

2.0 The Case for Change

2.1 Overview

The original thinking for the theatre space within Titanic Belfast was based on the installation of a Flying Theatre. A Flying Theatre is a panoramic simulator theatre that uses the latest in simulation and cinematic projection technology. Riders enter what appears to be a normal theatre with seats at floor level in an un-raked auditorium. As the show starts, they view a small screen that introduces the intent of the programme. Shortly after the start, riders become aware that their seat is being elevated. In parallel, the image grows until it completely fills a hemispherical screen and as the riders reach the full immersion the film accelerates and they begin to fly over scenery in front of them.

It was intended that the Flying Theatre at Titanic Belfast would be supported by a film experience focused on the natural and built heritage of Northern Ireland and / or a Titanic related experience.

In either case, the Flying Theatre was to operate as a quasi stand-alone facility that might be sold either in tandem with or separately from the main Titanic exhibition. It was anticipated that, managed in this fashion, the Flying Theatre could assist in the delivery of repeat visitation to Titanic Belfast.

Notwithstanding the potentially exciting nature of the Flying Theatre, or its ability to be managed as a separate attraction, there are a number of downsides to its inclusion. Principal amongst these is the disconnected nature of the experience, and the fact it would not be wholly inclusive due to age reluctance or height restriction. Further, rather than offering a seamless and coherent finale to the Titanic exhibition, the Flying Theatre signalled an abrupt end to the exhibition on a negative note (sinking) and the introduction of new and potentially unrelated content. This was a key criticism of the 2006 TNS market research.

With these thoughts in mind, the design team considered various alternative solutions to the closing stages of the exhibition, with support for the Immersive Theatre growing following a series of meetings with Dr. Robert Ballard and his team over the Summer and Autumn 2009. The thinking was furthered in early 2010. The ideas outlined in the Titanic Belfast Scheme Design Report are the result of extended and considered exchanges within the design team and reflect not only Ballard's subject specific experience in North America, but significant carried knowledge of global visitor attractions more generally.

The new Immersive Theatre concept not only overcomes the problem of a disconnected final gallery, but meets all the other performance criteria achieved by the Flying Theatre. Located at the close of the exhibition at Level Three, the Immersive Theatre offers a natural location for the telling of the Titanic discovery story. Collaboration with Professor Ballard has meant unrivalled access to his high definition photographic and video archive: an asset base that will be uniquely displayed in the new Immersive Theatre gallery.

2.2 The Immersive Theatre Material

The newly configured theatre experience is entered at Level Three, and uses the full height and volume of the space to platform the high definition footage that Ballard has taken of the Titanic wreck during his expeditions (the most recent being in 2002). Not only is this material unique in its own right, but when configured in the manner suggested it offers a visitor experience that is second to none in terms of experience and impact.

The Ballard footage can be categorised in three principal groupings:

1. **A portfolio of large-scale images of the Titanic taken as Ballard's underwater search vessel scanned the wreck from all angles.** This material is astonishingly powerful and not only portrays the majesty of the Titanic and the remarkable degree of its preservation, despite almost a century lying underwater, but also delivers a human perspective enabled through access to areas such as the Captain's private cabin and promenade decks.
2. **Large-scale imagery of the wreck resting on the sea bed.** This footage offers a direct overhead view of the deck of the Titanic as discovered by Ballard in 1985. The imagery has been created as a mosaic that comprises a series of HD elements that have been combined to form the whole.

At present a mosaic exists of the bow section only. The stern section has been commissioned and will be available for the Immersive Theatre.

3. **An array of images taken within the debris field.** This footage is much more personal in nature and identifies everyday belongings and items that are a poignant reminder of the human loss. Wine bottles, shoes, luggage, combs and tea cups are but a few of the readily identifiable objects in view, all of which offer strong storylines and areas for investigation.

2.3 The Immersive Theatre Experience

On entry to the Immersive Theatre, the visitor is met by Robert Ballard aboard his discovery vessel, The Nautilus, somewhere in the Black Sea. He will introduce himself and the story of his expedition speaking of the initial discovery of the debris-field and the eventual sighting of the wreck, a moment that not only changed his life, but also man's understanding of the importance of undersea discovery. The narrative will tell how the Titanic was but a smoke screen by US Naval Intelligence to enable the covert recovery of two missing nuclear submarines.

Moving forward, initially a little disorientated, the visitor quickly begins to realise that they have travelled two and a half miles underwater and, as they enter a cathedral like space, it opens up and looks over an enormous immersive environment dominated by a 12m by 8m projection screen showing high definition images of the Titanic, two and a half miles underwater.

