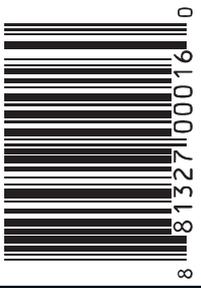


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Animal Instinct

When it comes to interpretive elements, wayfinding, and signage, zoos count on environmental graphic design firms to create big design on a small budget.

By Jenny S. Reising



The 8-by-65-ft. Temaikèn Zoo entrance sign is a steel structure with metallic mesh and projected-concrete letters, set on a concrete foundation. The colors reflect the zoo's emphasis on earth and nature.

Few entertainment attractions can compare to a zoo. After all, where else can you see animals, amphibians, and birds from around the world in the comfort of your own city? A timeless destination, zoos will never be challenged in attracting new crops of young families who want to introduce these creatures to their children.

But when it comes to exhibit design, wayfinding, and interpretive elements, zoos face a constant struggle to maintain and update their EGD programs. The number one challenge is budget. “It costs money to develop, fabricate, install, and maintain a signage system, and big donors of the past aren’t coming forward with the money,” laments Barbara McGrath, Director of Exhibits at the Philadelphia Zoo. “Although donors are highly supportive of interpretive elements, wayfinding is a different story. It’s not easy to get a donor to donate parking garage signage, but it’s important to the zoo.”

Wayne Hunt, Principal of Hunt Design in Pasadena, CA, couldn’t agree more. Although his firm has designed exhibits at the Los Angeles Zoo, “The zoo has yet to sew together something that connects the experiences.” In other words, a compelling wayfinding system. But Craig Piper, Executive Vice President/COO at the Denver Zoo, has a different attitude about signage. Piper says, “In terms

of wayfinding, you have to change as plans change. Visitors demand that, and it’s one of the zoo’s primary services to help guests find their way.”

For example, while the zoo has already overhauled its identity and wayfinding, some exhibits—for example a revamped bird attraction—are still on the boards. But that hasn’t stopped Piper from reinterpreting the existing building with new signage. “It couldn’t wait until the new exhibit went up,” he says. “It was a mess, and it was money well spent, particularly to keep ourselves relevant.” This is one reason Seth Frankel, Managing Director at ECOS Communications of Boulder, CO, calls the Denver Zoo “one of the most successful nonprofits in Denver,” with visitorship and revenues consistently up from year to year.

Aside from budgetary issues, another challenge is coming up with new ideas in a field where change is slow to occur. McGrath points to the Bronx Zoo as one venue that has raised the interpretive bar. At its Congo Exhibit, visitors sit in a theater, watch a short film about Congo conservation and gorillas and, after the show, curtains open to reveal gorillas behind the screen. “We need to move in that direction of thinking rather than just putting a graphic on a

stick,” McGrath says. “People come to a zoo to see the animals, not for an intense, educational experience. And there should be a better relationship between interpretation and the exhibit so that it’s a seamless, fun experience.”

In an increasingly attention-deficit prone society, keeping audiences captivated and entertained is no small task. “Audiences are evolving continuously, and newer, more effective signage systems are necessary to satisfy their demands when they visit public spaces,” notes Ronald Shakespear, Design Director of Diseño Shakespear in Argentina. However, every zoo is different and when it comes to exhibits and signage, what works in one locale may not work in another. For example, Diseño Shakespear’s identity, branding, wayfinding, and interpretive work at Argentina’s TEMAİKÈN Zoo takes a more organic approach to the visitor experience, putting an emphasis on raising awareness about conservation and care of nature. Shakespear explains, “Some things appeal to the people of Argentina that may not move a hair on the head of a U.S. visitor.” And it’s clear that most zoos, while aware of what other zoos are doing, are intent on creating timeless exhibits, interpretive elements, and identity systems that are unique and appropriate for their audience and locale. As Shakespear says, “Above all, a zoo has to look like a zoo.”

Signage from the Ground Up

It’s not every day that an environmental graphic design firm has the opportunity to work on a project from the ground up. So often, wayfinding is an afterthought, taken into consideration only after the buildings are designed and constructed. But Diseño Shakespear not only got to help sign a new zoo from soup to nuts, they also named it.

