much choice in what they are engaging with. This section is inspired by a haunted house, in the way that where one would go from one element to another in an intentional sequence. The order will be chronological, and the first section will be the historical context and working conditions leading up to the strike. This will be followed by a description of Republic Steel and the organizing of the strike, and then a section showing how the strike turned into a massacre. Finally, a brief memorial for the protesters who were murdered by the police will lead museum-goers into a more traditional museum setup, complete with memorial artworks and oral histories. This last section is intended to bring the entire experience together and leave a deeper sense of understanding for what the massacre meant in the big picture. Overall, this design was chosen to highlight the small and large scale of the events' impacts, as well as accommodate the limited types of resources that are available to use – mainly oral histories and visuals – in an intriguing way.

Aesthetically, this part of the physical space will be exclusively black and white. It will also be intentionally industrial, perhaps with some exposed steel beams. Lighting will be dark, with the exception of the lights illuminating the exhibit features (photographs, mostly). Another

choice in this design is to have little cluttering the floor, and practically all signage and images will be mounted on the walls and/or hanging from the ceiling on banners similar to the ones in the robotics exhibit at the MIT museum. This is in part because the corridor itself will be dark to walk through.

When viewers first enter the exhibit, they will come to a commanding sign with a narrative of what the massacre actually was. This will be the most reading-intensive portion of the exhibit, and is intended to give everyone similar background before they enter. They will then enter the first hallway, and be confronted by dates, number killed, and relevant images detailing labor-related massacres of similar circumstances preceding Memorial Day in 1937. This will include events such as the Battle of Blair Mountain (1921) and the Herrin Massacre (1922). Then, a sign will indicate that the Memorial Day Massacre was the most recent large massacre of this kind. This section will be followed by an introduction to working conditions and later specifics of Republic Steel. Throughout the entire exhibit, messages will be conveyed using images from sources like *Images of America: Chicago's Southeast Side Revisited* (Sellers, 2001), *The Last Great Strike* (White, 2016) and many pictures from the Southeast Chicago Historical Museum collection provided for this project. Images will be blown up to a large scale and mounted on the walls with minimal captioning. The second section will also be overlaid by an audio recording of Geraldine Borozan describing why the strike took place. If an actual audio recording from this interview cannot be salvaged, then someone can record her interview verbatim, and this can be used instead. For people with limited or impaired hearing, a text copy can also be provided. In sections of the hallway where an oral history is not being played, then the strike song sang by Mollie West (recorded for this purpose) will be played lightly as a background track (White, 2016).

Borozan will eventually transition her conversation to the violence of the day, which will coincide with the transition of hallways into the third segment – the massacre itself. The most notable feature in this section of the exhibit will be a very large projection of the video footage provided by the Southeast Chicago Historical Museum projected on a wall, so that the audience almost feels as though they are in the scene. This video will be accompanied by sad-toned music and accompanying gunshots and yelling. Following the video will be more images and brief descriptions, once again mounted on the walls and depicting protesters being beat and shot by police. Then, a sign will indicate that there were ten total deaths (and many protesters were wounded). This will lead the museum-goers into a small hallway where they will be confronted with the death certificates of each of the ten people killed, the images blown up to a large size and suspended from the ceiling in an orientation that forces people to walk around them and confront each one.

Before leaving the very structured segment of the exhibit, the last feature the museum-goers will see will be a pile of protest signs. These will not be actual artifacts, but replicas based on protest signs seen in photos of the Memorial Day Massacre. This will be placed intentionally in the middle of the hallway, forcing the flow of traffic to curve around it. And because the picket signs will be replicas, there is no harm in allowing the guests to get very close to the stack and potentially interact with the signs. The concept of this spectacle is to drive home the intentions of the strike, and to have a pile that speaks to the scale of how many protesters were there that day. This image is hopefully one that will be associated with the exhibit, similar to how the Holocaust Museum is always associated with its display of shoes.

Once out of this section of the exhibit, guests will find themselves in a larger room in a more traditional museum style. The lighting will be brighter, talking will be more comfortable,

and the aesthetic will incorporate some colors. Here, visitors will be able to choose what they would like to interact with. The two main sections of this room are products of the Memorial Day Massacre (two pieces of artwork made in its wake, and a replica of the memorial statue dedicated by the United Steelworkers of America Committee) and an area dedicated to oral histories. In the oral histories section, there will be pictures and descriptions of each of the interviewees, and participants can choose which one they would like to put headphones on for and listen to for a while. Finally, there will be a seating area in this room. As learned at the MIT museum, it is important to have a resting area to encourage people to rest and then continue to engage with the material. Ideally, this exhibit would be followed by another section of the museum, perhaps focused on a topic such as the Save our Jobs Committee.