This large-scale imagery will be supported by a voiceover (Ballard's) that narrates the moment of the find and his emotions at that time. The immersion continues with a complete tour of the ship, alighting on key components and views, all of which are brought alive by a commentary to enrich and deepen the experience.

The intention is that visitors can dwell for as long as they wish in this space, exploring the magnificence of the Titanic on the seabed, recalling all they have discovered about Titanic earlier in the exhibition. Unique not just in Belfast, but across the globe, Titanic Belfast will be able to boast the first large-scale screening of these dramatic images.

Over a balcony the visitor can see the level below with the glass floor and a hint of the plan view of the wreck. This entices them down to the lower level and a huge glass floor where they are able to gaze at the unimaginable sight of the deck of the RMS Titanic as they float across it. The imagery – created as a mosaic from high definition stills of the deck taken by the Ballard team – will pass under the feet of the visitor revealing the great ship, from bow to stern, 100 years after its sinking. The mosaic reveals all the details of the Titanic, at large-scale, as seen by Ballard on his first dives following discovery. The visitor will get to explore the deck and locate all the key points on it – the ship's prow, the crow's nest, captain's cabin etc.

In addition at this point are a series of debris field installations. These freestanding stations are made available to the visitor so that they might explore the huge range of smaller more personal objects located on the seabed around the Titanic. These objects are intimate and personal in nature and all carry individual stories. This is a space in which the human scale of the disaster is

brought close to hand; no more is this a story about the industrial leviathan of the Harland & Wolff shipyard, but rather it is a collection of individual items that are indicative of a series of personal tragedies of global proportions.

2.4 The Ocean Exploration Centre

On exiting the debris-field the visitor is led downstairs to the Ocean Exploration Centre (OEC). The OEC is an exciting new facility that mirrors 'The Inner Space Center', a state of the art underwater exploration facility at The School of Oceanography, University of Rhode Island.

The facility in Rhode Island is the *nerve centre* of Ballard's underwater exploration programme, collating and processing live feeds from each of the three exploration vessels that are working their way non-stop around the world's oceans. The Inner Space Center allows direct, real-time exchange between the scientists on board Ballard's exploration boats and the research base at the University, and acts to connect to a North America-wide network of other specialists and academics. Through this facility, Ballard and his team are able to coordinate all aspects of their research and exploration programmes including, *inter alia*, marine geology and geophysics, archaeological oceanography, geophysical and ocean exploration, and seafloor mapping.

Significantly for Titanic Belfast, as a replica of the inner Space Centre, the OEC will have the capability to deliver all the above elements, linking not just to Ballard's programmes in the US, but developing partnerships with European marine schools and, in particular, leading University departments based on the Island of Ireland (notably the Universities of Ulster and Galway).

On entering the OEC visitors will find themselves at the heart of an exploration operation. They hear the Nautilus crew talking of their expectations and the game-plan for the operation. They will see the launch of the discovery craft before beginning a journey to the deepest parts of the ocean, places where the sea bed has never been viewed. Visitors will embark on a journey that will transport them to the sites of wrecks that have not been seen since their demise, often many hundreds even thousands of years ago. They will view, on three high-definition screens, the actual footage viewed by the team during the exploration. The three central screens will be supported by secondary modules that show sonar readout, tidal conditions, weather and myriad detail that provides critical information to the team during the dive.

The first climax will be the discovery of a wreck, a wreck that has remained hidden for millennia, a wreck that contains treasures that will advance man's knowledge of the lives of civilisations that are long gone. The second climax will be to leave the discovery scenario and go to the Nautilus

live on the day of the visit. With the help of a guide visitors will learn where in the world the Nautilus is working, what its current project is achieving and the current status of the discovery programme.

The OEC will provide a unique platform for use in three principal ways;

1. a facilitated experience orchestrated by a guide who might walk an audience through the process of discovery.
2. an individually directed facility that can cater for independent and undirected engagement.
3. a working hub for the streaming of live footage for any of a range of explorations and research expeditions.

The creation of the OEC at Titanic Belfast will present a series of valuable opportunities for the project. These range from the exciting possibility of recreating the moment of discovery of the Titanic, to the chance to develop partnerships with Britain's and Ireland's leading marine science universities to platform their own research programmes within this facility. In terms of the long-term educational value of the project, there can be no stronger foundation. Potential partners with whom this opportunity could be explored and who it is believed would be receptive to the concept include the University of Ulster (the Centre for Maritime Archaeology), NUI Galway (the Marine Science Institute) and the University of Southampton (the National Oceanography Centre).

This is a unique and exceptional opportunity which has the potential to put Belfast at the vanguard of ocean exploration and marine research for decades to come. Further, the collaboration with Ballard and the Institute for Exploration offers enormous PR and market leverage value, the like of which will significantly underscore the aspirations for the long-term sustainability of Titanic Belfast.

