

A Place Where Lovers of the Sea Come Together

Proposed Narrative Vision for the New Maritime Museum of San Diego

Page 1 is an overview. Pages 2-onwards expand each idea. Implications for stakeholders and the discovery phase are highlighted at the end of each Ideas deep-dive.

Note: This document presents initial narrative thinking – not a finished plan. Every idea requires MMSD and Carrier Johnson's input. This framework will be updated during Discovery with findings from workshops, site visits, and stakeholder conversations.

Bottom line:

The new MMSD could be the place where San Diego meets the Sea – past, present, and future. The collection is extraordinary. The waterfront is iconic. What's missing is a frame.

Our initial vision in four ideas:

- **Lovers of the Sea** – People, not ships. Human stories as the frame for 500 years of maritime history and technology.
- **The Sea as a Bridge** – The Sea is a bridge between the people, cultures, and vessels that now call San Diego home.
- **Living History** – Boardable, sailable, active. The Super Diorama frames the fleet for all of San Diego
- **San Diego's Maritime Future** – Blue economy (defense, ship building, research, aquaculture and fisheries, fisheries, maritime trade, leisure). Designed to matter for the next 50 years.

What this means:

- **For visitors:** A museum that feels personal whether you have 30 minutes or 3 hours.
- **For the community:** San Diego's diversity reflected in the rooms, not added as an afterthought.
- **For stakeholders:** A binational positioning that no other maritime museum in America can claim.
- **For the collection:** Room to grow. The ships stay the stars. The building frames and protects them.
- **For the city:** A new centerpiece of the Embarcadero. Designed to shape the lives of San Diegans for generations to come.

IDEA 1

1. Lovers of the Sea

A museum built around people, not ships.

People founding places. People fishing, patrolling, hauling, exploring. Families crossing oceans to start over. Sailors navigating with sight, stars, and sonar...

The ocean is still the great frontier. San Diego sits at its edge. The MMSD's fleet – spanning 500 years of seafaring – is among the finest evidence of that frontier anywhere on the Pacific coast.

A future MMSD wouldn't ignore technical history – it'll anchor it in human stakes. When a new rigging design cuts oceanic crossing times, the exhibit shouldn't just say "faster transit." It should show what that speed meant: more voyages per year, fewer months away from family, cheaper goods in port, and entirely new trade routes becoming viable. When visitors understand what a technical change did to real people, they remember the details.

1.1 What this looks like

The Star of India is not a registration number in a shipping ledger. She is the vessel that carried hundreds of emigrants from Britain to New Zealand – each with a name, a reason for leaving, and a story of arrival. She hauled salmon from Alaska with crews of Chinese, Filipino, and Scandinavian laborers working side by side in brutal conditions. She has been sailing for 160 years and still sailing today. That human continuity is the story.

The San Salvador is not a replica of a 16th-century galleon. She is a starting point for San Diego's binational story – connecting Cabrillo's 1542 landing to the cross-border economy that defines this city right now. But San Diego's maritime story doesn't start in 1542; the Kumeyaay navigated these waters, harvested the sea, and built coastal trading networks long before European contact. The current museum covers this era only lightly. We see it as one of the richest opportunities for new interpretation – a chance to show how maritime practices and technology evolved over millennia, not just centuries.

When you tell history through the sailor who slept in that bunk, the family who emigrated on that ship, the diver who explored that wreck, the dockworker who loaded that cargo – the museum stops being a place you visit once. **It becomes a place you bring people back to.** The artifacts become evidence of human stories, not the other way around.

1.2 Why this matters for stakeholders

Human-centered storytelling opens the door to partnerships that a ship-taxonomy museum can't: oral history collaborations with universities, community co-curation projects with tribal nations and immigrant communities, and education grants that fund narrative-driven programming over static displays. These collected stories could become as much a part of MMSD's collection as its wood and steel artifacts.

1.3 How we'd explore this in Discovery

- Identify which personal accounts, oral histories, and archival voices exist in MMSD's collections
- Assess the opportunity for pre-Columbian and indigenous maritime content – working with tribal communities and historians to determine scope, voice, and appropriate representation
- Map the human stories across the fleet – who sailed each ship, who built each vessel, who relied on them
- Work with MMSD curatorial staff to determine priority educational messages
- Identify which communities feel underrepresented in the current exhibits and how to change that

WHAT WE KNOW

- The fleet's history and vessel significance
- Human-centered interpretation works (proven at MuVaCa)
- Visitors respond to personal narratives over taxonomies
- Technical history is more memorable when framed through human impact

WHAT WE NEED TO LEARN

- Which personal accounts exist in MMSD's archives?
- What oral history collections are available or planned?
- What are MMSD's priority educational messages?
- What pre-Columbian / indigenous maritime content exists or is accessible?
- Which communities feel underrepresented?

IDEA 2

2. The Sea as a Bridge

The Sea built this city. The museum should show how.