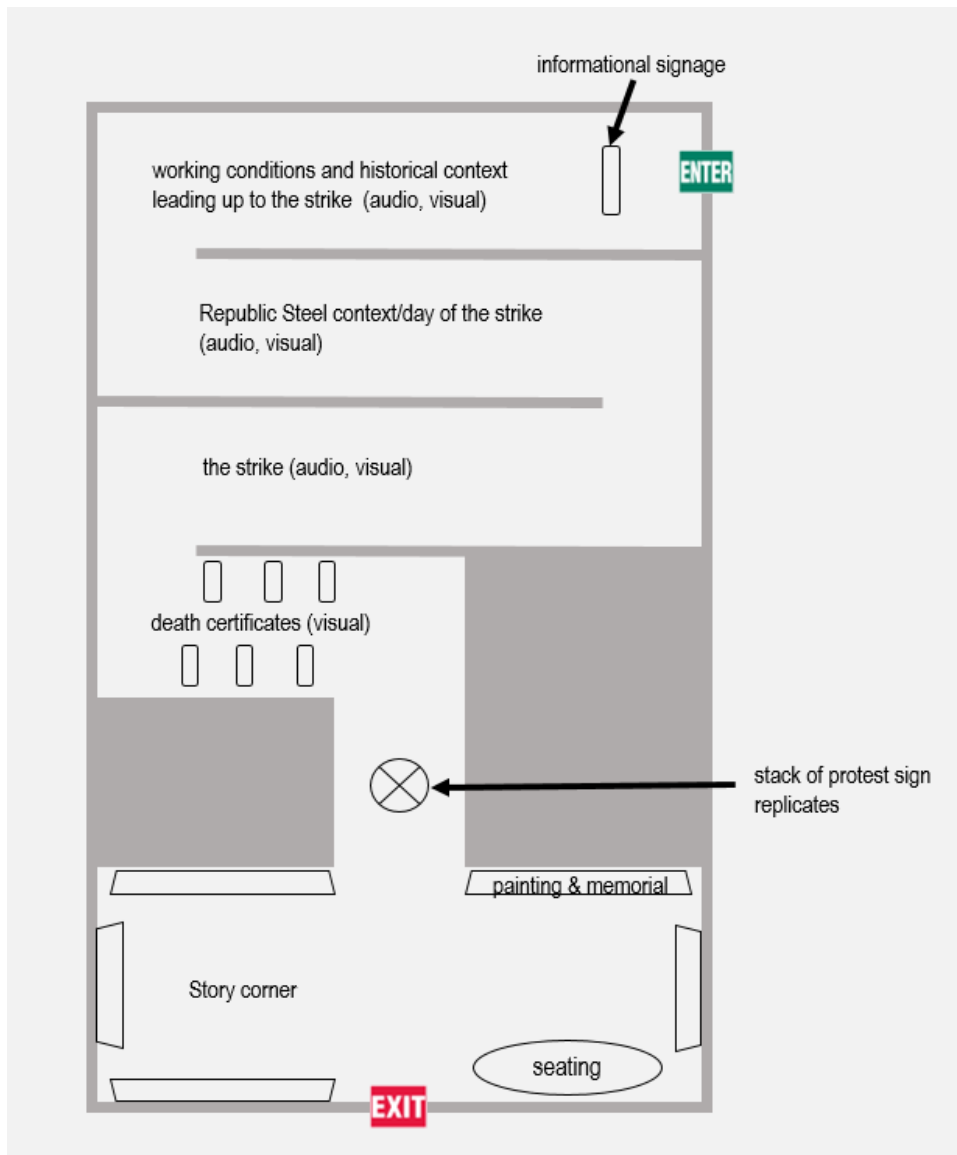
Aside from the historical and technical factors, this exhibit is intended to evoke emotion. For anyone, confronting brutality towards other human beings in an intentionally somber environment is bound to provoke emotion. For members of the community, possibly those who know people featured in photos, recordings or oral histories will bring this exhibit to a new level of personal and reinforce the idea that this very much an event that shook the community.

Sources additional to the Southeast Chicago Historical Museum

Sellers, Rod. *Images of America: Chicago's Southeast Side Revisited*. Arcadia, 2001.

White, Ahmed. *The Last Great Strike: Little Steel, the CIO, and the Struggle for Labor Rights in New Deal America*. University of California Press, 2016.

General Blueprint



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