2.5 A Unique Facility

The creation of the Immersive Theatre experience within Titanic Belfast will deliver a unique visitor attraction component that will combine the thrill and awe of large-scale high definition imagery with the force of the Titanic narrative and the leading edge reality of high technology underwater exploration of the 21st century. This is a powerful and compelling combination that has no parallel in the market place.

Whilst large scale film theatres (IMAX) are relatively common, the ability to combine high definition projection of unique film footage within the context of a genuine, brand-strong, narrative experience presents a genuinely compelling visitor offer.

At the same time, the combination of the discovery footage with the ability to stream *live* material from ongoing expeditions (be they Irish or US based) offers a dimension to the Immersive Theatre concept that guarantees not only a high degree of in-built product renewal, but ensures that rather than focusing on an historic moment in time the content acts as a springboard for the future.

2. 6 Design Development Changes

Design development for the Immersive Theatre has been ongoing for the past 12 months. Throughout this period there has been a constant iteration of the physical design and narrative approach to the telling of the discovery story.

The current layouts, as expressed in the July Scheme Design Report, not only represent the best solution from a storyline and visitor experience perspective, but are the most pragmatic and acceptable solution from a design and circulation point of view. With respect to this latter point, there have been a number of health & safety and fire regulations specifics that the design has had to accommodate.

Importantly, the Scheme Design layout not only presents an intuitive and stimulating visitor solution, but has been configured to accommodate the required level of visitor throughput.

2.6.1 Strengthening the Core Narrative

The single most important factor driving the current layout is the significant benefit it delivers in terms of strengthening the core narrative. This is apparent in a number of ways:

Initially, a modest display area located immediately before the main 'theatre' space has been introduced. This acts both as an introduction and a 'teaser', holding visitors back before they enter the main space. In this pre-show, visitors meet Ballard who will narrate his story of the discovery. This will act not only to inform the visitor about the run-up and background to the discovery voyage, but will also build anticipation and sense of arrival.

Immediately upon entry to the Immersive Theatre space the visitor will be stunned by the monumental scale and clarity of the Titanic images before them. **This is not a cinematic**

reproduction of the great ship, but the real thing. The quality and definition of the images, only achievable through projection at this scale, will allow an impact and intimacy not available publicly anywhere else in the world. The footage - projected in a looped presentation - will allow the visitor to experience the detail and wonder of the wreck, remarkably preserved, in its final resting place. This is the same ship that the visitor has seen being built, launched, and fitted out in previous galleries.

While the horizontal view is dominated by the large-scale wreck imagery, the visitor is able to walk over the projected mosaic of the Titanic's deck. Co-located with the debris field interactives, the deck walk-over is now, in narrative terms, correctly positioned at the centre of the debris field, and by virtue of being a level lower makes the best use of floor space available.

The walk-over facility extends to approximately 8 metres by 4 metres, and while there has been a small 10% reduction in size compared to the walk-over indicated at concept design, it is larger than that shown in the mid-scheme design iteration of April 2010.

2.6.2 Creating Dramatic Visual Impact

A central feature of the gallery and a core component of the *wow* impact is the enormous scale and clear definition of the images. This is particularly so in the case of the large projection screen, but is equally important in terms of the definition and detail that is available in the deck walk-over and debris field interactives.

Achieving the scale and definition that is required within the gallery space is predicated on the use of leading-edge video projection technology. Given the high definition nature of the raw asset, use of high resolution projection will deliver the material to best effect. Certainly, large-scale projection of the type suggested is the most superior approach. The alternative - large LCD or plasma monitors - implies a requirement to *tile* the monitors as a video wall for example. This would mean substantial configuration challenges and visual fragmentation: factors that would undermine the movie quality and by extension the visitor experience.

In terms of the technology, it is proposed that a native high-definition projector with a 1080P video source be used in harness with a wide-range sound system suitable for the ambient sound presentation required in the space.

2.7 Operational Flexibility

Once opened, the unique geometrical design of Titanic Belfast will make it an easily recognisable and iconic building, both on the Island of Ireland, and further afield in the UK and Europe. Many organisations will wish to harness the building's potential, its unique heritage connection and the story it tells as a venue for their own events. The IT/ OEC arrangement will provide an opportunity for Titanic Belfast to advertise and deliver beyond its original purpose.

Not only will it be possible to operate the Immersive Theatre independently of the main exhibition, the new Immersive Theatre space will also offer significant flexibility of use. In particular, the auditorium will have the potential for use as a venue for special events and activities. For example, these might include a season of Titanic movies, talks, lectures and other presentations. It will be possible to programme these activities on an out-of-hours basis, independently of the main exhibition, ticketing them accordingly. This will allow utilisation of the space to be maximised, and will present opportunities for additional revenue generation – see Section 2.8 below.

