

"MAKING ALCATRAZ AMAZING": THE ALCATRAZ CELLHOUSE TOUR

Elizabeth Boling, *Indiana University*

In 1987 the National Park Service and Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy launched the *Alcatraz Cellhouse Tour* as part of the interpretive program educating visitors about the island and its history. Using an existing format made possible several years previously by Sony Walkman™ technology, the designers framed this individual, and innovative, audio tour as a means for visitors to experience the cellhouse through the voices of people incarcerated there, or living and working there, during the years when it served as an active federal prison. Such a design called for different decisions about content, scripting and moving people through space than had been required for ranger-led tours or the lecture-type audio tours prevalent at the time. The original tour has been updated continuously since its launch, and experienced by millions of visitors in multiple languages. The author of this case experienced the tour in 1988 and interviewed key designers in 2014.

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INTRODUCTION

Museum tours and tours of historic sites are, broadly speaking, designs for learning. A visitor may not walk away from such a tour with specific facts to be recalled later on, so much as with an enriched appreciation for what she has seen. That appreciation is arguably as important as facts, if not more so—and it is almost certainly tougher to convey via intentional design. With translations in 10 languages, listeners in the tens of millions since its inception, and a 98% satisfaction rating from those who experience it, the audio tour of Alcatraz, *Alcatraz Cellhouse Tour* (1987), can be considered a classic of the genre. This short design case focuses on the original tour, and was constructed from four sources:

- An interview with Chris Hardman (Artistic Director and Founder of Antenna Theater and the originator, together with Chris Tellis, of the original audio tour of Alcatraz)
- An interview with Nicki Phelps (Vice President, Visitor Programs and Services for the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, project manager for the original tour and director of development over the subsequent 25 years)
- The author's memory of experiencing the audio tour in 1989 as a tourist on Alcatraz Island
- And the author's recent re-hearing the original tour (via the 15-year old cassette player in her car) and the current tour (via CD import to Apple iTunes™)

EXPERIENCING THE TOUR

Tickets to board the ferry at Pier 33 in San Francisco for the ride to Alcatraz Island sell out days or weeks in advance, and by a month or more for the night tours. When you can get a ticket, you and about 300 other people ride a mile and a quarter across the San Francisco Bay, chased by gulls and listening to the chatter of other tourists. Disembarking on the island, you join a smaller group led by a National Park Service ranger and begin to climb the hairpin path leading to the cell house (Figure 1). You and about 600-700 people an hour tour the cell house interior, and tours take place 14 hours a day year round.

Disembarking from the ferry and listening to the ranger describe the general history of the island as she backs up the hill ahead of your group, you shiver in the wind that whips around the island, even though the day is bright enough



FIGURE 1. View from the bay side of the lighthouse with the cell house immediately behind. The ferry dock and path bringing park visitors to the cell house are beyond. Used by Permission: alcatrazalumni.org

to see the city clearly across the water. During this walk you may wonder what your feelings would have been if you had come to the island as a worst-of-the-worst prisoner of the federal penitentiary system between 1934 and 1963. Once you enter the dim, chilly interior of the cell house and put on headphones to start the free audio tour, you don't wonder—the voices of actual inmates and guards describe those feelings, or at least their memories of feelings, directly to you while you stand in the spaces where *they* stood decades previously.

In 1989 when I visited the island and was guided through the Alcatraz cell house by the audio tour, the experience was memorably different than any park or museum tour I had ever taken before—or since. It was intimate; the voices spoke quietly but clearly just to me, both separating me from the crowd around me and joining me to each individual telling me a story that moment. Unlike other educational tours I had experienced, it felt immediate—not filtered through the dry, instructional lens of a docent, or exaggerated, however positively, by a guide's enthusiasm for the site. It sounded and almost felt as though I was there in the days when the penitentiary was open. I barely noticed being told where to walk, when to pause, or where to look next, and completely lost the sense of being there with a hundred other people. In fact, I lost the sense of listening to an audiotope, and at the

end of the tour almost had the impression that I had guided myself through Alcatraz.