“The TEMAİKÈN Zoo was a flat site the day the client hired us,” recalls Ronald Shakespear. “They called it an animal park instead of a zoo, so we worked on the general concept, naming, corporate identity, signage, standards manual, and everything in between.” The name TEMAİKÈN is a Tehuelche word from Patagonia that translates to “earth” (Tem) and “life” (aiken).

Another unique circumstance was a budget that developed along the way. So, unlike most other zoo projects in which designers lament designing big on a small budget, Diseño Shakespear had the flexibility to create a compelling program with little financial or creative restraint. “Once we gained the client’s confidence, they realized what a formidable tool design was and how helpful it would be,” Shakespear says. In other words, it was a designer’s dream come true.

On the client side, it was important that designers “get” the zoo’s goals. “It was the launching of a new concept in which entertainment and education had to be perfectly balanced,” explains Gustavo Sambucetti, former Sales and Marketing Manager at TEMAİKÈN Zoo. “We wanted a system that could communicate scientific content in a friendly way, be attractive for a 3-year-old child, easy to read for his grandparents, and interesting enough for a biology student.” In short, the wayfinding, signage, and interpretive elements had to have broad demographic appeal. Authentic, durable materials, soft colors and shapes, and a pictographic-based design system combine to create a durable, aesthetically pleasing wayfinding system that traverses age and language barriers.

“We wanted a system that could communicate scientific content in a friendly way, be attractive for a 3-year-old child, easy to read for his grandparents, and interesting enough for a biology student.”



Directional signposts offer alternate routes, and their strategic locations facilitate quick decision-making.



Animal landmark pictograms consist of a steel column with two aluminum circles, the front one made by laser-cut technology. The pictographic shadow projected on the background circle lends an interesting 3-D effect that is influenced by the sun.

TEMAİKÈN ZOO

Location

Escobar, Argentina

Client

TEMAİKÈN Zoo

Design

Diseño Shakespear, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Design Team

Juan Shakespear, Ronald Shakespear, Barbara Shakespear, Lorenzo Shakespear, Fernando Strasser, Cecilia Bonnefon, Juan Cerda, Silvina De Gennaro, Mariana Rivero, Alejandro Jara,

Fabrication

Grafic SA, 3M, Arquitectura del Agua SA, Intecel SA, Americana SA

Consultants

Sade Skanska Saic, Larson Themed Construction, Arq Guillermo Musante, Arq Gustavo Borlasca, Hector Berra y Asociados, Los Luque, Fischer America

Photography

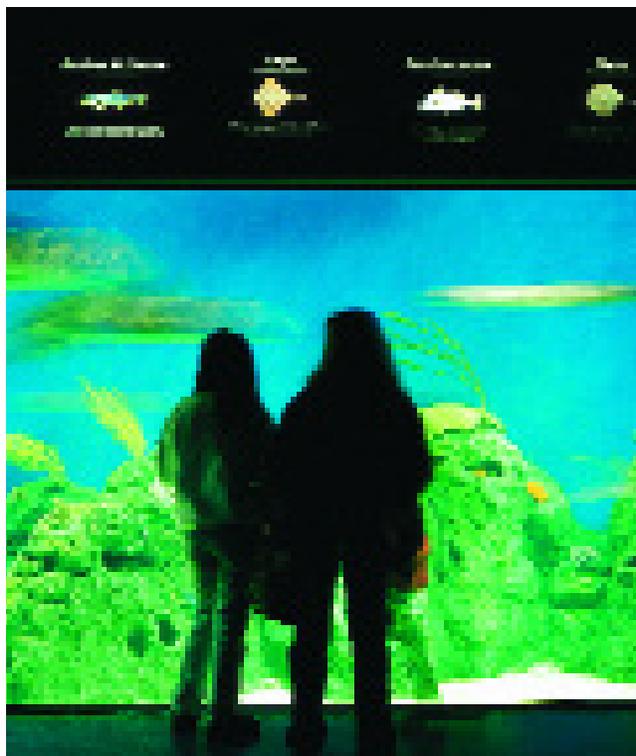
Juan Hitters, Lorenzo Shakespear

The system begins at the entrance, where an 8-ft.-high, 65-ft.-long sign announces the TEMAİKÈN Zoo. Conceived in a flexible, organic typography, it expresses the phonetic name in natural sepia and sienna tones. Taking cues from the logo, designers created a shortened symbol—the letter “T” in a sphere that alludes to the earth—that is used throughout the wayfinding system. According to Shakespear, “These basic elements shape the TEMAİKÈN brand and reflect a warm, non-aggressive image that fosters a more intimate dialogue between the zoo and its visitors.”

