BUILDING A CANAL | CONSTRUCTING RACE
PREJUDICE AND LABOR IN THE PANAMA CANAL ZONE

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This is not an exhibit about the Panama Canal.
This is not an exhibit about building the Panama Canal.
This is an exhibit about the people who built the Panama Canal.
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“At the start of any worthy design project is a strategic phase... some practitioners call this needs assessment, some call it problem definition, some call it discovery. But since the best designs always embody their intentions... what if that intention, from the get-go is aimed toward some social good? Does that change the product we end up with?”
– Emily Pilloton, Design Revolution
MISSION STATEMENT

Building a Canal, Constructing Race: Prejudice and Labor in the Panama Canal Zone aims to reveal to visitors the socially constructed nature of race by telling the story of segregation during the construction of the Panama Canal by the American government, specifically, through the eyes of the various ethnic groups of laborers that were not treated equally to their white U.S. citizen counterparts during a period of severe segregation in the United States.

By focusing on this unique story and by providing interactive and compelling “teachable moments” about race, the exhibition:
• offers a new perspective to visitors on their own identity
• shows how society creates artificial classifications for groups of people
• the exhibition promotes a more tolerant and equitable community through direct social impact in the museum.
BUILDING EMPATHY

This exhibition aims to offer visitors an emotionally compelling museum experience that allows them to each detach from the historical narrative and instead engage in their own empathic experiences that recognize a more universal truths of the human condition through:

- **Identification**: continuing to provide traditional museum explorations of history or ideas through tangible facts and objects.

- **Imagination**: adding components with open-ended explorations of ideas or concepts.

- **Self-guided learning opportunities**: empowering visitors to form their conclusions and develop connections between the historical experience on display and what is relevant in their own personal experiences.

- **Emotional experience**: allowing learning to take place on an emotional level rather than only on an intellectual level.
DESIGN GOALS

1. SOLEMN AND HONEST:
2. Contemporary take on old fashioned design:
   - TO REFLECT THAT THE EXHIBITION IS on a modern issue made visible by history
   - TO RESPECT the SENSITIVITY of the SUBJECT MATTER and LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- immersive Environment:
- create an inviting and safe space for reflection and DIALOGUE AMONG VISITORS

- use design to evoke location without making recreations

Headlines in the typeface called Showcase and the rest in a clean, modern slab serif like Univers or Avenir. Color palette is in grays with pops of bold color.
EXHIBITION LOCATION

The Panama Canal Museum (Spanish: Museo del Canal Interoceánico de Panamá), a non-profit museum located in the historic old quarter of Panama City, is dedicated to the history of the construction of the Panama Canal.

The museum offers a large permanent exhibition as well as space for multiple temporary exhibitions. Building a Canal, Constructing Race will be made for the entire first floor of the museum where the permanent exhibition space stands, since the exhibition aims to create a broad view of the history of laborers constructing the canal.
CONTENT NARRATIVE

ENTRANCE
SEGREGATION EXPERIENCE
JOURNEY TO THE CANAL
DIVERSE LABOR POPULATIONS
GOLD AND SILVER SYSTEMS
CANAL ZONE SEGREGATION SYSTEM

EMPATHY INTERACTIVE ZONES
CONTENT AREAS

BUILDING A CANAL, CONSTRUCTING RACE
CONTENT NARRATIVE
EMPATHY INTERACTIVE ZONES
CONTENT AREAS
BUILDING A CANAL, CONSTRUCTING RACE

ENTRANCE TREATMENT
SEGREGATED ENTRANCES, ONLY "COLORED" ACCESSIBLE TO VISITORS

LANGUAGE CHOICES DELIBERATE TO EMPHASIZE FEELING OF FOREIGN, AMERICAN CONTROL
ENTRANCE TREATMENT | SEGREGATION EXPERIENCE

Visitors will be confronted with segregated entrances to the exhibition. As visitors are forced to proceed through the colored entrance, they are presented with an empathy-building experience in which they lose the ability to self-identify racially, just like the canal laborers under American controlled segregation.
Visitors pass a wall-sized infographic showing the diversity of nationalities and quantity of laborers that arrived to the Canal Zone during construction.
Visitors emerge into a setting resembling a passenger ship from the era. Each series of bunks provides an opportunity to learn about a different migration story from the various countries laborers traveled from.

A narrated film of historic imagery plays through pothole inspired monitors.

The lower bunks are benches.

Graphics indicate country of origin.

desde
ESTADOS UNIDOS
Portraits are backlit and light up according to the category of laborers they belong to.

The upper monitor indicates which grouping of laborers are being light up according to the gold and silver system of segregation.
BUILDING A CANAL, CONSTRUCTING RACE
GOLD AND SILVER SYSTEM | LOOPED ANIMATION
Visitors can visually learn what the different grouping of segregated labor were in the Panama Canal Zone. As the screens cycle through the Gold and Silver System groupings, visitors come to understand how big each group was and what the laborers’ skin tones were in each group.