All the voices on this tour belong to individuals, guards, and inmates from the active days of the penitentiary. A former correctional officer on Alcatraz, Thomas Donahue, begins by directing you quietly to the physical location where the tour will begin, and telling you where to look so that you know you are in the right place (Segment 1, 0:00 – 1:32). You begin on the main corridor, "Broadway," which would have smelled of many bodies in close quarters then, but which now smells mainly of cool concrete (Figure 2). Every minute or so the guide directs you to another location, or tells you where to look next.

The guide also works into the narrative some facts about the facility and its history, as heard in Segment 1 and Segment 2 (4:26-5:02). These feel like a conceptual orientation that goes along with the navigational directions you are given.

Almost right away you begin to hear the voices of former inmates (Figure 3). You are walking through empty spaces with other tourists all around, but these voices bring the experience of having been here years ago to life. At one point, the time spent walking from one location to another is used to help you understand the kinds of prisoners who served time on Alcatraz (Segment 3, 6:30-6:52). At others they remark on how it felt to be incarcerated on Alcatraz (Segment 4, 2:38-2:53) and how it felt to look across the bay, knowing they couldn't take part in life on the outside (Segment 5, 15:26-15:56).



FIGURE 2. "Broadway," the main corridor in cell block D down which a new prisoner walked at intake, and the starting point for the audio tour. Used by Permission: alcatrazalumni.org

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
UNITED STATES PENITENTIARY
(San Francisco)

RECEIVED
AUGUST 28, 1942

From: **USP MARSHALL ISLAND**
Crime: **KIDNAPPING & DYER ACT**
Sentence: **45 yrs** ... **May 25, 1942**
Sentence begins: **MAY 25, 1942**
Sentence expires: **MAY 25, 1987**
Good time sentence expires: **APR. 11, 1972**
Date of birth: **8-16-1902** Registration: **ALBANY**
Birthplace: **USA** Nationality: **AMERICAN**
Age: **39** Comp: **PAID**
Height: **5' 9"** Eyes: **GRAY**
Weight: **165** Hair: **BROWN**
Build: **HEAVY**

Scars and marks: **LARGE SCAR RIGHT CHEST**

CRIMINAL HISTORY

NAME	NUMBER	CITY OR INSTITUTION	DATE	CHARGE	DISPOSITION OR SENTENCE
JAMES J. QUILLAN	15974	USP MARSHALL ISLAND	RECEIVED AT ALCATRAZ, 8-28-42, BY TRANSFER		
JIM PILR	1049955				

(Please furnish all additional criminal history and police record on separate sheet)

JAMES JOHN QUILLAN

ALCATRAZ #586

"Jim" Quillen was sentenced to 45 years for Kidnapping & Dyer Act. Sent to Alcatraz 8/28/42 to 8/24/52. Had previously escaped from San Quentin early 1942. Quotes from his record: "Subject is impulsive and seems to think himself a 'Big Shot' because of his long sentence". "Subject is a Bitter Youth". "Maladjusted Attitude". By 1952 He had "Continued with Self-improvement Efforts" and was transferred. He later became a Reg. Radiological Tech. licensed in California. Wrote his Autobiography "Alcatraz From Inside"

FIGURE 3. James Quillen's voice is one of those included in the tour (Segments 3 and 4). Used by Permission: alcatrazalumni.org

Voices and sound effects add layers to the sense of experiencing life at Alcatraz. As you stand in the mess hall, you hear from inmates and officers about an uprising over the bad spaghetti being served there (although you hear at another time how good the food was most of the time), and even though it is short, this story is rich with the sense of experience (Segment 6, 13:52-14:37). Similarly, a description of the cells you are seeing, entirely bare now, gives you the facts about what was there and what was issued to each prisoner (Segment 7, 8:19-8:40) but then other voices join in to give this information immediacy (Segment 8, 8:40-9:00) and connect it to the emotional dimension of prison life (Segment 9, 9:33-9:56). These voices are no longer young, but the timbre in them as the men recount their memories of Alcatraz allows you to imagine them as they were in this place; the voices make the place come alive.

