

Career Opportunities in Zoo Design

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Introduction

I often receive inquiries from students asking how to prepare for a career as a zoo designer, and I have prepared this short paper as a response.

I've had the good fortune to find a career in a field that barely existed when I started looking for work. In 1966 I completed my Master of Landscape Architecture degree. Armed with my thesis on zoo design based upon animal behavior, I toured American zoos. They were all happy to show me what they were doing, but none were interested in my largely untested ideas. It was six years before I got my first zoo project. Working with my Harvard classmate Grant Jones and his partners at Jones & Jones in Seattle, we proceeded to "write the book" on "landscape immersion" zoo exhibits, helping to create the profession we now enjoy. I'm now a retired principal of CLRdesign inc., Landscape Architects, Architects and Exhibit Designers in Philadelphia. I started a small practice in Australia in 2003.

Where is the Work?

CLRdesign, inc., together with Jones & Jones, the Portico Group (both in Seattle), PGAV (St. Louis) and Torre Design Consortium (New Orleans) are the larger firms, totaling in the order of 120 design professionals. Smaller firms include Bassett Associates, (Lima, Ohio), Zoo Plan, Associates (Wichita, Kansas), Studio Hanson Roberts (Seattle), PJA (Seattle), and Bernard Harrison & Friends (Singapore).

Three zoos, San Diego Zoo, Arizona Sonora Desert Museum and the Wildlife Conservation Center/Bronx Zoo also have excellent small design staffs. There are of course architectural and landscape architectural firms which occasionally do zoo work. The Larson Company (Tucson) and Rock and Waterscape (Los Angeles) specialize in exhibit fabrication or "design/build", as contractors.

Is Design or Biology the Best Background?

Most zoo design work is done by design professionals working with the zoo or aquarium's own animal experts or with specialist zoo biologists from other zoos. I know a few full time consulting zoo biologists including Peter Stroud (Australia) and Ray Pauley (Chicago) who occasionally become involved in exhibit design. When I

get a letter from a student or a recent graduate with a background in zoology or animal behavior, I advise them to go on for a design degree as well.

It will be discouraging for students who have already invested many years in their education to learn they face three or more additional years of design education. It will further discourage many to know that, although I have received 3-4 inquiries each year for the last 15-20 years (every year I receive a copy of a student thesis related to zoo design along with a job application), I know of only five of these people who have found jobs in zoo design. The simple fact is that it is easier to teach a good designer zoo lore than to teach an animal specialist design. However, if your skills in the design professions are good enough, you will find good opportunities, for the zoo design profession is still growing.

What is the Best Design Background?

The answer depends upon the area of zoo design that most interests you. If you like hands-on and design/build work on small, detailed projects then you may study museum design and/or apprentice to a design/build fabrication company. If you are interested in the big picture, zoo master planning and exhibit design, then landscape architecture is your best field of study. If you want to specialize more in building design for zoos, then architecture is the appropriate field of study. However, all of these professional studies only provide you with broad, though highly useful design tools. You will need to seek additional specialized courses outside your professional school.

I have found the following areas most important:

Primary Skill Areas

1. Landscape architecture, architecture or exhibit design
2. Computer aided design (CAD)
3. Drawing (a vanishing art)
4. Writing
5. Construction document preparation

Other Valuable Areas

1. Animal behavior
2. World geography, geology and bioregions
3. Travel experience
4. Ecology
5. Presentation skills
6. Business

Be Prepared to Travel

On a final note, if you do find work, be prepared to travel. Before retirement I spent, on average, twenty days each month on the road and some travel even more than I do. I believe the major markets for zoo designers in the future will be in China, India and perhaps other emerging mega-economies such as Brazil and Indonesia and economic hot spots like the United Arab Emirates. So be prepared for international travel and business. Modest pay, sixty hour weeks, deadlines and high pressure are normal. However, when you watch a gorilla, an elephant or a flock of penguins enjoy the new homes you've helped create for them, and watch a child spellbound by the sight, well, you can't find a more rewarding profession.