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INTERPRETATION IN THE MOUNTAINS





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Interpretation at 14,000 feet—planning a visitor center atop Pikes Peak presents unique challenges. See the story on page 10. Photo courtesy RTA & GWWO.

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OXYGEN DEPRIVED

Interpretation at 14,000 Feet

RTA & GWWO



GREG MATTY



ALAN REED

Since Katharine Lee Bates first stood atop Pikes Peak and penned “America the Beautiful” in 1893, the mountain has loomed large in the nation’s consciousness. Its history goes back to 500 AD, when it was dubbed *Tava* or “sun” by the Ute People. The history also includes early Spanish explorers, the Colorado Gold Rush, and even Nikola Tesla.

Today, Pikes Peak is the only 14,000-foot peak—a *fourteener*, in local parlance—that anyone can access no matter age or fitness level. Truly America’s Mountain, Pikes Peak is the quintessential mountain adventure for those who wish to witness majestic views, experience the natural environment, and delve into a fascinating part of our nation’s history. Such a site demands extensive interpretation. However, the effect on the body at 14,000 feet above sea level due to reduced effective oxygen—let alone the dramatic temperature

The visitor center's design uses shade, shadow, and fragmentation to coalesce the building into the peak.



swings, spontaneous lightning strikes, or 50-mile-per-hour wind gusts—leaves a limited timeframe for interpretation. In fact, most visitors will start to feel the effects of altitude within 15 to 20 minutes. But, such a site demands extensive interpretation.

When tasked with creating a new interpretive experience atop Pikes Peak, the visitor center design team took a holistic approach to the building, exhibit, and landscape



DHM DESIGN

design to create an impactful visitor experience achievable within an hour or less.

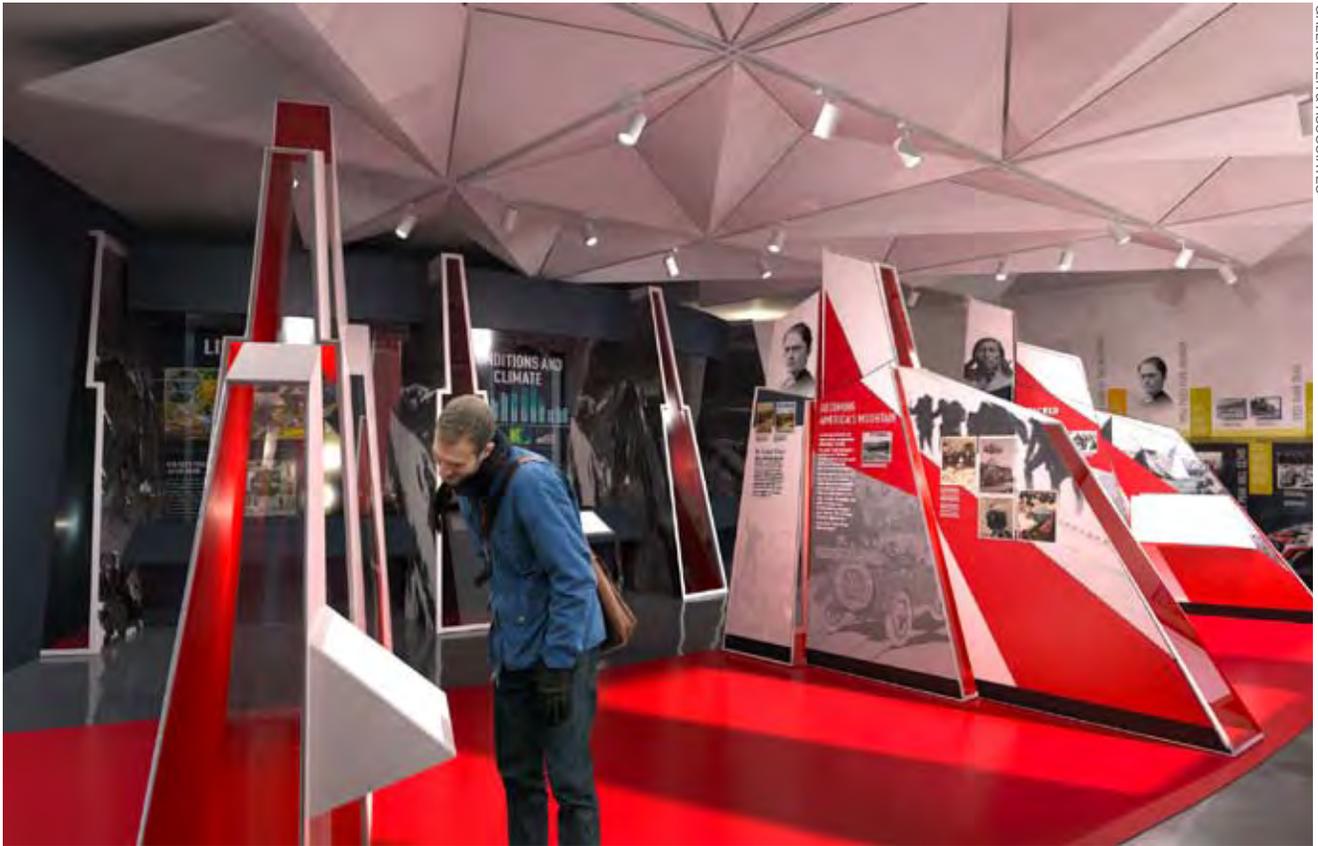
The key to designing memorable interpretive experiences in any location is to distill concepts down to easily digestible and relatable components that will keep a visitor's interest without overwhelming them. Successfully executing this approach is even more crucial when designing within mountainous or other natural environments that impose restrictions due to their extreme settings. The goal at Pikes Peak, or any high-altitude location, is to make the experience accessible and to offer a broad range of ways to experience the site and its stories, all within a reasonable timeframe. Strategies to increase the interpretive opportunities include successful integration of the indoor/outdoor experience, interpretation in unconventional places, expanding the experience beyond the mountain, and imbuing the facilities themselves with meaning.