The tour is immersive. It feels longer than the 30 minutes that it actually takes because each physical location in the cell house seems to have been made alive, and many stories have been told. Each segment is not longer than 20-30 seconds or so, sometimes with several voices included in that short span. But the impact of these stories is high, as when a former inmate explains how he kept himself busy when he was locked up in the dark, soundless cells of solitary confinement (Segment 10, 19:45-20:09). More time is devoted to those narratives that visitors are likely to want to hear the most about: Robert Stroud, the “Bird Man,” (Segment 11, 18:11-19:17), the famous escape from Alcatraz, and the escape attempt during which several guards and prisoners died. I was sincerely sorry when the tour ended and I had to turn in the cassette player—still running, as Thomas Donahue instructed near the end of the tape. I wanted to return to Alcatraz, and I did several times. The place had been made alive for me.

ORIGIN AND INSPIRATION FOR THE DESIGN

In the mid-1980s the National Park Service (NPS) was facing multiple problems managing visits to Alcatraz by the public they serve. Boat tours of 150 visitors at a time taking two and a half hours, each conducted by a regular or seasonal ranger, were neither as compelling nor as affordable as they needed to be. They were also subject to inconsistency, due to the effect of media on the accuracy of interpretation by rangers, and to the limitations on numbers of visitors who could move through the site smoothly as a group. They were also, according to Nicki Phelps, “brutal” duty for the park rangers who conducted the tours. In response to these problems, the NPS called for proposals to develop an audio tour for use in the cell house, the central attraction of the site.

Audio tours were not brand new in the mid-1980s, although in museum and historical site settings they generally reproduced the face-to-face guide format in which a single voice talent read a script, delivering facts and explanations as the listener moved from one point to another. Among the

proposals that came in for the Alcatraz tour was one from Chris Hardman, who had pioneered, and by then had several years of experience using, mobile audio as a form of theater that transformed audience members into “audients”: full participants in the dramatic experience. His first show of this type, *High School*, sent audients walking at night through an actual high school, each fitted with a Sony Walkman™, listening to the real voices of high school students telling their stories and encountering actors as characters in these stories along the way. He describes the seminal moment for this use of new technology as being a flight to Europe that he took about 1980. He had fired up Wagner on his (then novel) Walkman™ prior to take-off as a substitute for the noises of a busy passenger compartment. Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* happened to play coincidentally with lift off (the “gigantic lift force” merging with “Wagner sawing away”), joining “where I was and what I was hearing” into the realization that audio synchronized with experience was a theatrical tool of immense potential.

When the call for proposals from the NPS came out, a traditional script had been written and they were simply looking for a contractor to produce it. From the basis he had built up already in generating immersive audio experiences, Chris envisioned an alternative possibility and played them some audio from another project, including a clip from an actual previous inmate of Alcatraz. This had to have been something of a conceptual leap for Park Service personnel, but a compelling moment as well, because they took a chance and contracted for a tour on the model of Chris’s vision. Nicki Phelps joined the project from a different company, also a bidder, as project manager.

KEY DECISIONS AND REVISIONS

The core decision in this design was that it should have a dramatic, rather than an expository, frame. The dramatic frame specified that visitors have the prisoner experience in this physical space for 30 minutes, with some history interspersed. This decision was made possible in part by the site. It is self-contained and, while listeners cross and re-cross their own paths moving through it, it is small enough to be navigated in a reasonable period of time. The cell house is approximately 28,000 square feet in total, but much of this is taken up with the cells. In fact, Chris points to the “amazing fit” between the audio format and the site as a factor not present other places. The drama would also be authentic; every voice heard in the tour would be that of someone who had been incarcerated at Alcatraz or who had worked or lived there when the prison was in operation, not the voice of an actor. Again, the site made this decision possible; its active period of use had ended recently enough that those voices were available.

Even so, getting this frame in place required working through obstacles, first among them the natural inclination

on the part of rangers to consider non-experiential information—dates, building materials, statistics—as vital elements in the Alcatraz story. Thirty seconds is considered more than twice as long as the average visitor will usually stand at an exhibit. Rangers, who had considered much of the original expository script to be critical, visited the site to stand at various locations for 15-20 seconds and see how long that period of time really is. Some points originally considered non-negotiable could be worked into the script, but many had to be left out and rangers agreed to do so as the dramatic shape of the project emerged. According to Chris Hardman, some strong experiential stories had to be cut as well—and some compelling but potentially distressing stories gathered on tape from former residents of the island were left out. Nicki Phelps explains this was, in part, because the tour was intended for park visitors that included those as young as eight or nine years old.

