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Asia exhibit at the Oklahoma City Zoo to include larger area for elephants

11-ACRE, \$23 MILLION PROJECT TO OPEN AT OKLAHOMA CITY ZOO IN 2011

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Ace Torre, president of Torre Design Consortium, talks with staff at the Oklahoma City Zoo about plans for the new elephant exhibit. PHOTO BY JOHN CLANTON, THE OKLAHOMAN

Page after page of drawings rested under Ace Torre's hands as he listened to advice from a horticulturalist.

His drawings represent the largest and most expensive project in [Oklahoma City Zoo](#) history, and now it's come down to plant locations, door handles and drainage ditches.

Torre is the lead designer of the Oklahoma City Zoo's new [Asia](#) exhibit, an 11-acre, \$23 million project set to open in 2011. The design process has taken months, but the end is in sight.

"The pieces come slowly into focus," he said.

Designs integrate history

Torre began his career as a landscape architect who moved into traditional architecture and urban design. He worked as a city planner.

But he wanted a new challenge, he said.

His earth-friendly nature drew him to zoo design, which requires both sets of skills.

He's designed exhibits in nearly every state and even overseas. He's president of [Torre Design Consortium](#), based in [New Orleans](#).

Torre incorporates as many of his client's dreams as possible. It's exciting for zoo staff, said [Dwight Scott](#), executive director of the Oklahoma City Zoo.

"His greatest strength is really listening to staff input," Scott said.

"Ace is not designing an Asia exhibit the way he wants to design it. He's designing it the way all of us want to design it."

Elephant areas changing

The Asia exhibit will be a journey through southeast Asia. Visitors will begin in the ancient Cambodian city of [Angkor Wat](#) and travel along an [Irrawaddy River](#) display, which will feature the rhinos, Torre said.

The exhibit ends in [Thailand](#), home of the elephant habitat. Buildings will look like everything from impressive temples to native villages.

The capstone of the Asia exhibit will be the elephants. It will transform the [Oklahoma City](#) elephant program from a pair of sisters cramped onto a quarter acre of concrete to a family herd roaming up to 6 acres of lush grassland.

Zoo design, especially for elephants, has changed dramatically since Torre began his career more than 30 years ago.

American zoos experienced a boom in elephant population and habitat construction in the 1950s, when the Oklahoma City exhibit was built. Most used lots of concrete and few natural features, Torre said. Today, the designs are completely different. In the new Oklahoma City habitat, the design includes plenty of trees and leaves the natural contour of the land.

"This thing is going to be incredible," Torre said. "It's going to be one of the best programs in [North America](#)."

MORE INFO

BY THE NUMBERS

The Asia Exhibit

- 11
Size, in acres, including about 6 acres for the elephant area. Elephant area is currently one-fourth acre.
- 12,000
Size of the new elephant barn, in square feet, compared to the current 16,000 square feet.
- 10-15
The number of elephants the new exhibit will accommodate. The zoo currently has two elephants.

Source: Oklahoma City Zoo and Torre Design Consortium