

**CHAPTER 4**  
**VISITOR CENTER**  
**AND INTERPRETIVE**  
**STRATEGY**

## Chapter Review

In this chapter we address two crucial components of the Heritage Park. First, we address the options for the visitor center "experience": its programmatic components, the configuration of those components and their respective spacial requirements. We present an interpretive orientation of the visitor center as a "Place Museum," and suggest an approach for finalizing the historical and social themes would best be woven into the "message" of the Park . We propose specific interpretive elements of exhibitry that would educate and captivate the tourist, as well as local families, students, and teachers. We conclude with a call for action to finalize the design and proceed with construction of the visitor center.

## Options for the Overall "Visitor Experience"

Three types of orientations can characterize the visitor center experience:

**Traditional approach.** The traditional visitor center is a passive point of information gathering. The staff at the center serve as greeters and facility care-takers, not interpretive guides or visitor service providers. The presentation(s) and exhibits at the traditional center will be purely informational, non-interactive, and permanently unchanging (you need to see them only once). Brochure racks provide information regarding tourist services and amenities in the region. There are rest rooms, water, and vending machines. In essence the traditional visitor center is a point to stop and get information. It is not an attraction on its own, nor does it necessarily serve as an attractor for the other sites in the heritage park. The Connecticut Welcome Centers, currently managed by the State's Tourism Division, fall into this category.

**Add "sizzle" to traditional approach.** This approach includes all of the information services and amenities of the traditional approach, but with the addition of exciting experiences that draw visitors for an initial visit, and are worthy of repeat visits. Such a visitor center must be a vibrant place, with staff who can interpret the area's history and provide visitor planning services (directions, reservations, helpful hints, etc.). The interpretative exhibits should be interactive, changing on a regular basis, and multi-media with a compelling thematic message. There should be a gift shop and places for community activities (educational programming and special events).

**Visitor Center "Plus" major attraction.** In this approach, the Visitor Center is a major attraction unto itself, through the addition of one or more attraction features: a major exhibit component, a major presentation experience (e.g. IMAX/OMNIMAX-type theater), or the addition of a unique feature attraction (e.g. a tall ship). The "plus" feature can be on-site (i.e. the exhibits), or in close enough proximity to be considered an integral part of the visitor center experience (i.e. adjacent, or across the street on the waterfront). In essence, the "plus" feature makes the visitor center equal to or greater than the historic sites that comprise the heritage park, thereby elevating the significance of the area's historic resources.