Many of the design decisions made in structuring the tour were rooted in Chris Hardman's insistence that park visitors experiencing the tour *are the movie*. The tour is prompting them, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, to pan, zoom, and dolly. Chris refers to his rules guiding these moves and mentions that he has compiled them into a handbook for producing context-specific audio experiences. As an example, the audio always describes or talks about something a visitor is *about* to see; never something that has already been passed (Segment 12, 24:49-25:03). This keeps the visitor moving—"walking is good; standing is not." The focus is also on the reveal: while the visitor is looking at a cell, a dining room, a shower room, or a corridor in the present, "people's voices [on the audio] are creating the scene [from the past]." The audio also has to address obvious features of the location where a visitor is supposed to be at a given time so that she can recognize that she is where she should be (Segment 12).

In the first implementation of the tour an entire segment had to be removed within the first couple months when rangers discovered that some visitors, out of sight from rangers when they visited the second floor infirmary, were getting lost, scribbling graffiti on the walls and potentially being exposed to asbestos—"a nightmare!" Later, Chris Hardman watched in puzzlement from where he was located, performing maintenance

on the cassette players, as a group of visitors headed up the stairs to the second floor, even though the tour had been revised and they should not have been going that way. Catching up to them, he discovered that a previous visitor to the park had bootlegged copies of the first tour cassette and distributed them to this group in advance of their trip. They were simply following the out-of-date script. This was one of the translated versions of the audio tour; even though the tour is free once visitors have paid for the ferry ride to the island, the group might have had concerns over enough cassettes being available for them when they arrived. This element of the design could likely not be addressed differently until technology could provide a solution.

Over time, at least one experiential moment in the original tour has been recognized to create a preservation problem for the park (Segment 13, 5:08-5:23; Segment 14, 5:35-5:47). Rather than recite facts about the different metals used for cell bars in the oldest part of the installation and in the newer cells, the tour invited visitors to place their hands directly on the bars and feel the difference in their warmth and their sturdiness (Figure 4). Unfortunately, the sweat and oil on thousands of hands over decades deteriorates the metal leading to degradation of the site.



FIGURE 4. Visitors peer into a cell, at the same moment of the tour and aware of each other, but each also experiencing it individually. Used by Permission: John Martini

A different kind of wear and tear, a kind of emotional daze, results from the intense experiential quality of the tour. Moving visitors almost continually gives them no place to decompress. This facet of the design was identified some time after its initial implementation, and changes in pacing made later were not necessarily viewed positively by Chris Hardman. However, he acknowledges that the voices are still there—the foundational rule that every voice heard in the tour is someone who lived on the island between 1934-1963 has remained intact through later revision of the tour—and therefore the tour “radiates the past.”

EVOLUTION OF THE DESIGN

While the original design emerged from a happy confluence of then-recent advances in portable audio, Chris’ related inspiration and artistic work, the nature of the Alcatraz site, and the willingness of park service personnel to take a chance on Chris’ vision, evolution of the Alcatraz audio tour has proceeded in multiple ways across the subsequent 27 years. Early on, practical revisions were made to accommodate the needs of visitors accompanied by guide dogs and/or requiring tactile markers for orientation during the tour. Translations were also made into several languages (ten in all), necessitating the production decisions and the production effort required to mix the translation over the authentic voices keeping the volume regulated so that the dramatic effect of the originals is not lost. The second version, *Doing Time*, evolved in response to a number of factors discussed below. Current plans for revision of the tour involve a *charrette*—or collaborative design meeting—to be held at about the time of this writing, and recognition that visitors to the park include both many more elderly people than previously as well as young people who “listen faster” than anyone used to do because media styles have accustomed them to short, rapid audio and visual bursts. Everyone is used to increasingly higher levels of production value now than they were several decades ago.