From a fabrication standpoint, durability, aesthetics, mechanical resistance, and functionality drove the material selection (aluminum, steel, concrete, projected concrete, and Scotchprint graphics), which in turn created a safe signage system. According to Fernando Strasser,

architect at Fernando Strasser Architecture and Sign Systems Solutions (Buenos Aires), wayfinding elements feature smooth borders, circular columns, and concrete foundations that ensure the columns won't fall down even if the metal inserts do. Another challenge Strasser faced was finding the right location and a precise, clear communication strategy for each message (about 800 elements are included in the sign system). "We took special care to define every detail and keep the designer's intent, but it was such an interesting project," he says.

Now in place for several years, the signage system is holding up very nicely, and Shakespear calls it one of Temaikèn's highlights. "It was the brand that caused such an impact, precisely because it has



Visual communication in dark areas, such as the aquarium, employs a four-color process printed onto transilluminated acrylic sheets and then assembled in hermetically enclosed black zinc cases.

none; it is the opposite of a glossy, sleek identity system," Shakespear explains. And Sambucetti adds, "I have visited many zoos and theme parks in Latin America, the United States, and Europe, and I haven't seen anything like the Temaikèn Zoo's visual identity and communication system. It's a one-of-a-kind, revolutionary project."

Animal Scents and Sensibility

Elephants can certainly hold their own at any zoo. After all, what's cooler than a giant animal that feeds itself with its long and highly mobile nose? But when Roto Studio was tapped with revamping the interpretive experience for the Elephant Encounter at Hogle Zoo, designers were inspired to create big ideas that give visitors a first-person sense of the power, size, and coolness of this exotic behemoth.

The experience begins at the entrance where a life-sized 20-by-13-ft. fiberglass and steel African bull elephant by LifeFormations is made to look like the world's largest soapstone carving. A succession of pictograms not only furthers the authentic soapstone look but also conveys important stories about these threatened animals. When

guests approach it, a motion sensor sprays air and water like a sneeze, with accompanying audio effects. According to Jameson Weston, Art Director at the Hogle Zoo, the iconic piece has been a huge hit with visitors and a frequent photo site.

Nearby, a series of musical elephant footprints lead visitors to the exhibit. Fabricators painted the foot of a live elephant, scanned it, and traced it to create realistic bronze footprints. When guests walk over them, some of the footprints make

