Connecting History to Community: A Framework for Permanent Exhibits at the ASUW Shell House

Exhibit Concept by Brooke McCulloch
It comes from the air...

Step inside and take a deep breath in. The soft, dry smell of aged timbers welcomes you. Sunlight fills the vaulted space, filtered through old paned windows.

...moves across the land...

Moving through the main room, you wonder what this space used to be. Why are the ceilings so high? Where does that staircase lead? What is on the other side of those huge doors? Curiosity leads you further into the building.

...and returns to the water.

As you move toward the doors on the southern wall you hear water washing against a concrete ramp. You look out these doors and find you are mere feet away from the cool waters of the Montlake Cut. Why is this building so close to the water? How can you learn more about this place?

*History lives when we engage with our environment.*
Why does the ASUW Shell House need permanent exhibits?

History

The history of the Associated Students of the University of Washington (ASUW) Shell House spans over 100 years of diverse stories and unique communities. The Shell House is a wooden structure curiously placed at the edge of the Montlake Cut on the southeastern corner of the University of Washington’s campus. No other building near it is in a similar style, and the finish of the exterior suggests that this building is old. It is easy to assume that the building holds stories, but not easy to learn what they are. Including exhibits into the renovation design intent provides a clear opportunity to highlight the history of the building in accessible and tangible ways for visitors to learn.

Community

The ASUW Shell House is sustained by its community members, who serve as advocates for the building and act as a living archive of memories and connections with this place and its stories. Exhibits are a way to preserve the stories that these people hold and increase accessibility. When these stories about the Shell House are shared, new people will find opportunities to become supporters of the Shell House.

Connections

Exhibits can serve as a method for connecting people to the history of the places they live and the people who came before them. By visiting the ASUW Shell House’s exhibit space, new community members can learn about the past and discover connections with their lives today. Through teaching about the past, the importance of preserving community histories becomes paramount to how we support our community today. By connecting with past stories, we learn about shared experiences and gain an understanding for how our communities were built.
Exhibit Resources

The ASUW Shell House’s current tours and interpretive materials, along with the University of Washington’s libraries and archives, are a strong foundation for the content that will inform the permanent exhibits. Objects for exhibits will range from naval aviation artifacts from World War I, historic rowing shells and memorabilia from the early days of the UW men’s and women’s rowing teams, tools and shells made by George Pocock and his workshop, as well as University Recreation’s canoe rentals. As a way of honoring and acknowledging the land on which this building stands, there will be information about how the land was used for thousands of years by the Lakes Duwamish peoples prior to European settlement and the important roles that access to water has always held in their lives.

The draft floorplan below shows the two levels of the ASUW Shell House and the planned footprint for exhibits inside of the building.

The following pages provide details of some of the unique resources within the shell house that are ready to be explored in exhibits. These resources have been identified with the help of the ASUW Advisory Board.
The community of the ASUW Shell House is truly unique and diverse. Composed of the descendants of Olympic rowers, members of the Pocock family, members of Seattle’s vibrant rowing clubs, veterans, aircraft enthusiasts, members of Coast Salish tribes, and people who simply love historic buildings, this foundational group has already established its commitment to keeping the history of the shell house through their ongoing and growing support for the capital campaign and enthusiasm to bring new people into the ASUW community. Through their diverse skills and interests, the ASUW community has connections that help find historic objects and tell the stories that took place within these wooden walls and along the shores of the Montlake Cut. This dedicated group is connected to all of the histories of the Shell House and has the ability to bring forward stories that are rarely told such as the significance this area has to the Lakes Duwamish peoples, its connection to Naval aviation during World War I, the University of Washington’s sailing team, and the reestablishment of the Husky Women’s Crew team.
In 2018, the ASUW Shell House was the first building on the University of Washington’s Seattle campus to gain designation as a historic landmark. Within the landmark designation, the architectural features of the building were noted as critical to preserve. As one of the last two standing wooden United States Military aircraft hangars from World War I, the shell house stands as an example of craftsmanship as well as a model of repurposing an existing structure to serve a new need. The great size of the building has helped it serve all the purposes it has had over the years and will continue to do so in its renovation. The space that permanent exhibits will occupy will leave room for the building to be used for other purposes as well.