PERSONAS DEL SISTEMA DORADO
ORIGEN: ESTADOS UNIDOS
RAZA: BLANCA

TRANSLATION:
GOLD SYSTEM LABORERS:
ORIGIN: UNITED STATES
RACE: WHITE

PERSONAS DEL SISTEMA PLATA
ORIGEN: TODOS
RAZA: TODOS

TRANSLATION:
SILVER SYSTEM LABORERS:
ORIGIN: ALL
RACE: ALL
TOWN SQUARE

Visitors enter a recreated town square where they can freely engage with the central interactive or visit three different galleries about home life: Silver System Home Life, Gold System Home Life, and the Railroad Station.
BUILDING FACADES ARE IN GREYSCALE TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION OF STEPPING INTO A HISTORIC IMAGE OF A TOWN SQUARE

THE EMPATHY INTERACTIVE (SEE P. 28) IS VISIBLE FROM ALL SIDES OF THIS AREA. AS VISITORS EXPLORE THE SURROUNDING GALLERIES THEY ALWAYS RETURN TO THE INTERACTIVE, HOPEFULLY REMINDING THEM THAT PREJUDICE CONTINUES TO THIS DAY.
EMPATHY INTERACTIVE

Visitors approach the interactive and by following the directions on the screen, a picture of their arm is captured. They then proceed to judge other visitors arms with adjectives pre-loaded on the screen. This process is captured and projected on the screens above, reminding everyone that we continue to be prejudice to this day.
SILVER AND GOLD LIFE GALLERY ENTRANCES
Both entrances are next to each other. Visitors pass through porch areas to transition to the Silver System and Gold System home-life environments.
VISITORS ARE INVITED TO SIT ON THE CHAIRS IN THE PORCHES. THE SILVER AND GOLD PORCHES FEATURE DIFFERENT CHAIRS THAT REFLECT THE AFLUENCE OF THE TWO CLASSES OF LABORERS.

A PORCH SCREEN SEPERATES THE TWO GALLERIES SO THAT BOTH GALLERIES ARE VIEWABLE FROM THE OTHER. THIS ENHANCES VISITORS ABILITY TO COMPARE AND CONTRAST THE SIMILAR CONTENT AREAS IN BOTH ROOMS.
SILVER SYSTEM HOME LIFE
Both the Gold System and Silver System galleries have parallel content: a home goods storage area, bedroom area, and a video component.

HOME GOODS ARE DISPLAYED IN A CASE THAT IS INSPIRED BY A SIMPLE CLOSET, FEATURING A SINGLE METAL POLE TO HANG GARMENTS FROM.
BUILDING A CANAL, CONSTRUCTING RACE

DOCUMENTARIES ARE PROJECTED FROM THE CEILING ONTO THE SURFACE OF CAFETERIA TABLES. THE FILM EXPLAINS HOW SPANISH WORKERS RIOTED IN A CAFETERIA OVER BEING FED WITH AFRO-CARIBBEAN LABORERS.

BUNKBEDS DISPLAY THE LOW QUALITY AND TIGHT QUARTERS OF SILVER LABORER HOUSING.

LA VIDA EN EL SISTEMA PLATA

- Que harás en tu próximo trabajo?
- ¿Cuánto ganarás?
- ¿Cuánto dormirás?
- ¿Dónde te quedarás?
- ¿Qué comidas tendrás?
- ¿Qué te hará el agua?
- ¿Qué te hará el sol?
- ¿Qué te hará el viento?
- ¿Qué te hará el hambre?
- ¿Qué te hará el cansancio?
- ¿Qué te hará la fatiga?
GOLD SYSTEM HOME LIFE

HOME GOODS ARE DISPLAYED IN A HIGH END CASE
DISPLAYING LUXURY GOODS AVAILABLE TO GOLD
SYSTEM LABORERS
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WINDOWS WITH SCREENS FEATURE PROJECTIONS FROM BEHIND OF HISTORIC IMAGES SHOWING WHAT GOLD SYSTEM LIFE WAS LIKE.

MISQUITO NETTING OVER THE BED IS A DISPLAY ABOUT HOW GOLD SYSTEM LABORERS WERE FAR MORE PROTECTED FROM MOSQUITO-BORN DISEASE, WHICH LED TO MANY DEATHS IN THE CANAL ZONE.
THE RAILROAD STATION

Visitors emerge from the town square onto a train station platform, with a passenger car on a train track as the focal point. This area explores the importance of the railroad to travel along the Canal Zone before the canal was constructed and how the railroad was racialized.
Visitors can metaphorically walk along the railroad to the construction zone along inlaid metal stripes in the floor.

The setting changes from a grayscale environment to a full color jungle scene to enhance the experience of journeying into a dense jungle and showing how wild the terrain really was.
CONSTRUCTING THE CANAL

BUILDING A CANAL, CONSTRUCTING RACE
A PANORAMIC PHOTO OF THE PANAMANIAN JUNGLE SURROUND THIS GALLERY

THE CENTERPIECE IS A BUCYRUS STEAM SHOVEL, AN AMERICAN INVENTION THAT ENABLED THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CANAL.
Construction objects are displayed on a giant pile of excavated dirt made of fiberglass.
VISITOR CAN OBSERVE OBJECTS IN A CASE DESIGNED TO LOOK LIKE CONSTRUCTION SCAFFOLDING. THIS CASE FEATURES CONSTRUCTION OBJECTS AS WELL AS MONITORS WITH HISTORIC IMAGES.
EMPATHY REFLECTION AREA

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RACE AND EMPATHY REFLECTION AREA
The empathy interactive from town square concludes in this final gallery where visitors can obtain a printout of their arm that shows what other visitors thought about them. Visitors are invited to sit down and discuss their experience.
LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE UN CANAL | LA CREACIÓN DE UNA RAZA
SEGREGACIÓN Y TRABAJO EN LA ZONA DEL CANAL DE PANAMÁ

- FELIZ
- TRISTE
- RICO
- POBRE
- VIEJO
- DILIGENTE
- PEREZOSO
- CANSADO
- ENERGÉTICO
- ESTÚPIDO
- LOCO
- CALMA
- FLACO
- MUSCULAR
- GRANDE
- ALTO
- CORTO
- EXTRANJERO
- LOCAL
FINAL THOUGHTS

BUILDING A CANAL, CONSTRUCTING RACE
FINAL THOUGHTS
Visitors are confronted with a final invitation to relate the experience of the canal workers with modern day life and contemplate whether racism continues today. Translation: In what ways are we segregated? In what ways are we more integrated?