

Collaborate, Design, Engage, Succeed!

An Interview with Jonathan Katz

By Liucija Ambrosini

As the California Academy of Sciences (CAS), the renowned natural history museum in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, continues intense preparations to open its spectacular new 370,000 square foot museum in late 2008, we find Cinnabar's thoughtful, intense CEO Jonathan Katz right in the middle of the gigantic undertaking.

What is the relationship between you and CAS?

My title on the project is Executive Producer, and I am responsible for assembling the team to conceptualize, design and install many of the exhibits. I am like the three-legged stool: I have to oversee the schedule, the budget and the creative synthesis of the message.

Among the many different areas we are designing and building are the Natural History Museum Exhibits located in the main hall: Expedition-based exhibits about Madagascar and Galapagos, as well as the California Exhibit, throughout which is woven the topic of Climate Change – how it will affect us and how we can do something about it; the Early Childhood Center; the recreation of Tusher Africa Hall; and

the Naturalist Center, a research area complete with displays, specimens and reading areas for visitors.

The childhood center includes a California backyard with activities, a tide pool and endangered species play activities, reflecting the diversity and beauty of the natural environment. The original Tusher Africa Hall had a series of dioramas and CAS wanted to save the hall as a legacy of its past. We are faithfully recreating familiar loved features and adding some new elements. We are also reinstalling another legacy piece – the Foucault Pendulum. CAS has always had its own machine shop and built pendulums for many museums around the world.

How did you become involved with this project?

It was some 10 years ago that the facility suffered earthquake damage and they needed to rebuild but still had ongoing exhibits to develop ["Temporary Academy" exhibits have appeared in several locations in the San Francisco area while the main facility is closed]. Cinnabar came on board about six years ago – a design for a new exhibit was not working and the opening was fast approaching, and someone thought of and suggested us because they knew us to be responsive, able to work fast.

It was a 6,500-square-foot hall. We jumped in, came back with the idea, we stripped the place down, built the exhibit – inside budget, on time – and it was a big hit! It was an exhibit of skulls. They had typically used 150 skulls before – this used 2,000! But suddenly, the museum found that the exhibit was attracting other, non-museum audiences: audiences that came because it was beautiful, art students who came to sketch, etc. That event started other discussions on how to develop designs, how to be more responsive to audiences.

We continued to do additional projects with the Academy and our role expanded when they realized they needed a lot more help to install the new Steinhart Aquarium and other spaces, in the new building. They had begun implementing fresh strategies – one of which was to bring in designers who were not strictly



Artist's rendering of exhibit hall for the new California Academy of Sciences

museum designers, such as Cinnabar - and had seen the importance of mobilizing a team to design and get things built. I made a proposal that they adopt the same approach, pointing out that it would dramatically control costs in addition to other benefits. Since we already had great familiarity with the workings of the institution and its goals, we would be able to put together the best people into an integrated ensemble to get the best possible results.

Who is on the team?

Along with a team of about 10 people from Cinnabar, there are H+F (architecture and exhibit design), Darcie Fohrman Associates (content developers), Tim Martin Design (exhibit design), and Mindi Lipschultz (media producer).

What were some of the challenges?

The building architect, Renzo Piano, was completely committed to overturning the usual dark-box environment so typical of natural history museums. He wanted an open, light-filled, orthogonal scheme - a beautiful scheme, but also one that presents an enormous challenge for the display of specimens, especially when you are using the real thing as much as possible.

Also, the Academy wanted exhibit elements that were very flexible and which could be easily changed, reorganized, reused. And, there was a

work-culture challenge: we were bringing in a production model that many museum participants were not familiar with, and a shorter timeframe than they were used to.

Another factor was the LEED rating for the building. The Academy wanted to get the platinum rating. The building was going to take the bulk of the price tag and the budget for inside areas fell to a low to middle range, giving us another unique challenge.

Speaking of interesting challenges, you actually went on an expedition to collect army ants?

Yes, we collected an army ant colony in Costa Rica and worked through enormous red tape to bring them back - not to mention the actual containment - and developed an exhibit in a huge enclosure. It was a spectacular display and it actually mesmerized teenagers.

What has been the most important training for you to get to this point in your career?

I studied theater and economics, then traveled. I got involved in alternative energy and sustainable farming movements. This led me to work for then-Governor Jerry Brown's Office of Alternative Technologies and other conservation programs in the 70s. We installed solar panels in state parks, developed bicycle programs for state workers - things that foreshadowed what is on people's minds now.