Along with its landmark designation by the City of Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board, the ASUW Shell House is the recipient of the 2020 Historic Preservation Stewardship Award from the Washington State Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation.
In George Pocock’s workshop on the second level of the Shell House, the floor is layered with speckles of varnish that mark the places where Pocock would build and finish his remarkable cedar rowing shells. In some places, you can even find his footprints preserved in varnish, a feature critical to preserve and a highlight in exhibits. This floor provides a rare opportunity to easily retrace and follow in the footsteps of one of Seattle’s greatest craftsmen and the man who played a critical role in the history of rowing and boatbuilding.
The first level of the shell house holds the secrets of the many purposes this building has served. Looking in corners, at support posts, and different wood paneling, past configurations of the interior spaces are discovered. The southwestern corner of the building shows the outline of where an office from the Naval aeronautical ground school was during World War I. Two sets of windows on the eastern wall are different from the rest, marking where apartment living spaces were once installed. Boat racks throughout the first level of the building show how crew teams from the foundational days of the Husky Men’s Crew, through the reestablishment of the Husky Women’s Crew, and to club rowing today have and continue to use the space to store their boats. A wench system and ramp remains from the University’s Sailing team. Around every corner and every wall, there are fixtures of the building that tell a story and serve as remnants of the shell house’s many past lives.
Follow Previous Caretakers and Craftsmen

George Pocock was not the only craftsman to work within these walls. After the University’s men’s rowing team moved to their new boathouse in 1949, the Shell House was repurposed as the University of Washington Canoe House as part of the Waterfront Activities Center. Drips of paint all over the floor of the southeastern corner of the first level show where the caretakers of these canoes would paint and maintain their collection. These canoes were available for rental and allowed students and community members to take to the waters of Lake Washington in a truly Seattle experience. Along with canoe storage and rentals, a concrete ramp to the water and winch system are remnants of the UW sailing team’s time in this building.
Themes and Content

The themes of air, land, and water were selected for this exhibit for their ability to the features of the building and how these features were key to the history of the Shell House.

Air

The vertical space within the shell house was necessary for its original purpose as an aircraft hangar. Now, the high vaulted ceiling and large widows create an interior space that feels light and open to a visitor. The great size and overhead space provides an opportunity to hang larger objects, such as a small airplane or historic Pocock rowing shells, within the space they were first built without taking up floor space.

Land

The Shell House and land it stands on has historically served as a place where people go to be close to the water. The Shell House is located on the ancestral lands of the Lakes Duwamish people, and was a portage and gathering site where they would beach and carry their canoes from between Lake Union and Lake Washington. It was called staxʷ“ugʷil (stukh-ug-weelth) by the Lakes Duwamish people, meaning “carry a canoe.” The land that the shell house stands on has always and continues to be a natural meeting place for people.

Water

So many of the Shell House’s stories are so intrinsically connected to the waters outside of its doors. The activities that this building has housed are distinctly dependent on its proximity to one of Seattle’s busiest waterways. For many people who are already connected to the Shell House, access to water is important to their concept of place. By telling stories linked to the water, visitors and community members can once again have easy access to the shores of the Montlake Cut.
Exhibit Goals and Audience

The primary goal of the permanent exhibits is to tell the history of the ASUW Shell House to engage new community members. This goal can be achieved through permanent exhibits by providing an accessible opportunity to learn about local history within the contextual space where it all took place. Exhibits in historic sites and buildings have long been effective ways to show the importance of preserving historic buildings and understanding our shared history within a local community.

The target audience for this exhibit includes, but is not limited to the following:

**UW Students and Alumni**

Exhibits will provide UW students and alumni a new opportunity to learn about the history of the University of Washington and the ways it has supported diverse communities and activities. This can broaden their sense of community within the University and its renowned history.

**Waterfront Community Members**

The ASUW Shell House is recognized by many members of Seattle’s rowing and boating communities as a keystone for access to the waters of Lake Washington and Lake Union. Through exhibits, these people will be able to learn more about the history of water use in this area as well as the building’s uses that were not related to the water.

**Lakes Duwamish and Coast Salish Peoples**

There are few places where native peoples can return to their ancestral lands and learn about their history in the place where it happened. Exhibits would honor the first uses of this land and the people who first lived here and continue to live in Seattle today.

**Visitors to Seattle**

Seattle is a destination for many people’s vacations. It is not uncommon for visitors to know one of the ASUW shell house’s most remarkable stories as told in the book and upcoming movie, *The Boys in the Boat*. Permanent exhibits will become a destination for many people to visit and walk through the building and workshop that helped the 1936 Husky Crew Team race their way to victory in the Olympics and establish UW’s enduring legacy of rowing.