

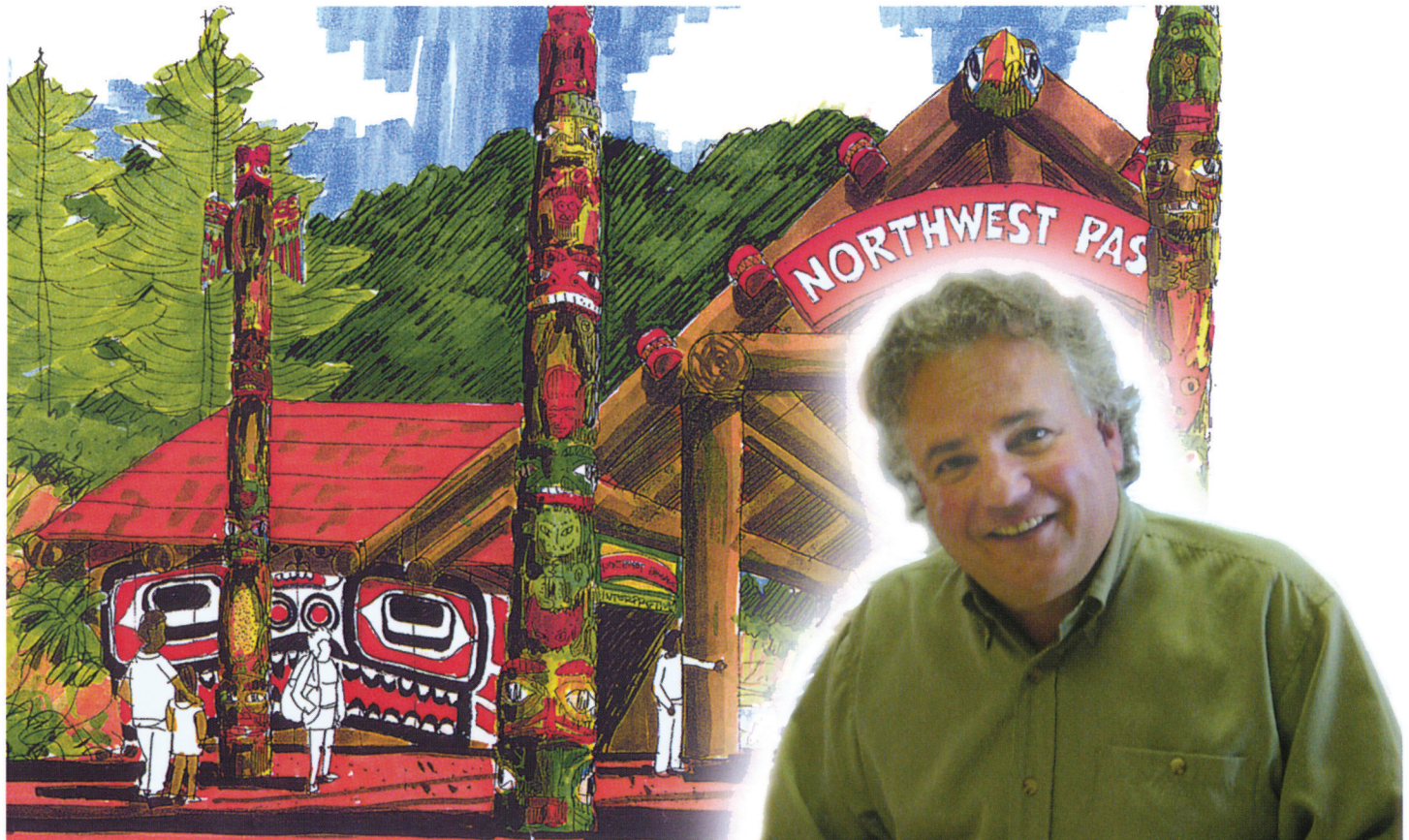
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Emphasis

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Eye candy

Ace Torre

ACE TORRE / TORRE DESIGN CONSORTIUM, LTD.

Architectural visions are main ingredients in Memphis Zoo exhibits

BY MICHAEL SHEFFIELD

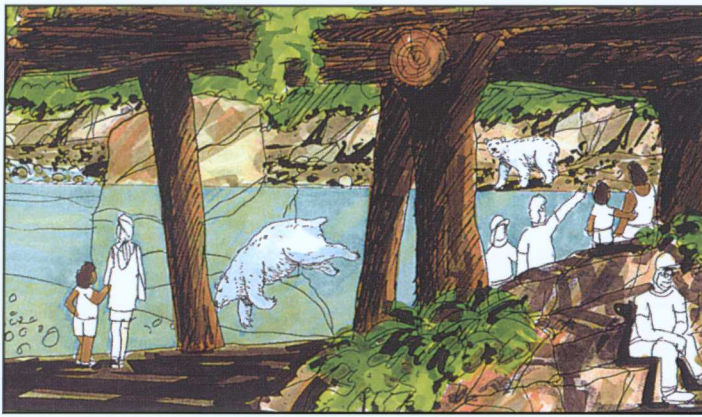
When people think of the Memphis Zoo, architecture is probably the last thing they think of. But the zoo is a wonder of unique,

storytelling architecture.