Cinnabar CEO Jonathan Katz

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I ended up in LA and entered the film world, building scenery and effects. I started Cinnabar in 1981. We have continued to work in television and film, TV commercials, music videos, retail stores, while gradually finding ways to apply theatrical, film and other appropriate technologies to many other venues, now including museums.

What should designers think about in relation to working with museums?

It's important to develop a keen awareness of a museum's core and why this or that material is important for them to present. We all have to make a bigger effort to absorb ideas to make our work more valuable. For example, when we were working on the Galapagos exhibit, some of the designers involved didn't know what made finch beaks so important. I gave them research books to read and it made a huge difference in the final product.

It's also important to remember that exhibits can be fun, and that interaction can be energizing and get audience interest - but that a fun, interactive exhibit will not succeed in terms of the museum's mission if it is not achieving the goal of getting people to learn something about the subject matter. Just like in the movie business - it doesn't succeed until it succeeds.

Why are finch beaks so important?

The finches Darwin observed on Galapagos were key empirical evidence for developing the theory

of evolution. He noted that they had developed different sized and shaped beaks according to what they ate.

What is important for museums to consider as they develop new ideas, exhibits, new directions?

Museums tend to be very protective of what they are about. While good in one respect, it can mean that they may isolate themselves from a bigger dialogue and a bigger result. At times I think management can be overly academic or too hierarchical.

Museums have been very slow to break away from their traditional production models. Many have been insular, resistant to new approaches. But many times, when it comes to designing and building exhibits, there are false economics in play. Design based only on money considerations never works out. Institutions end up either spending more money than anticipated or not getting what they expected. It just does not maximize the return to the institution. Museums would benefit from exploring different ways to build exhibits, and a more collaborative process.

Why would a collaborative process serve them?

Creative collaboration brings together a diverse group of people each with their own skills, talents, and experiences, for a mutually beneficial result. The importance of collaboration is that things can



be built better, problems can be talked over and solved, and necessary changes and adjustments can be made - all contributing greatly to the total value of the experience.

As designers we want to not only get something designed and built, we also want to participate in the conceptualization. Sometimes doing something in a different way can produce an end result that is more emotionally engaging and effective.

How did CAS deal with developing ideas?

Process was very important. They looked at and were interested in themed places, obviously not so much for the content, but for the technologies and techniques used. They were interested in making environments that are interesting and compelling thereby increasing the quality of time spent by audiences. Companies like mine represented the developing edge of those technologies. They were very interested in talking about concepts and how to integrate all the various components.

Are there things that museums could do to improve their presentation of subject matter?

Theater. Use theatrical techniques - not to be goofy or emotional, but to be flexible and effective in getting the message across. A docent, a volunteer, a human - a person is most successful in conveying this information and a little bit of theatrical training really helps.

What do you feel museums should be doing with their information?

It's very important for a lot of these institutions to take a clear view on such topics as climate change, evolution, global warming. I think that many natural history museums command a high degree of authenticity in the sense that people are saying, "You know what this is all about, tell us what we should do to live in a natural world, how we should behave." These museums command a high degree of respect and should really think about such issues as an important opportunity - even a responsibility. As Dr. Susan Solomon, winner of the National Medal of Science, said, "Thomas Jefferson said, 'Science is my passion, politics my duty.' That's probably how I think about it too. Science does have a duty, when called upon, to provide information that's important to society the best way it can."

The Academy (CAS) itself wants to walk the walk instead of just talk the talk. They realize that they need to translate those values, e.g., conservation, into environmental citizenship. They are addressing the essential virtue of thinking locally. They are integrating the extremely important lessons of climate change and global warming into their guests' experiences. For example, it doesn't mean a lot to put out recycling bins if you're serving a lot of fast foods with excessive packaging. Here, they are trying to be connected with nature, be naturally ventilated, create a food service with local cuisine instead of hiring a fast food service. This is all a huge challenge for the museum but even in a cafeteria you need to show that you are relevant to people by doing it yourself and not just preaching.

It's important for institutions to step up. They have the authenticity to take a stand. ■■■■

Interviewer Liucija Ambrosini (atthepark@earthlink.net) is co-founder of Chicago-based At-the-Park Inc. which published the influential magazine At-the-Park for more than a decade. She is an internationally recognized authority on parks and attractions. She is also a theatrical director.



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