ELEPHANT ENCOUNTER AT HOGLE ZOO

Location
Salt Lake City, UT

Client
Hogle Zoo

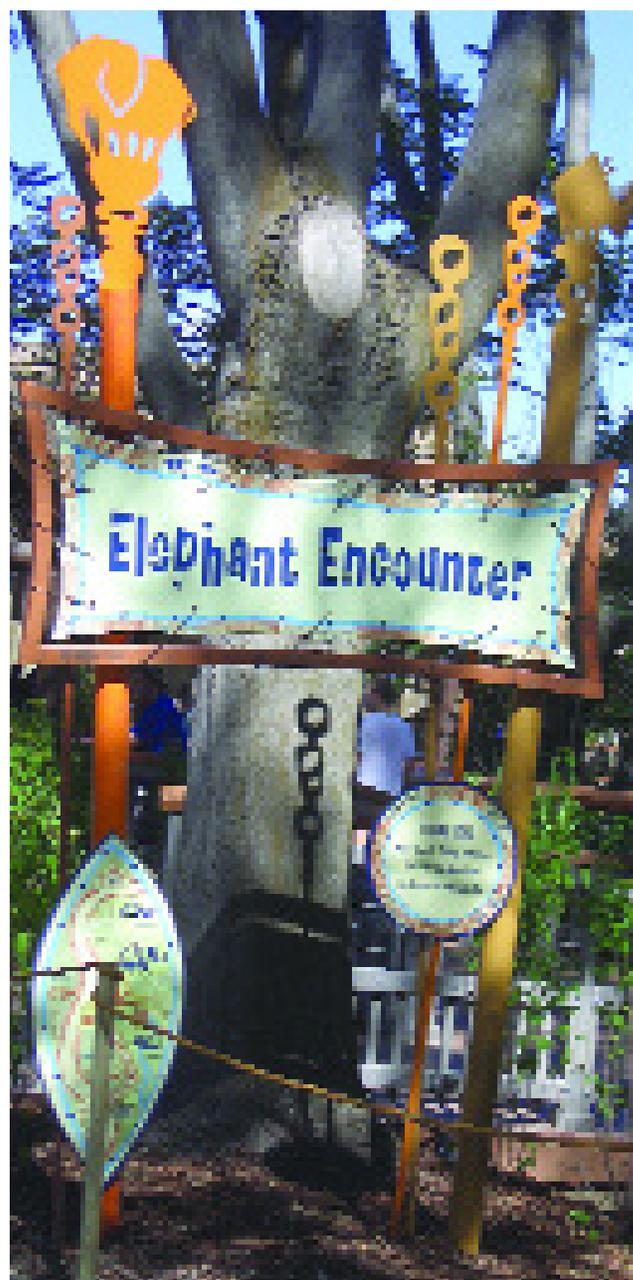
Design
Roto Studio, Dublin, OH

Design Team
Allen Boerger and Joe Wisne, Principals in Charge; Lacey Schmitzer, Meghan Schofield, Terry Jones, Young-Jin Kim

Fabrication
Lifeformations, Gotham Group

Consultants
Korda, Nemeth Engineering

Photography
Lacey Schmitzer



Designers used typography of Coop typeface, vibrant colors, and African-inspired iconography to introduce visitors to the new Elephant Encounter exhibit at Hogle Zoo. One sign set atop a tall pole gives visitors a clear idea of how high an elephant can reach. Interpretive signs below convey additional information.

noises. “It’s just a fun thing for kids to discover,” says Meghan Schofield, a Designer at Roto Studio.

Another fun interactive element is a 4-by-6-ft. scale that tells you, in elephant terms, how much you weigh. Your weight might be compared to a baby elephant or, if you put several people on the scale, to a full-grown animal. Yet another interpretive graphic offers perspective on a different elephant scale: height. Set high atop a tall pole, the graphic indicates how high an elephant can reach. Regional information is detailed at eye level.

To hit all the senses, designers created a tried-and-true interactive element they call the “stink exhibit.” Here, visitors can press a button and identify a smell (i.e., elephant dung). “We looked to past experiences and tried to put old ideas in a fresh form,” Schofield says. “And some things just work really well, so we do them over and over.”

No stranger to zoo projects, Roto Studio opted for UV-safe and durable Scotchprint digital prints mounted on 1/2-inch Sintra (for basic graphics) and MDO (for interactive elements). For example,

Elephant Encounter



A 20-by-13-ft. African elephant sculpture features soapstone-like carvings that tell stories about the animal. Made of Styrofoam and held together with a steel armature, it features a water pump that spews water and makes sounds from speakers hidden behind the ears.

one non-interactive series of graphics relates the zoo animals’ personalities (i.e., “this elephant is grumpy but gets along with her penmate”) as inside information that fosters a better connection between visitors and the animals.

The Elephant Encounter exhibit is just the beginning of a long-term master plan to revamp the Hogle Zoo, but it’s already proved a hit with the public. “We wanted a more hands-on exhibit that would get people closer to the animals,” Weston says. “With the interpretive elements, we’ve taken a new direction and gone beyond the norm to involve and engage visitors. It’s raised the bar for how we approach all our new exhibits.”

Rocky Mountain Zoo Redo

When the Denver Zoo adopted a master plan in 1998 to revamp its facilities, the entryway was one of the first projects on the boards. Dating back to the 1960s, when visitor numbers were about half of what they are today, the front entrance featured a tollbooth for ticket sales and lacked a strong identity system.