That is a testament to 20 years of hard work by Ace Torre, the zoo's architect of record and president of Torre Design Consortium, a New Orleans-based architecture and design firm that has

worked on zoo projects all over the U.S.

Torre's most recent zoo project is the China exhibit that holds the giant pandas, Ya Ya and Le Le. Construction on the new Northwest Passage exhibit started on May 10. Once again



COURTESY TORRE DESIGN CONSORTIUM, LTD.

Artist's rendering of the pending new Northwest Passage exhibit



ALAN HOWELL / MBJ

Architecture at the zoo's China exhibit is as enticing as the giant pandas.

Torre is the architect.

Torre says the Northwest Passage will be a mix of history, culture, anthropology and animals that will tell the story of the first Native Americans who settled the Pacific Northwest and the lower part of the arctic, as well as native animals to the area including black bears, seals, sea lions and polar bears.

The care of seals and polar bears will involve a water cooling system that Chuck Brady, president and CEO of the Memphis Zoo, says is on par with water pumping systems at most aquariums.

"Polar bears and sea lions need icy water because their bodies' insulation keeps the heat from escaping from their bodies, so they suffer in hot weather," he says. "We have 180,000 gallons of water cooled to 65 degrees that will be disinfected and polished so people can see through it."

Brady says the water will also have heat exchangers to cool it and the pumps will recycle it in and out of the pool.

"That's the major challenge we face, but if you were to walk in and look at it from the engineering point of view, you'd think you were in a water pumping station," he says. "We're proud of it and we hope it'll serve us for 30-40 years."

The rest of the exhibit will feature an entry plaza with six 20-foot totem poles in the style of Salish, Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian and Kwakiutl tribes and a seal and sea lion amphitheater, as well as a longhouse classroom that will allow students and other visitors to watch the seals and sea lions swim right up to the glass.

The polar bear exhibit will also feature an underwater viewing pavilion and a new grotto for black bears. Brady says the exhibit will also feature an eagle aviary for the zoo's bald eagles and a donor garden dedicated to Chief Seattle,

chief of the Suquamish and Duwamish tribes, who spoke on the need to protect the earth and all of its creatures.

Torre says the garden will feature quotes from the chief from a speech he delivered during treaty negotiations in 1850.

"The exhibit is an \$18 million project that represents state-of-the-art technology, but at the same time celebrates the completeness of the natural world," Torre says.

Torre says the project began as a polar bear exhibit, but during the development stages, the idea grew into the "engaging experience" it currently is.

"We tried to develop a storyline or presentation and had to look at ways to display the animals and also the enrichment of the animals," he says. "We also go to great lengths to make sure they can adapt to the climate, so we have to look at how we can display them in their habitats."

Torre says the ideas in these designs is to not only show people these animals, but to give them a better appreciation of the animals and respect them more.

"We dream up these storylines because in a sense, we're frustrated movie makers. The exhibit has a strong introduction and a body, just like a movie," he says. "The closure also has to be strong, so people can understand it because when you go to a movie, you expect to be moved. If it's a good movie it does, if it's a lousy movie it doesn't."

Brady says the theme with the China exhibit has been huge and not only because of the presence of the pandas. He says the zoo's architecture starts when people enter the zoo and he wants that theme to permeate the entire experience.

The "film concept" extends to the exhibits' beginning, middle and end, and gives visitors the feeling of being in Egypt, China or Africa. Then they exit to a communal path and go to another exhibit.

"We have some phenomenal architectural features here starting with the main gate with the avenue of the animals, which is similar to the avenue of the sphinx in ancient Memphis," he says. "We want you to feel like you're in

Egypt for a moment."

He says the China exhibit has a Beijing feel to it that extends past the pandas and Asian wildlife. The ornate roofs and tiles in the exhibit feature actual tiles bought in China.

"I've had Chinese people from China tell me the China exhibit reminded them of home and made them think they were in China. The first part of China is like the forbidden city in Beijing," he says. "We are trying to give people a chance to see the architecture and get a feel for it and the culture as well."

Brady and Torre say the storyline is there for the people who actually want to see it and dig deeper. The China exhibit features stories of hows and whys of the architecture and construction methods in the Chinese culture.

Brady says zigzagging bridges are designed to ward off evil spirits and the gardens have their own stories.

"Not everybody gets the whole storyline. Some people get a little and some get nothing out of it. It depends on what you want to get out of it," he says. "If they want to see peasants and giant pandas and go to the next exhibit, that's fine too."

Torre says the architecture involved in this project and the company's projects nationwide involve detailed drawings and a great level of communication between architect and contractor.

"We have to cut it down and do the designs in such detail that a contractor who has never done any zoo projects before can go out and build the next marvel of the zoological world," he says.

Brady says the overall theme of the zoo with so many different exhibits is consistency.

"From now on, our exhibits will always be themed, and we will have the culture and architecture to blend together," he says. "Having an animal exhibit is not enough to attract visitors. They want to see beautiful animals in beautiful surroundings and they want to be transported to that place if only for a moment. Be it China, Africa or Alaska, they want to be there, and that's our challenge."

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