

# From the Sea to the Stars

*A New Museum in Virginia Takes Visitors Through 400 Fascinating Years*

IN APRIL, the town of Hampton, Virginia, celebrated the opening of the new 118,000-square-foot Virginia Air and Space Center and Hampton Roads History Center. The lengthy name is surprisingly appropos for the center—it encompasses more than 100 exhibits that tell an exciting story of 400 years of history, adventure and space exploration. The new structure also serves as the official visitor center for the NASA Langley Research Center.

The theme of the center is “From the Sea to the Stars”—a title that captures its underlying



concept of “exploration and discovery” of the past and present. Exhibits span the centuries between the early landing of the colonists in the region and the era of space exploration.

Hampton’s own long

New York City, incorporated the spirit of flight and exploration in the architectural design of the center. From head-on, the giant glass and metal structure resembles a monolithic bird ready to take flight. Interior finishes include steel and cable bracing, as well as a glass-enclosed elevator, emphasizing the themes of technology and progress.

Design firm Krent/Paffett of Boston was not only faced with the enormous task of creating all of the exhibits within the 2.2-acre, nine-story space, it was responsible for visually and conceptually tying them together. The diverse exhibits are arranged as a journey through time, the present never losing sight of the past.

The historical exhibits were created as full-size interpretations of places and events. Theatrical techniques provide cost-effective realism. Details such as life-size figures discussing the business of the day, and background noises—such as water lapping and laborers grunting in the waterfront exhibit—help the visitor experience, not simply observe, the artifacts of the time.

Air and space exhibits were developed with the same care. High-tech scenes mimic aerospace materials and details. Vivid graphics are rear-lit to overcome changing daylight levels in the main gallery. Life-size talking figure sculptures place the exhibits within the visitor’s context.

Nick Paffett, principal of Krent/Paffett, noted, “What we pushed for was a cultural story, a human story to bring the place to life. When you have the front end of an F-16, it may be an interesting object, but it has no human context. That’s why we put sculptures of pilots next to it, talking to each other, telling yarns about flying the thing.”

— Keli Dugger



Top: The “Bunch of Grapes” tavern vignette is based on archaeological evidence found near the museum site. Theatrical lighting techniques were used to create drama. Above: “Off the shores” of the period vignette of a tobacco shipping wharf are full-scale mock-ups of the dueling ironclads, the *Monitor* and the *Merrimack*. The original Langley Aerodrome, on loan from the Smithsonian Institution, is suspended overhead. Right: In the Rockets & Satellite exhibit area, models of rockets, in scale to each other, allow visitors to make comparisons. In the background, a glimpse of the popular “Launch a Rocket” exhibit can be seen. Photography by Jeff Goldberg/Esto



and colorful history influences the broad scope of the museum’s theme. Hampton’s shores hosted the historic Civil War battle between the ironclad vessels the *Monitor* and the *Merrimack*, and it was home to aviation pioneer Samuel P. Langley, for whom the NASA research center is named.

Design architects Mitchell/Giurgola, based in