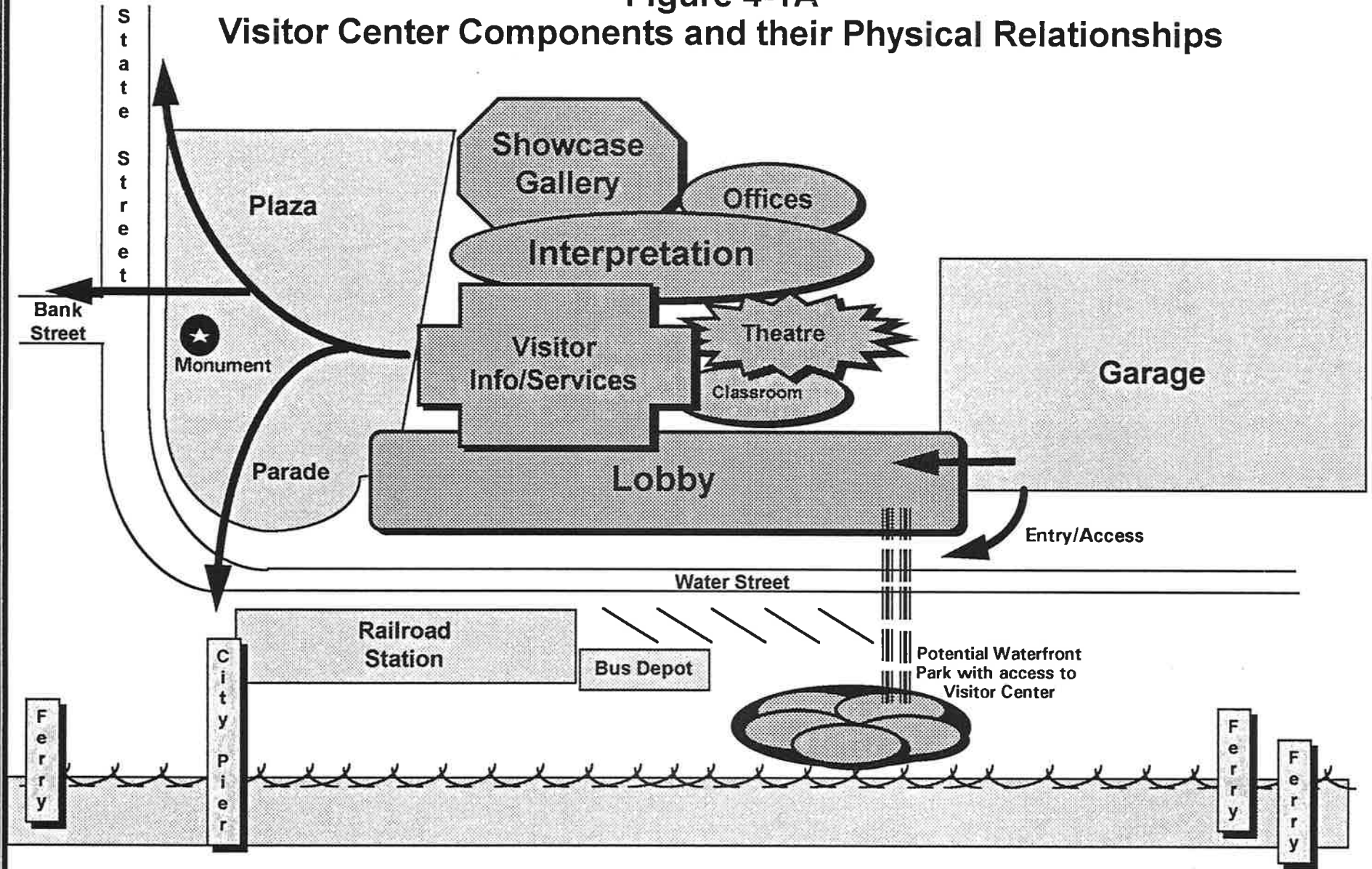
## Visitor Center Architectural Program

The selection of a visitor center orientation is guided by many factors, including site availability, market demand, available budget (for capital and operating expenses), local leadership and commitment, and the overall magnitude of the project itself. Given these factors, the visitor center of the Thames Maritime Heritage Park can and should be more than a traditional visitor center. However, the financial and human resources required for the Visitor Center "Plus" (major attraction) concept are beyond the region's current capacity. A visitor center with "sizzle" is therefore the recommended option at this time.

The current visitor center plans call for the inclusion of the "sizzle" components (interpretive exhibits, classrooms, theater, etc.). Current bonding levels will allow for some of these components. However, funding increments will be needed (above current bonding levels) to build out the full complement of exhibit and architectural design components that we contemplate, as described in the balance of this chapter.

With these components in place, the Thames Maritime Heritage Park Visitor Center will attract visitors who otherwise would not likely stop and stay in the area. The center will be a vehicle for advancing the goals and purposes of the historic sites in the Thames estuary region, and it will initiate the attractions development process. These issues are described in greater detail in subsequent chapters of this report. Figure 4-1A on the next page presents a stylized graphic representation of the recommended architectural program for the Visitor Center. Figure 4-1B shows the recommended ranges of size for each component. Following the architectural program, we present the overall interpretive concept and the next steps in seeing that the visitor center is implemented expeditiously.

Figure 4-1A  
Visitor Center Components and their Physical Relationships



**Figure 4-1B  
Visitor Center Space Requirements**

|   | Square Footage |               |               |
|---|----------------|---------------|---------------|
|   | Low            | High          | Average       |
| Visitor Information   | 500            | 750           | 625           |
| A&T Info System Kiosk   | 25             | 35            | 30            |
| Visitor Planning  | 300            | 500           | 400           |
| Visitor Services  | 300            | 500           | 400           |
| Theatre   | 1,200          | 1,800         | 1,500         |
| Interpretive Space<br>(Permanent Exhibit, Timeline Wall, Estuary Model) | 5,000          | 6,000         | 5,500         |
| Showcase Gallery  | 1,000          | 2,000         | 1,500         |
| Classroom / Multi-purpose   | 300            | 400           | 350           |
| Gift Shop   | 500            | 1,000         | 750           |
| <b>Subtotal</b>   | <b>9,125</b>   | <b>12,985</b> | <b>11,055</b> |
| <b>Support Space (45%)</b>  | <b>4,106</b>   | <b>5,843</b>  | <b>4,975</b>  |
| Offices   |                |               |               |
| Circulation   |                |               |               |
| Toilets   |                |               |               |
| Storage   |                |               |               |
| <b>TOTAL:</b>   | <b>13,231</b>  | <b>18,828</b> | <b>16,030</b> |

## **Overall Interpretive Concept: "Place Museum"**

**We recommend that the overall interpretive concept of the Heritage Park visitor center follow along the approach used for "place museums". These facilities interpret broad themes from their home community and region including history, geography, people, economic trends, etc. Excellent examples of this concept can be found in:**

**Adirondack Museum (NY)  
City of London (England) Museum  
Desert Museum (AZ)  
Old State House (Boston)**

**Within these museums, additional themes are developed that illustrate how and why the area developed as it did. Exhibits in these museums often show the unique features that shaped the community or region (e.g. the fire that changed the face of Boston, the guide boats of the Adirondacks, climate and water availability on the desert).**

## Interpretive Approach

There are many interpretive approaches that can be implemented within the general framework of a "Place Museum".