The purest way to discover any site is to experience it. However, weather conditions often seen at altitude, including freezing temperatures, massive snowfall, and wind gusts, can make that challenging. To provide all visitors with a comparable experience, no matter the conditions, it's important to plan for an alternative, controlled, indoor experience. In the case of Pikes Peak, visitors often choose to visit only the peak or the visitor

Secure walkways and trails with wayside plaques allow visitors to experience unobstructed 360-degree views while learning about the site's history.

center, given the time constraints and potential weather challenges. While this helps drive repeat visitation to the peak, it necessitated an integrated and balanced interpretive plan. Wayside plaques and other outdoor interpretive elements focus on the rich history of the mountain and its 360-degree views, while a variety of interior interactive exhibits expand upon and further the story. If a visitor spends all their time on the peak, they will still leave with a comparable experience to those who spent their time within the visitor center. Coordination between indoor and outdoor exhibits can also help to drive traffic outside and vice versa.

Accessibility and safety can be a major concern in this type of environment, especially for those who are not accustomed to traversing the mountainous terrain or the high altitude. Paths should be designed with gradual elevation changes and multiple pausing/resting spaces to minimize fatigue. These moments should be coordinated with the interpretive plan to enhance the experience using wayside plaques and designated viewpoints. As many visitors desire to be as close to the resource as possible, walkways with appropriate barriers over treacherous terrain and very near



to cliff edges must be incorporated to create both physically and psychologically safe conditions to view the resource. Not only do these walkways protect visitors, but they also preserve the natural resource. In the case of Pikes Peak, elevated grated walkways allow visitors to traverse the summit and learn about the tundra without impacting the fragile ecosystem.

To maximize each visitor's interpretive experience within a limited timeframe requires a bit of imagination and a less conventional approach to exhibit design. For visitor centers or museums, every space in the building can be designed with interpretive opportunities in mind. At Pikes Peak, the dining area, gift shop, and even the restrooms allow visitors to discover part of the story. From early maps used by the Spanish explorers to photographs of the first woman that climbed the peak, visitors can learn without ever setting foot in the formal exhibit space. However, these opportunities are really meant to enhance the experience offered by the traditional exhibits. While

confined to a small area, the exhibits give visitors an opportunity to dive slightly deeper into the story of Pikes Peak, from its use by the native people to its modern-day legacy.

Another strategy for overcoming shortened durations of the typical visit is to focus on the big picture—a momentous feat when many natural environments and historical sites demand extensive interpretation. Breaking down each site's story into the key components and identifying the basic messages visitors should leave with will help to frame the interpretation. In the case of Pikes Peak, those stories are the natural, cultural, and social history of the mountain. While all stories are briefly covered inside the visitor center and its exhibit space, significant themes are further communicated outdoors for increased retention and exposure for those who only visit the peak itself. It's also important to consider the use of outside resources. Directing visitors to other local sites such as museums and libraries allows visitors to choose their own path, creating a personalized experience for those who

The exhibit space mimics the rugged forms of the front range, while interactive and graphic displays offer insight into the site's history.

wish to learn more. For Pikes Peak, visitors are directed to several local museums, all within 20 minutes from the base of the peak. Every space that visitors may experience while atop Pikes Peak—from the visitor center to the outdoor interpretation—includes information on how to learn more, and where to go based on individual tastes and subject matter. Pointing visitors to informational websites and custom apps that they can peruse on their own time, both before and after their visit, can also help to continue the experience.

Architecture imbued with meaning is the final piece to maximize the story being told. From the exterior expression of the building to the smallest interior detail, the design of visitor and interpretive centers can evoke emotional responses and provide an additional level of interpretation. For Pikes Peak, the

visitor center is seemingly carved from the side of the peak. Sited to frame the view of Mt. Rosa, the location from where Zebulon Pike viewed the peak in 1806, the lobby offers the same unobstructed views that inspired “America the Beautiful.” Accentuating the relationship between the two landforms, the 3.5-degree angle from Pikes Peak to Mt. Rosa is reflected in the downward tip of the lobby walls. That same angle is mirrored in the upward slope of the roof acknowledging the expansive views to the east. Clad in material similar to Pikes Peak granite, the modern hue seamlessly blends into the mountainside, solidifying the peak’s place as the prime interpretive experience.

While mountains such as Pikes Peak and other natural environments often dictate a truncated interpretive experience, many interpreters face a similar challenge through shortened attention spans and increased competition. By taking a holistic view of all interpretive opportunities and employing innovative strategies, interpreters can guarantee each visitor a memorable and meaningful experience in a relatively short timeframe.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Alan Reed, FAIA, LEED AP is President and Design Principal of GWWO, Inc./Architects and has spent his 30-year career designing facilities for culturally, environmentally, and historically significant sites, including this most recent project for Pikes Peak – America’s Mountain.

The Pikes Peak visitor center design team includes Gallagher & Associates (experience designers), GWWO, Inc./Architects (design architect), RTA Architects (architect-of-record), and DHM (landscape architect).

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