The Immersive Theatre will present the opportunity to explore the world of oceanography both in the context of the discovery of the Titanic and, perhaps more importantly, the ongoing quest to discover more natural and man-made features undersea. This will be a new facet of Titanic Belfast that would not be possible with the Flying Theatre *in situ*.

This is an important distinction, as it offers a taste of Belfast's continuing role in ground-breaking Research & Development. Visitors to Titanic Belfast will be able to familiarise themselves with the real, sophisticated and high-tech world of marine exploration, a process akin to the great space programmes of the second half of the twentieth century. Not only will this experience be real, but it will be made available in a unique and accessible fashion for all segments of the visitor market. By contrast to the traditional thrill-ride offered by the Flying Theatre, the new Immersive Theatre experience and the OEC will offer an extended and more engaged experience that will deliver significantly greater value for money, higher levels of visitor satisfaction, and a more compelling motivation for repeat visitation.

The OEC is a facility that will have appeal both as a visitor facility per se and as a broad-based and inclusive education facility with reach across all schools and university segments. It will be possible to promote the OEC as a separately ticketed feature, charging a low admission price consistent with the educational remit of the Titanic Foundation.

2.8 IT/ OEC Standalone Operation

The various operational experts consulted by HCL are very clear in their view that the IT/OEC would significantly enhance the visitor experience and would give visitors a reason to both visit and revisit Titanic Belfast. Further, the positive operational feedback is supported by the market research conducted by Millward Brown, which found very high approval ratings for the IT/OEC, expressed consistently by the focus group participants, where it generated extremely high levels of interest, and was considered to deliver a real 'wow' factor to the exhibition.

Standalone Exhibit

Feedback from the operational experts and market research indicates the IT/ OEC can be a gallery in its own right. The uniqueness and scale of the images being displayed in the Immersive Theatre, alongside the live streaming in the OEC, are felt to provide strong reasons to revisit this 'wow' element of the exhibition for a separately ticketed price. Separate ticketing at the ground floor and access to the IT/ OEC from level 3 is easily achieved.

Flexible Theatre Space

The physical arrangement of the Immersive Theatre, including the access routes via the atrium, make it suited to separately ticketed evening events outside of normal exhibition operating hours. Suggestions previously made include potential for;

- lectures & seminars, both standalone and in conjunction with the conference and banqueting suite
- debates, even televised such as 'question time' format
- film showings and theatrical entertainment
- business and networking events, again both standalone and in conjunction with the conference and banqueting suite
- a third and unique pre-function space.

Through combination with the banqueting facilities, the Immersive Theatre will provide a further potential benefit, acting as a greeting and reception space before banquet guests make their way to the main hall. The proximity and central location of toilets provide the required and easily accessible provision for licensing purposes, while arrangements can be made with the family dining outlet beneath to provide a location to both cater from and/ or to function visitors.

Educational Portal

TFL is an educational trust whose key objectives include:

- 1) *'The provision of information to the public via interactive medium to encourage and facilitate the exploration of Belfast's maritime and industrial heritage particularly with respect to the history and heritage of RMS Titanic, in particular but not exclusively (through) the construction of an interpretive centre in Belfast's Titanic Quarter, and the publishing of associated guides and information leaflets'.*

- 2) *'To engender among the people of Northern Ireland a strong sense of their own identity and foster pride in their heritage regardless of social or religious background'.*

The IT/OEC will deliver a far superior outcome with respect to the first of these objectives, taking into account the complete integration of the material in the IT/OEC with the rest of the exhibition, the wealth of additional information that it will provide to visitors, and the very high educational value of the OEC in comparison to the Flying Theatre.

The OEC and its live streaming link to remote undersea exploration missions all over the world will provide an unmatched educational facility, and the potential for developing partnerships with Britain's and Ireland's leading marine science establishments. The educational opportunities capable of delivery via the OEC are huge, be they an interface between university level students, or as a platform for delivering prerecorded wreck dives to school classes. This is clearly an exciting area for discussion.

Key factors in achieving the second of the above objects will be the scale and iconic nature of the building, the content and quality of the exhibition, the overall management of Titanic Belfast, and the creation of a sense of ownership among the people of Belfast and Northern Ireland. As the IT/OEC will be the only facility of its kind outside the United States, it will actively contribute to this sense of pride and ownership, and will have the potential to create a real sense of pride among the people of Northern Ireland. As one market testing participant commented: *'At last Belfast has a landmark building...something we can feel proud of...not just asking people to come here to visit the Giant's Causeway or the Troubles...'*