The Sea has always been a bridge to new lands and between cultures. The Sea is the great connector.

Every culture in San Diego arrived by sea, crossed a border shaped by the Sea, or built a livelihood on it. Spanish explorers. Chinese fishermen. Portuguese whalers. Hawaiian sailors. Mexican traders. U.S. Navy. The tuna fleet. Refugee families from across the Pacific. Japanese abalone divers. Italian fishing families in Point Loma. All these peoples built, developed, and shared maritime cultures together.

That diversity is not an add-on to San Diego's maritime story. It is a maritime story. The Sea was the highway, and everyone used it. The museum that tells this story honestly – in all its complexity, in all its languages – becomes a more interesting place to visit, a more accurate representation of the city, and a stronger institution overall.

2.1 Bilingual from inception

This is not about adding Spanish labels to English exhibits. It's about conceiving content in both languages simultaneously, so that cultural nuance, tone, and meaning are built into both versions from the first draft. The difference matters: a translated museum feels like it was built for one audience and adapted for another. A bilingual museum feels like it was built for everyone.

MUSEUM DTE has done this. At MuVaCa, our bilingual museum in Baja California Sur, the content speaks to American tourists and Mexican families with equal fluency. Visitors don't notice the seams because there aren't any. That methodology transfers directly to the Embarcadero.

2.2 Why this matters for stakeholders

San Diego sits at the intersection of many cultures, languages, and ways of seeing the world. A binational cultural institution on San Diego's Embarcadero opens funding doors that a conventional maritime museum cannot:

- Corporate sponsors in the blue economy
- Foundations focused on U.S.-Mexico cultural exchange
- NEH and IMLS grants that reward multilingual and multicultural programming
- The Port of San Diego

These conversations become possible when the museum’s identity matches the city’s identity. **A museum director who can walk into a foundation meeting and say “we are the only fully bilingual maritime museum in America” could stake a claim nobody else can make.**

2.3 How we’d explore this in Discovery

- Assess MMSD's current visitor demographics – who's coming, who's not, and where the biggest gaps are between the museum's audience and the city's population
- Identify which cultural communities have deep maritime ties to San Diego but limited presence in the current exhibits (e.g. Chinese fishing villages, Portuguese fishing and whaling families, Filipino Navy stewards, Kumeyaay coastal communities, Mexican tuna fleet workers)
- Review existing cross-border partnerships and identify new ones – particularly with Baja California cultural institutions, the Port of San Diego, and potentially the iAlumbra Collective
- Evaluate bilingual content needs beyond panels: wayfinding, audio guides, digital interactives, docent scripts, and web presence

WHAT WE KNOW

- San Diego's demographics and cross-border visitorship
- Bilingual methodology proven at MuVaCa
- Multilingual programming strengthens grant eligibility
- Cross-border identity is a competitive differentiator

WHAT WE NEED TO LEARN

- What are MMSD’s current visitor demographics?
- What languages beyond EN/ES should be considered?
- What cross-border partnerships already exist?
- What funding sources has MMSD pursued or plans to pursue?

IDEA 3

3. Living History

Boardable. Sailable. Active. Not behind glass.

The collection is the star of the show. The exhibition's job is to make sure everyone knows it...

MMSD's fleet is not static. The Star of India still sails. Vessels offer tours. Ships dock and depart. Visiting tall ships arrive for events. This is a working port, and the new museum's design should celebrate that – not ignore it.

3.1 The Super Diorama

MMSD has an opportunity to create a Super Diorama: a living, walkable, and boardable diorama that visitors can completely immerse themselves in. Every sightline matters. Every person who encounters this museum, whether they planned to or not, should say, "woah":

- The visitor approaching on foot from the Midway
- The tourist on a harbor cruise
- The office worker looking down from a downtown tower
- The cruise passenger scanning the waterfront from their balcony

Each of those vantage points is a chance to draw someone in. The Super Diorama is designed to work at every distance: iconic from across the bay, inviting from the promenade, and immersive once you step aboard.

3.2 The building completes the fleet

The new building adds what the ships cannot provide: climate-controlled galleries for sensitive collections and loan objects, temporary exhibition space for rotating shows that keep the museum fresh and relevant, amenities and businesses for the public, and the infrastructure to host traveling exhibits from other institutions. It plays to the strengths of modern, permanent structures.

The operational dock is equally important. **MMSD isn't a museum that displays ships – it's a museum that operates ships.** The dock needs to support an active fleet, visiting vessels, and touring programs for decades to come. It also needs to be part of the overall design scheme so that visitors are always learning – always immersed. The exhibit design and the operational design should be developed together, not separately.

3.3 Built for real-world conditions

At MuVaCa, we designed a high-end museum to flourish in a semi-permissible environment – brutal UV, limited power and water, remote supply chains, and the realities of things breaking and going missing in a small-town desert setting. The museum thrives six days a week. We know how to build museums that work in hard conditions – desert UV, corrosion, limited infrastructure. San Diego gives us both: a permissive indoor building and an active fleet exposed to the same forces we've already designed for. The onboard environment is the hard part. We've done the hard part.

