

SO YOU *wanna* BE A **ZOO ARCHITECT**

# Building a better monkeyhouse

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**THE NEXT TIME** you visit your favorite zoo exhibit, take a moment to observe it as a whole. The visitor's area is immersive, educational and subtle; the animal's habitat is humane and authentic; and any glimpse of the "night house" (the staff's area and the animals' after-hours home) you may get looks clean and efficient. It's as safe as it is attractive, but you may not have noticed that before. An incredible amount of time, money and thought must have been invested in the exhibit, starting with the logistical juggling act of designing it. How does someone get that job?

## 'Don't need too many'

There is no institute for zoo design, and zoo-specific architecture classes

are extremely rare; Keith Larson, a partner at Jones & Jones Architects and Landscape Architects, Ltd. of Seattle, noted that "we don't need too many [zoo designers] in the real world," estimating there are about 100 working professionals in the U.S. In addition to

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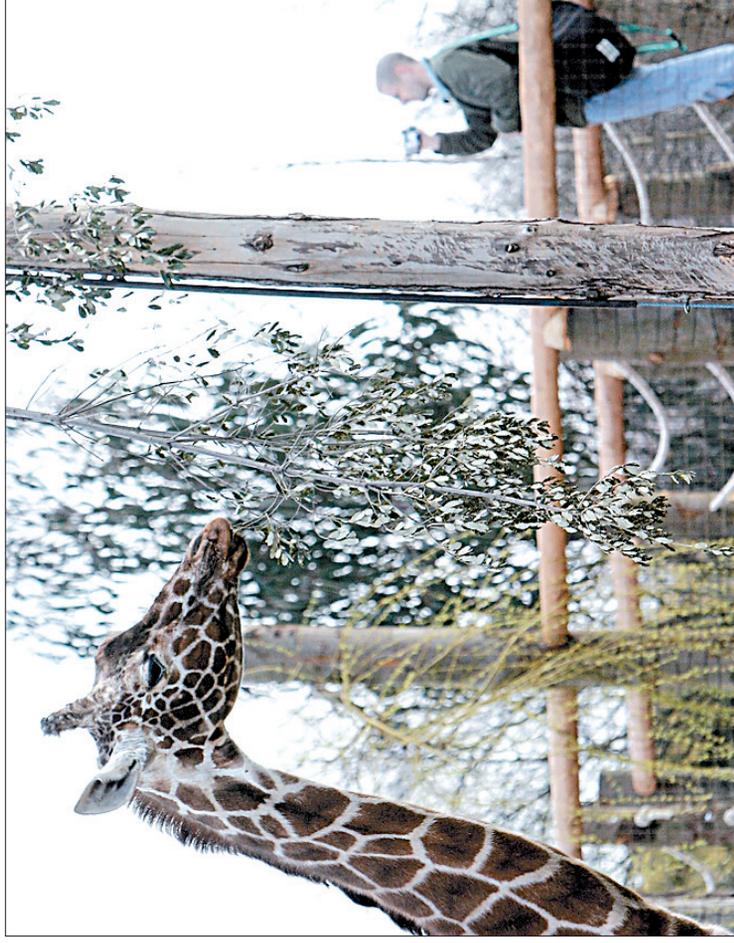


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Volunteering as a zookeeper's assistant while attending architecture school can be quite useful, but the key to becoming a zoo designer is learning to be an accomplished architect or landscape architect first; zoo-specific training is had on the job, at a firm that handles zoo projects. "We've seen students get into zoo design too early," Larson warned, noting that the discipline's learning curve is around five years of professional work.

## Team effort

Because zoos pose such difficult fundamental challenges to architects, hav-



**IF YOU'RE GOING TO build for giraffes, you may want to brush up on cathedral ceiling design.**

ing an unshakable grasp of the fundamentals is vital. They're typically built on grounds with poor soil characteristics, a problem that often has to be addressed before con-

sidering the unique concerns of a specific exhibit, like a species' territorial instincts or its physical limitations. The average exhibit's design is a massive collaboration between architects, landscape architects, zoo administrators, zoologists, zoo horticulturalists, interpretive designers, life-support specialists and other professionals, with years typically spanning the time between the initial concept-design estimate and

the exhibit's opening. Versatility, adaptability and teamwork skills are important.

## Just like home

The revolution in zoo design gained momentum in the early '70s as environmentally conscious architecture graduates entered the field. "We saw a great opportunity to transform the perception of zoos by the public, and raise environmental awareness," Larson recalled. "By giving the public a chance to relate to an animal's original habitat, good exhibit design connects people with faraway places like Africa and the world's rain forests. It makes the industrial and environmental threats to those areas 'real.'"

That's something else to consider on your next trip to the zoo.

## SAVE THE APES

Besides finding the right balance of utility, safety and appeal for the humans on both sides of a zoo habitat, an exhibit's design also has to address the often strange but life-preserving needs and limitations of the animal it will house.

For example, despite its great strength, a gorilla can drown quite easily, even in shallow water. Some mixture of the gorilla's thick physical density and its curiously high center of gravity makes it sink like a rock. Thus, the placement, shape and depth of any wading pools for a large primate have to be carefully chosen.



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