By historic period (e.g. "Revolutionary Period").

By theme (social, military, economy, people, etc.) across all historic periods.

By emphasizing topics for which strong cultural resources already exist.

By creating new interpretive resources to focus on topics where interpretive resources are currently few or none.

By choosing a random group of "interesting" interpretive opportunities that characterize the area.

By making the "heritage park" itself the theme (the visitor center and designated sites taken together).

The following figures (4-2, 4-3, 4-4) illustrate how the interpretive focus can be established for the first three approaches listed above. Each figure shows a "Time-Period" matrix. While the data we have provided is illustrative only, and by no means historically complete, it shows how the matrix can shape an interpretive approach that focuses on a specific historic period, or, alternatively, on a specific topical theme, or on the area's cultural resources. Using a completed historical data matrix, the interpretive planner will finalize a program for the Visitor Center. See Appendix C "Potential Interpretive Themes" for more information on thematic possibilities.



## Figure 4-4 Interpretive Approach Using Strong Cultural Resources

The matrix presented here is illustrative only. The shaded areas show the result of using the matrix to identify an interpretive approach based on the region's strongest interpretive resources.

| Period Theme | The Land Pre-European | 17th Century                              | Revolution                            | Early Republic   | Civil War    | Late 19th century                | Early 20th Century | WWII                       | Post War/ Technology   |
|--------------|-----------------------|---|---------------------------------------|--|--------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Social       | Native Settlement     | Religion, Churches, Government            | Burning of New London                 | Shaw Mansion   |              | Immigration                      | '38 Hurricane      |                            | Urban Renewal  |
| Economic     | Wampum Fishing        | 1st shipyard<br>Triangular Trade          | Navigation Acts                       | Whaling<br>Steam Ships<br>Woolen Mills<br>Custom House | Whaling      | Whaling<br>Textiles<br>Railroads | Textiles           | Boat/Ship/<br>Sub Building | Boat/Ship/Sub Bldg<br>Pharmaceuticals<br>Underwater Technology |
| Military     |                       | Pequot War                                | Privateers<br>CT Navy<br>Ft. Griswold | War of 1812;<br>British Blockade                       | Ft. Trumbull |                                  | Coast Guard        | Sub Base                   | Sub Base<br>NUSC/NUWC<br>Nautilus Memorial                     |
| People       | Pequots               | Hempsted<br>Adrian Block<br>John Winthrop | Nathan Hale<br>Benedict Arnold        | Capt. Richard Law, Jr.                                 |              |                                  | Eugene O'Neill     |                            |  |

## Figure 4-2 Interpretive Approach Using A Specific Time Period

The matrix presented here is illustrative only. The shaded column shows the result of "slicing" the matrix by time period, say "Revolution". See Appendix C "Potential Interpretive Themes" for more information.

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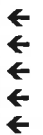
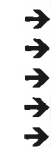
| Period Theme | The Land Pre-European | 17th Century                              | Revolution                            | Early Republic   | Civil War    | Late 19th century                | Early 20th Century | WWII                       | Post War/ Technology   |
|--------------|-----------------------|---|---------------------------------------|--|--------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Social       | Native Settlement     | Religion, Churches, Government            | Burning of New London                 |  |              | Immigration                      | '38 Hurricane      |                            | Urban Renewal  |
| Economic     | Wampum Fishing        | 1st shipyard<br>Triangular Trade          | Navigation Acts                       | Whaling<br>Steam Ships<br>Woolen Mills<br>Custom House | Whaling      | Whaling<br>Textiles<br>Railroads | Textiles           | Boat/Ship/<br>Sub Building | Boat/Ship/Sub Bldg<br>Pharmaceuticals<br>Underwater Technology |
| Military     |                       | Pequot War                                | Privateers<br>CT Navy<br>Ft. Griswold | War of 1812;<br>British Blockade                       | Ft. Trumbull |                                  | Coast Guard        | Sub Base                   | Sub Base<br>NUSC<br>NUWC                                       |
| People       | Pequots               | Hempsted<br>Adrian Block<br>John Winthrop | Nathan Hale<br>Benedict Arnold        | Capt. Richard Law, Jr.                                 |              |                                  | Eugene O'Neill     |                            |  |

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## Figure 4-3 Interpretive Approach Using A Specific Thematic Topic