3.4 Why this matters for stakeholders

MMSD is not a typical museum – it's an operational fleet, a touring company, and an event venue that also has galleries. When designing, we'd want the new building to strengthen MMSD's operational DNA, not complicate it.

The Super Diorama is focused on creating a visual landmark – the kind of waterfront image that shows up in tourism campaigns and peoples' mental picture of the Embarcadero.

3.5 How we'd explore this in Discovery

- Walk the full fleet with MMSD operations staff – understand the daily realities of docking, maintenance access, vessel rotation, and touring logistics before proposing any spatial changes
- Document the current visitor journey from street to ship: where do people enter, where do they hesitate, where do they turn around, where do they miss vessels entirely
- Identify port authority and maritime regulatory constraints on vessel positioning, pedestrian dock placement, and waterfront access
- Review MMSD's sailing and touring schedule to ensure exhibit design supports active operations

WHAT WE KNOW

- Sightline-driven design works (proven in diorama methodology)
- MMSD operates an active fleet with touring programs
- Operational museum design in harsh conditions (MuVaCa)

WHAT WE NEED TO LEARN

- What are the dock's operational constraints and port authority rules?
- Where can/can't ships and pedestrian docks be positioned?
- What is the fleet's sailing and touring schedule?
- What are MMSD's sq. ft. needs for climate-controlled space?
- What is the UV mitigation plan for glass-wall galleries?

IDEA 4

4. Future Focus

A museum designed to matter for the next 50 years.

Design for an entire generation of San Diegans and beyond. A place for our children; our children's children...

San Diego's relationship with the Sea is not past tense. The Navy's largest Pacific fleet is based here. Scripps Institution of Oceanography is here. The Port of San Diego manages millions in maritime commerce. Offshoreenergy projects are in development. Sustainable fisheries research is expanding. The blue economy is one of the region's fastest-growing employment sectors – and most visitors to MMSD have no idea it exists.

A museum that makes the blue economy visible – that shows a 14-year-old what a career in marine science or port logistics actually looks like – does something no history museum can do. It connects the past to a future worth working toward.

4.1 What “future focus” looks like in practice

- Exhibit content that connects historical artifacts to current issues (e.g. Star of India's emigrant routes → today's migration patterns; the tuna fleet → sustainable fisheries)
- Temporary exhibition space designed for rotating, timely programming that keeps the museum in the news and gives locals a reason to come back
- Partnerships with UCSD, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, and cross-border research institutions that position the museum as a hub for public engagement with ocean science
- Digital infrastructure that can evolve over time without requiring physical renovation – flexible AV, modular interactives, updatable content systems
- A building that supports the fleet's operational needs for decades, anticipating changes in fleet composition, touring programs, and visiting vessel schedules

4.2 Why this matters for stakeholders

Future-facing programming attracts partners. Foundations and government agencies increasingly prioritize institutions that connect heritage to contemporary relevance. A museum that can demonstrate how its 500-year maritime collection speaks to climate adaptation, workforce development in the blue economy, or cross-border cultural exchange has access to funding streams that a purely historical institution does not.

The 'Take Me to the Water' exhibition with UCSD is a model: community-sourced storytelling connecting historical absence to present-day visibility. The new MMSD should be designed so that kind of programming is the standard, not a one-off.

4.3 How we'd explore this in Discovery

- Identify what "the future of the sea" means to MMSD – is it naval innovation, marine science, climate, workforce development, all of the above? The answer shapes how we allocate finite gallery space
- Survey the institutional landscape: who in San Diego is already doing blue economy public engagement (Scripps, UCSD, Birch Aquarium, Port of SD) and where a maritime museum adds value versus duplicating effort
- Assess MMSD's capacity for rotating programming — turnover frequency, curation process, and what infrastructure is needed for fast, affordable changeovers
- Talk to MMSD's education team about school group programming – what do teachers actually request, what grade levels visit most, and how a future-facing gallery could align with California science and social studies standards
- Ask the hard question: in 2040, what should this museum be known for? The answer to that question today determines the interpretive infrastructure we design tomorrow

WHAT WE KNOW

- SD's blue economy and waterfront redevelopment trajectory
- "Take Me to the Water" as a model for future programming
- Temporary exhibit space drives repeat visitation
- Future-facing content broadens opportunities for institutional partnerships

WHAT WE NEED TO LEARN

- What is MMSD's long-term programming vision?
- What institutional partnerships are in place or desired?
- What is MMSD's digital strategy?
- How does this project relate to the broader SD waterfront plan?
- What does MMSD want visitors to feel about the future of the sea?
- What blue economy employers or institutions would partner on content?

*The Maritime Museum of San Diego
should be a place where lovers of the
Sea learn how it has always connected
people together.*

We are ready to begin.

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