

# Granville Island group takes museum visitors on a high-tech tour

By Matthew Burrows

Two Coast Salish bentwood cedar boxes sit at the foot of the ramp that shaves a path through UBC's Museum of Anthropology. At the ocean end is the classic Erickson glass wall, drenching the artifacts in maximum sunlight exposure.

Now imagine watching the history and creation of each of these prize museum elements unfold in the palm of your hand as you approach them.

Granville Island-based Ubiquity Interactive has made that technological leap a reality, with its first run of 20 hand-held, location-sensitive personal digital assistants (PDAs) programmed to guide visitors around the galleries.

Nestled in among the kids, cameras and general public last week, Ubiquity co-founder Leora Kornfeld showed how bentwood boxes are made and the history behind them. She reveals this background on just one of the PDAs, offering the first fully-operational hand-held media guide in Canada. On screen, the cedar that makes the boxes is bent into shape, dynamically bringing to life what is normally a passive viewing of an object.

On Wednesday, 600 representatives from the world's most celebrated museums — including the Guggenheim, Smithsonian and the Victoria & Albert — were to attend the opening reception and unveiling of this latest technology that Ubiquity has been working on for two years with the support of Telefilm Canada's New Media Fund. The 20 PDAs on order from Ubiquity will become available for the general public on May 17 at the public opening. They will be rented, with earpiece, on a first-come-first-served basis.

"The depth and versatility of the VUEguide provides unparalleled access to the Museum of Anthropology's collections, and to the richness of the cultures from which they came," said MOA director Anthony Shelton. "We are excited to have made this link between knowledge and new technology."

Aside from providing unprecedented access to images, interviews and commentary, the technology brings to life CBC footage that can be dusted down from the vaults, adds Kornfeld.

"You get to see [late Haida carver] Bill Reid carving poles in 1961 out at UBC. This would be sitting gathering dust, so obviously they're delighted we can use it."

Although there are other hand-held guides around the world, Ubiquity co-founder Lars Meyer said "the content approach is what sets us apart. We use infrared location beacons — little red flashing lights embedded in the exhibit — that send a signal to the PDA. So they act like a TV remote control, and as you approach an object you can do the equivalent of clicking on an internet link to access information on it [via the story buttons on a menu.]"

By moving around an object, visitors get what Meyer calls "curatorial on demand" without having to press any extra buttons.

"The PDA keeps track of the historical information you've already accessed, and makes the historical links for you. We did this by writing our own software, which contained over 25,000 lines of computer coding."

The coding, written by Ubiquity software devel-

oper Nick Simon, has helped provide rich texture and layering, enabling the PDA to be both user-friendly and unobtrusive.

"Most people want to spend between 60 and 90 minutes in the museum," added Kornfeld. "This is perfect for that. You could call it a portable augmented media experience."

More online information is available at [moa.ubc.ca](http://moa.ubc.ca) or by calling 604 822-5950. 



Ubiquity co-founder Leora Kornfeld reveals the story of museum exhibits on one of the PDAs, the first fully-operational hand-held media guide in Canada. Photo by Doug Shanks