“We thought it should speak to Colorado with a lodge feel, and we wanted it to be very transparent, letting people know right away that they’ll be having an animal experience,” explains Craig Piper, Executive Vice President/COO at the Denver Zoo. And it was only

“One girl pointed to the entrance and said, ‘The zoo used to be in there and now’s it’s out here, too.’ And I thought, ‘She got it.’”

natural that local design firm ECOS Communications, long the go-to team for the zoo’s signage and graphics program, would be up to the task. Their solution? Twenty-two life-sized animal sculptures that welcome visitors to the zoo experience.

“We wanted an entryway that would wow people immediately, that felt like animals migrating into the zoo,” says Seth Frankel, Managing Director at ECOS. “If you pull them away from the rest of the project, it could be architecture anywhere in Colorado. Our job was to make the institution stand out for what it does.”

And it’s not just the entryway that gives the Denver Zoo a distinct look and feel. “There are only two guaranteed places that anybody goes in a zoo: the ticket booth and the bathroom,” Frankel says. So, ECOS carried the zoo experience to the restrooms, where floors feature a life-sized graphic riverbed habitat cut out of Marmoleum and laid out using an ultrasonic process. Standing in the restrooms’ 20-by-12-ft. entryway, kids (and adults) can hop on linoleum rocks and listen to a corresponding soundtrack with an animal/jungle soundscape and the voice of a humorous, English-accented woman relating facts about animal behavior. Inside the restrooms, stall doors show supergraphics of animals’ fronts on one side and posteriors on the other, another way ECOS pushed the experiential envelope.

The colors and materials palette throughout the wayfinding and exhibit signage are designed to support the zoo’s overall aesthetic goal of

DENVER ZOO

Location
Denver, CO

Client
Denver Zoo

Design
ECOS Communications,
Boulder, CO

Design Team
Chip Isenhardt, Principal in Charge,
Seth Frankel

Fabrication
Dimensional Innovations, 20/20
Sign Communications

Consultants
McClain Finlon Advertising Inc.
(logo design)

Photography
Chip Isenhardt, Seth Frankel



Restrooms receive the full design treatment with animal fronts and posteriors playfully gracing the stall doors.

appealing to children without being childlike or condescending to adults. For example, general wayfinding elements and signage at the new African-themed exhibit near the entrance (also signed by ECOS) feature welded stainless steel, aluminum, wood, and stone, durable materials that are often used in Colorado. High-pressure laminates (rather than Scotchprint graphics) were used because they withstand the blazing Colorado sun and cope well with freezing and thawing. And new map stations are designed to be more flexible and easy to change, with printed maps on banners tied to wood poles.

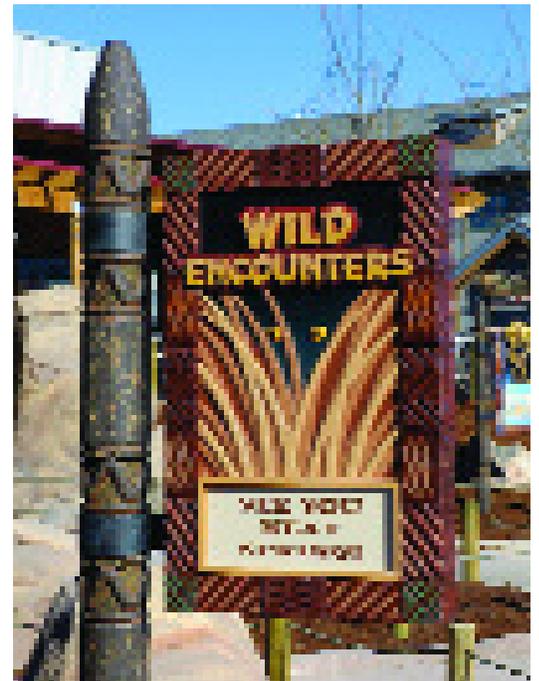
Calling the revamped entry, wayfinding, and exhibit signage “upscale and resort-like,” Piper says the new zoo looks more like a zoo than in the past. To make his point, he recalls a conversation between two little girls standing in front of the giraffe sculpture. “One girl pointed to the entrance and said, ‘The zoo used to be in there and now’s it’s out here, too.’ And I thought, ‘She got it.’”



Bilingual entrance signage acknowledges the Latin population, while 22 full-sized animal sculptures appeal to all visitors. Easy-to-change maps are mounted onto wood poles that extend the zoo’s lodge feel.