The matrix presented here is illustrative only. The shaded row shows the result of "slicing" the matrix by theme, say "Military". See Appendix C "Potential Interpretive Themes" for more information.

| Period Theme | The Land Pre-European | 17th Century                              | Revolution                            | Early Republic   | Civil War    | Late 19th century                | Early 20th Century | WWII                       | Post War/ Technology   |
|--------------|-----------------------|---|---------------------------------------|--|--------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Social       | Native Settlement     | Religion, Churches, Government            | Burning of New London                 |  |              | Immigration                      | '38 Hurricane      |                            | Urban Renewal  |
| Economic     | Wampum Fishing        | 1st shipyard<br>Triangular Trade          | Navigation Acts                       | Whaling<br>Steam Ships<br>Woolen Mills<br>Custom House | Whaling      | Whaling<br>Textiles<br>Railroads | Textiles           | Boat/Ship/<br>Sub Building | Boat/Ship/Sub Bldg<br>Pharmaceuticals<br>Underwater Technology |
| Military     |                       | Pequot War                                | Privateers<br>CT Navy<br>Ft. Griswold | War of 1812;<br>British Blockade                       | Ft. Trumbull |                                  | Coast Guard        | Sub Base                   | Sub Base<br>NUSC<br>NUWC                                       |
| People       | Pequots               | Hempsted<br>Adrian Block<br>John Winthrop | Nathan Hale<br>Benedict Arnold        | Capt. Richard Law, Jr.                                 |              |                                  | Eugene O'Neill     |                            |  |



## Options for Visitor Center Interpretive Components

Within the overall concept of "Place Museum", we recommend the following Heritage Park interpretive components. These should be reviewed with the exhibit design firm responsible for implementation of the Visitor Center Exhibitory and would be subject to the final building layout, budget, and size:

### *Welcoming Video*

A TV Monitor should be installed near the entry within an informal seating area. Upon arrival, the visitor should pass through this area and view a brief (3-5 minutes) introductory video on the heritage park. The video should tell the visitor what the park is, how to use the visitor center facilities, and the best way to take advantage of the attractions included in the park. The video should be non-changing (you won't need to view it again on subsequent visits).

### *A&T Interactive Info Kiosk*

This interactive touch-screen system should be placed in close proximity to the Welcoming Video

### *Topical/thematic Film*

The first major interpretive presentation should be a multi-media (film/slide/video, audio) presentation in a theater within the visitor center. The presentation should be approximately 10 to 20 minutes in length and should focus on one or more themes of the heritage park/region. It is our vision that a series of films be produced so that the visitor will find new material on repeat visits..

**Options for Visitor Center Interpretive Components (continued)**

***"Time Line" Wall***

This exhibit would feature a larger-than-life physical matrix of themes and time periods. We envision that the time line would be presented both verbally and graphically, interspersed with audio/video presenting local sites that reflect a particular feature of the time line.

***Model of the Estuary***

Models of geographic regions can be implemented in a number of formats, including: floor insets (glassed-in for walk over or recessed for walk around); landscaped outdoor settings; or enclosed scale models (as at Mystic Seaport)

***Permanent Interpretive Exhibit***

The visitor center should include a non-changing permanent exhibit that addresses selected themes of the park as "bundles" (for example, whaling, shipbuilding, economy, commerce and industry, people, etc.).

***Showcase Gallery***

We propose that space be allocated for quarterly or semi-annual changing exhibits mounted by one or more "designated collaborators (see page 5-3). The Showcase Gallery would promote area sites and whet the visitors appetite to see the larger collections at the sites themselves

## Visitor Center and Interpretive Strategy

**Finalize the elements in the visitor center development process, as follows:**

- ◆ Site and footprint (location and spacial requirements)
- ◆ Plaza/Parade (whether or not to restore to original grade)
- ◆ Facade (whether modernist or historic)
- ◆ Entry/Access (where do visitors "arrive")
- ◆ Architectural program (what's in it)

**Review and finalize the Visitor Center orientations and components, as follows:**

Overall visitor experience

Interpretive elements

- ◆ Place Museum and Key Themes
- ◆ A/V presentations
- ◆ Timeline Wall
- ◆ Model of Estuary
- ◆ Showcase Gallery
- ◆ Collaborations Orientation

Public Use (meetings, events, etc.)

Educational Programming (classes, workshops, lectures, etc.)

**Proceed with implementation action, as follows:**

Complete final architectural schematics and construction documentation.

Secure and convene exhibit design firm for interpretive components.

Establish consensus between and among the following stakeholding groups:

- ◆ Heritage Park Advisory Board
- ◆ Area cultural, educational and historical collaborators
- ◆ Municipalities
- ◆ Tourism Interests

Secure state and municipal agency approvals as necessary to proceed.