

CLOSE INTEGRATION OF TECHNOLOGY AND CONTENT DELIVER QUALITY EXPERIENCE AT THE ARAB AMERICAN NATIONAL MUSEUM

By Neal Weinstock

The Arab American National Museum and Cultural Center, which opened in Spring 2005 in the center of Dearborn, Michigan USA, takes up 38,500 square feet, cost \$12.8 million and exhibits Jamie Farr's golf cart, a manuscript of Paul Anka's song My Way, White House reporter Helen Thomas's Olivetti typewriter and lots of other similarly small belongings of much less famous people.

Mostly, in terms of what anthropologists call material culture, it offers viewers the truly meaningful little items immigrants clutched along on their passage to the New World. These are important things, but objects that are tough to display in some manner that will excite the average attendee's thirst for knowledge. So, the museum's designers knew from the start that they needed to make this an audiovisual (AV) storytelling experience.

The design began with Jack Rouse Associates (JRA) the Cincinnati-based group that started in amusement parks (Jack Rouse himself went from being a TV executive at Taft Broadcasting to buying out that firm's theme-park division, which is now Paramount Parks) and has now designed scores of museums, entertainment centers and other cultural attractions.

The architecture of the museum is an interpretation of traditional Arabian and Islamic forms, with three stories of columns around a courtyard and tiled surfaces. There's also an art gallery and a 160-seat theater. In the spaces around the central court are three permanent exhibits examining the origins of Arab culture and immigration to America. These are assembled from 24 exhibit vignettes, each of which tells a story about real people's lives. All are either entirely or largely made up

"Coming to America" examines the history of Arab American immigration from 1500 to the present. Using historical documents along with family and individual stories, the exhibit represents the diverse national and religious backgrounds of Arab immigrants and their unique immigration experiences.





The sports section of "Making an Impact" celebrates the achievements of Arab-American athletes.

of AV content. Thus, it involved a major technical installation, put together by Be Media of El Segundo CA, a company that has served often as a systems integrator for JRA.

"We began designing hardware based on multiple meetings with the client," said BeMedia president/CEO Mohammad Ahmadi. "In the design and engineering phase, it was a long process. It was about one year for the design and three months in implementation." Museums have precise needs, and Ahmadi pointed out that "Operability, maintenance and control of the variety of the components, especially of the interactive items, had to be of the highest caliber, while appreciating that every dollar had to be raised by the remarkable people at ACCESS." (ACCESS is the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services, the nonprofit that funded the museum.) The group also provides a wide range of social, mental health, educational, artistic, employment, legal and medical services to the Arab-American community, so every dollar spent on the museum was one with other strong claims.

As they say in the movies, the money all had to show on the screen. Indeed, the core of the museum is continual showings of 24 mini-movies in those vignettes. JRA made the films; it was BeMedia's responsibility to show them to best advantage. "The system is comprised of a head end, a lot of video servers and displays," said Ahmadi. "They can connect to the Internet to control everything remotely."

Servers used in the system include Focus Enhancement's four-channel Fireflies and an Alcorn McBride HD server. There are numerous Panasonic 42- and 65-inch plasmas. Several Elo

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Video is deeply integrated with interactive elements and artifacts on display, encouraging visitors to participate rather than passively watch.

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TouchSystems touchpanels and AMX devices provide control. Audio processing and networking is via MediaMatrix, and the museum uses "lots of dome speakers," stated Ahmadi.

"Due to the close proximity of many 'stories,'" offered Ahmadi, "the audio has to be highly directional in order to maintain the intimacy of each experience." This was quite a challenge, one that necessitated some long-distance tweaking at the start. Thus, it was quite handy that, "On the audio side we could go in over the Internet and manipulate the system." This is very much an IT/AV installation. "Separate IP addresses were given to every device. Everything is addressable by the internal IT department," he said. "From the Internet you can see the

control panels. The tech department—or any authorized individual having a password—can go in and log onto the controller and do everything from the local touchpad."

The museum has been live now for more than a year, and with good reviews from NPR's Morning Edition, The Wall Street Journal and others. "Everyone who walks into this facility, no matter their heritage, will be moved," said Ahmadi. "Working with ACCESS and JRA in order to bring every aspect to life was honestly heartfelt."

The Arab American Museum's website is www.theaanm.org.





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