An interactive Marmoleum riverbed graphic encourages visitors to leap from rock to rock while listening to a jungle soundscape and learning animals facts from an English-accented voice.



A reed-like wood signpost supports the Denver Zoo’s vibrant new identity/logo.

Not Your Typical Petting Zoo

It's no secret that zoos attract families, particularly families with young children. So any zoo worth its salt will have at least one area—usually called a petting zoo—designed to introduce young kids to animals in a non-threatening manner. But when the Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium (PDZA) set out to revamp its children's area, the in-house team envisioned a lively, experiential, play-based area that would help children develop caring attitudes toward wildlife.

"We wanted self-contained areas so that parents could find their kids at all times, and we needed enough signage to give adults a certain level of comfort, safety, and knowledge," says Carla Collette, Curator of Education at PDZA. "But we didn't want the signs to dictate the experience." With the help of BCRA Architects and Work As Play, Collette and her team conceived a series of nodes (or areas) that would give up-to-8-year-old kids an appreciation for animals, and keep them

KID'S ZONE AT POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM

Location
Tacoma, WA

Client
Metroparks of Tacoma

Design
Dillon Works, Inc., Mukilteo, WA

Design Team
Terry Sateren, Christine Lee, Todd Nordling, Steve Wong, Jeff Harrison, Janelle Baarspul

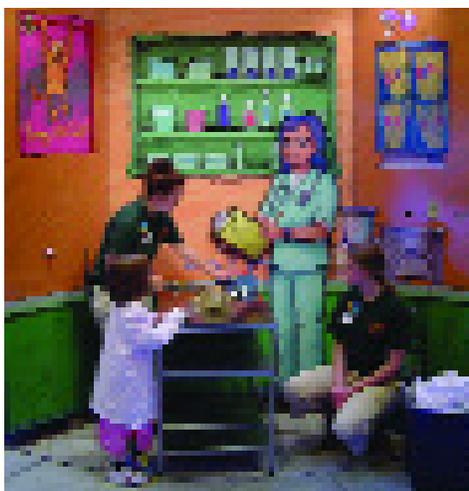
Fabrication
Dillon Works, Image Mill (large-format graphics)

Consultants
BCRA Architects

Photographer
Dillon Works, Inc.



The irregularly shaped Magical Movement node features a colorful mural and an oversized bird's wing that cantilevers over a playground. Action words on the building and the ground suggest without telling kids what to do.



At Contact Junction, kids can don props and role-play as caregivers in a mock nurse's station.

coming back for more. Then they turned to Dillon Works to bring those ideas to life.

Completed in May 2005, phase one of Kid's Zone involved the development of two nodes: Contact Junction and Magical Movement. Contact Junction features an iconic multicolored vinyl dome with a petting area to encourage animal contact, and vignettes where kids can role-play as caregivers. For example, a life-sized character talks to kids and asks them to help with the animals. In turn, the kids can don props (i.e., a doctor's coat, stethoscope, magnifying glass, and ruler) and learn how to care for an iguana, albeit a fake one.

The irregularly shaped Magical Movement features a colorful mural on the outside and an oversized bird's wing that cantilevers over a playground. Simple signage ("dive", "scamper", "hop", "fly") and intuitive playground equipment show kids how to mimic animal movement. For example, in Gekko Cling, kids put their hands and feet on paddles and climb over the curve like a gekko. "There is minimal signage so kids can discover it without being told what to do," explains Brian Leonard, Director of Sales and Marketing at Dillon Works. "Kids don't want it spelled out for them, and the zoo thinks the knowledge will be better retained without signage." Adds Collette, "We don't have to tell them how to do it; they just do it intuitively."

Since opening, Kid's Zone has contributed to a 20 percent increase in visitorship, as well as a boost in stay time and membership sales. And other zoos are taking notice. Collette says both the Woodland Park Zoo and the Lincoln Park Zoo subsequently contacted her regarding Kid's Zone as they were developing their new children's areas. And PDZA isn't done yet; phase two of Kid's Zone is already underway, with two more nodes, one dedicated to the up-to-4 crowd (with a family and new-beginnings focus) and the other to the 5 to 8 demographic (with a more cognitive lean), slated to open soon. ☒

Jenny S. Reising, a Cincinnati-based design writer and editor, contributes to *I.D.*, *HOW*, and other design publications.