Some fundamental changes have been carried out over time as those responsible for the tour have continued to build relationships with, and interview, alumni of the island’s penitentiary era exploring the differing and sometimes contradictory recollections of their time on Alcatraz. During the decades since 1987 the visiting public has also come to accept, perhaps expect, multiple narratives regarding a complex social institution of the type that Alcatraz Penitentiary had been. As an example, a former inmate may recall being walked down the main corridor of the facility without clothing during his initial intake, while prison personnel assert that this did not happen. The current tour, *Doing Time*, reflects this expanded base of source material, including

three levels of narrative—inmates, correctional officers, and the family members of those officers and administrators who lived on the island with them. The tour also now touches on subjects not addressed in the original, although some, like inmate violence and rape, still do not appear; the lower age limit for the tour is still eight to nine years old. Parents are now encouraged to start their own tours 10-15 seconds before those of their children in case they want to have the kids skip certain segments.

Technology has continued to evolve as well, opening up possibilities for changes to the audio tour. Small, high-grade audio recorders have allowed new material to be gathered from the alumni of Alcatraz Island more easily than was possible in the past. In fact, some material is sought from the Alcatraz alumni with interviews eliciting needed information when possible. While the number of authentic alumni is, of course, shrinking over time, the stockpile of material for inclusion in the tour has grown substantially as a result of the ability for designers to capture high-quality interviews from them anyplace they feel comfortable speaking. As Alcatraz alumni age, their memories and interpretations of those memories can evolve as well, so the underlying narrative of the tour must consider and respect these shifts—and they can be captured relatively easily.

Technology evolution has required other revisions, mainly technical, as the tour has been moved from cassette tape to compact disc to MP3 format. It is now being adapted for specialty hardware that will be easier to maintain in the damp, salt-laden island environment than are consumer-grade players, and that will stand up to the extremely heavy use to which they are subjected daily. Chris Hardman reports standing onsite “cleaning, calibrating, and repairing” the original cassette players; it is clear from Nicki Phelps’ description of the technology currently in use that functional issues of maintaining equipment and updating the tour (“changes all have to be made in 10 languages and the full script”) remain important.

Changes made to the how the cell house site is organized have also required adjustments in the tour. More space in the cellhouse is devoted to retail, and this has created some crowding, which is distracting to the visitors. Chris Hardman points out that, with an effective audio production, a tour or a theatrical event, people appear zombie-like as they move through the experience and then report later that “it was great!” They need to stay immersed in that experience and not be pulled out of it by navigational complexities so there is more direction to the visitor included, delivered by a former correctional officer (Segment 15, 6:18-6:27).

A CLASSIC DESIGN

During the five years I lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, I visited Alcatraz four times. It was my destination of choice when visitors came from out of state and we were expected to show them the sites. I have to confess that I did tour the cell house without listening to the tour twice, but I attribute to the tour much of my fascination with the space and all of my appreciation for its historical (not just its immediate) experiential qualities—even when I explored it sans-audio—that I would not have been able to develop without the tour, or through interpretation by a ranger no matter how well-informed or enthusiastic that ranger might have been. I am related to two interpretive rangers and respect their face-to-face work highly, but I agree with Chris Hardman that *this* site presented a unique opportunity for a different form of interpretive experience. That original tour was, I get the positive sense, experimental and handmade. The designers stuck close to their core decisions—authentic voices, cinematic sensibility and focus on experience over information—which resulted in a robust, flexible design.

It is true, as pointed out recently by S. J. Culver (2012) in *Guernica* magazine, that the voices of the current audio tour—gathered purposefully as they have been, and crafted to provide an immediate, but not an introspective or political, experience of the space—steer clear of larger questions

regarding the societal implications of incarceration, thereby allowing visitors to move through Alcatraz without considering those implications either. Specifically, these visitors, most of them unlikely to have been, or ever to be, incarcerated themselves, are not encouraged to consider the current state of the penal system in the United States or their role in tolerating, if not perpetuating it.

However, the brief for the original tour, as defined at the entry of Chris Hardman into the project, was clearly focused on moving from a traditional interpreter-led format to one with a direct emotional impact, achieved by making guard and inmate voices actually present. This was an innovative step for the NPS at the time. The core decisions made then are still serving as a strong basis, almost thirty years later, for the experience of Alcatraz carried away from the island by several million visitors a year; and revisions to the tour, now in the works, are moving in the direction of including additional voices and greater acknowledgment of the full experience of incarceration.

REFERENCES

Culver, S. J. (2012, December 3). Escape to Alcatraz. *Guernica: A Magazine of Art & Politics*. Retrieved from <https://www.guernicamag.com/features/escape-to-alcatraz/>