Measuring 12 feet high and 5 feet in diameter, the entrance sign to Kid's Zone at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium is fabricated from colorful painted steel with waterjet-cut letters. Hector, the ant in residence on the sign, is the unofficial Kid's Zone mascot.

Are there new concepts in zoo interpretation, exhibitions, and graphics?

Regarding the graphic description of a given territory—the map—the new concept is to be quite literal in describing the way ahead. Floor plans are not easy to read for many people.

But the idea of “new” is a bit awkward for us as it sounds like a trend, a temporary thing. At Diseño Shakespear, there’s only one clear, predefined strategy: there are no absolute recipes. There could be and many design offices use them. But everything begins to look the same. Everywhere. Same tricks, same resources. That the result of treating design as a commodity.

Which zoo’s exhibits or interpretive programs stand out to you?

The Washington Zoo, designed by Lance Wyman years ago, has always been a benchmark for us. It still is. The Taronga Zoo in Sydney, though not really rich in graphic design, has very nice interpretive programs and exhibits. We’ve visited many zoos and aquariums and each one had its own thing. They all proved to be valid and intense experiences, one way or another.

What technologies or materials do you see influencing interpretation?

Electronic media, of course, is more and more appealing. Still, as it depends mostly on a static, fixed screen and involves sitting down—hence stopping your journey through the zoo—many people prefer more concise information displayed in a traditional way, like print. But the fascination of the moving image helps immensely to capture the attention of any thirsty-for-knowledge visitor. It can explain things that were unimaginable before. At the service of didactic science, this is invaluable.

As to materials, better fabrication of traditional signs helps them stand out and endure a healthier life. Anti-UV films and lacquers, tougher metals, specific lighting systems, primers, better paints, four color process prints, laser cuts, etc. are now at the service of wayfinding. In South America, this is quite new and the difference shows immediately.

When it comes to zoo wayfinding/signage programs, what key factors are common to every zoo?

To make the zoo legible before the gate is, maybe, the most important issue. The act of arrival is crucial in the creation of an atmosphere. It is at that precise moment that the visitor realizes that the trip is worth the effort, the scale of the zoo deserves the effort, and the materials, signs, name, brand, all that they came in contact with came to greet them.

The interior, beyond the graphic design aspect, has to be coherent. Organic placement of signs along the path, color

schemes, availability for children, unobtrusive shape, height and materiality are key to our vision of a modern wayfinding program. For Temaikèn, we actually drew the pictograms freehand, without a grid, in order to achieve a fresher, friendlier feel. Hence, the continuity of the program was in the hands of the actual signs and their technological strength with an overlaying “soft” graphic interface.

Project management and visual conception, international experience and involvement in intensive large-scale projects, pragmatic understanding of communication design and understanding of new situations, adapting to new requirements and responding to them in an effective and efficient manner, understanding of the cultural aspects of design and the feeble stability of the shallow “global design” concept versus “local with international flavor,” the capacity of interaction in multidisciplinary projects as designer, integrator, strategist...all these result in a significant contribution. Not only to the clients, but also to the cities and their people.

But above all, the key is the audience. Failing to understand that the final recipient of a design work is the audience is the most common mistake designers and administrators commit. Failing to understand that project and audience must share a common “language” dooms more design projects than any other reason.

What are the obstacles in creating a compelling wayfinding system?

Custom made design and a vision. Although the concept of strategy is key to the understanding of design, there are no absolute guidelines to explain how to design, for any kind of project. From a postal stamp to a wayfinding system for a zoo, the relevant clue is tailor made design. We’ve always believed there’s a big difference between figures-oriented people selling design and designers turning into design business people. The intangibles make the biggest difference, like special sensibilities, abilities to perceive the incidence of design in people, urban landscape, buildings and commercial spaces, the business performance of companies, magazines and web sites, transportation systems and complex wayfinding programs. They allow us to naturally gain the confidence of clients who understand that investing money in design is crucial to the success of their enterprise.

What are the driving factors when developing your design, color, and materials palette?

- Clarity.
- Continuity.
- Permanence.
- Pertinence.