Award for Outstanding Achievement
Georgia Aquarium

IT'S ABOUT FISH

by Kathleen Whyman

The following is excerpted from an article originally published in Attractions Management magazine, shortly after the Georgia Aquarium opened in November 2005.

With more than eight million gallons of marine and fresh water, and more than 100,000 animals of 500 different species, the Georgia Aquarium is a gift to the people of Georgia from Bernard Marcus, co-founder of The Home Depot, and his wife Billie, through the Marcus Foundation. It is overseen by a nonprofit corporation run by a board of directors.

The mission of the Georgia Aquarium is to be an entertaining, educational and scientific institution featuring exhibitions and programs of the highest standards, offering engaging and entertaining visitors' experiences, and promoting the conservation of aquatic biodiversity throughout the world.

The exterior of the building was designed to look like a giant ship breaking through a wave. As guests enter the huge atrium inside the building, they will be guided into the facility by "a wall of fish." They then have the choice of entering five galleries.

Each gallery is easily identified by an icon and signage at the entrance: Georgia Explorer has a lighthouse; River Scout displays a cascading waterfall; Cold Water Quest has an ice-covered cliff; Ocean Voyager offers a peek window into the huge habitat; and Tropical Diver has two video screens displaying the perspective of a fish on a reef. Guests return to the main atrium before entering the next gallery.

There are 60 habitats at the Georgia Aquarium with 12,000 square feet of viewing windows. The acrylic used in the windows weighs a total of 328 tons. The largest habitat holds 6.2 million gallons of water and measures 263-feet long by 126-feet wide by 33-feet deep, at its largest points. It was specially designed to house whale sharks alongside tens of thousands of other animals that typically live along a coral reef and out to the open ocean.

The aquarium has a 100-foot-long tunnel and one of the world's largest aquarium windows with views into the whale shark habitat, which is the aquarium's largest gallery. The gallery's second largest habitat, containing 800,000 gallons of water, was designed to simulate the natural habitat of Beluga whales.

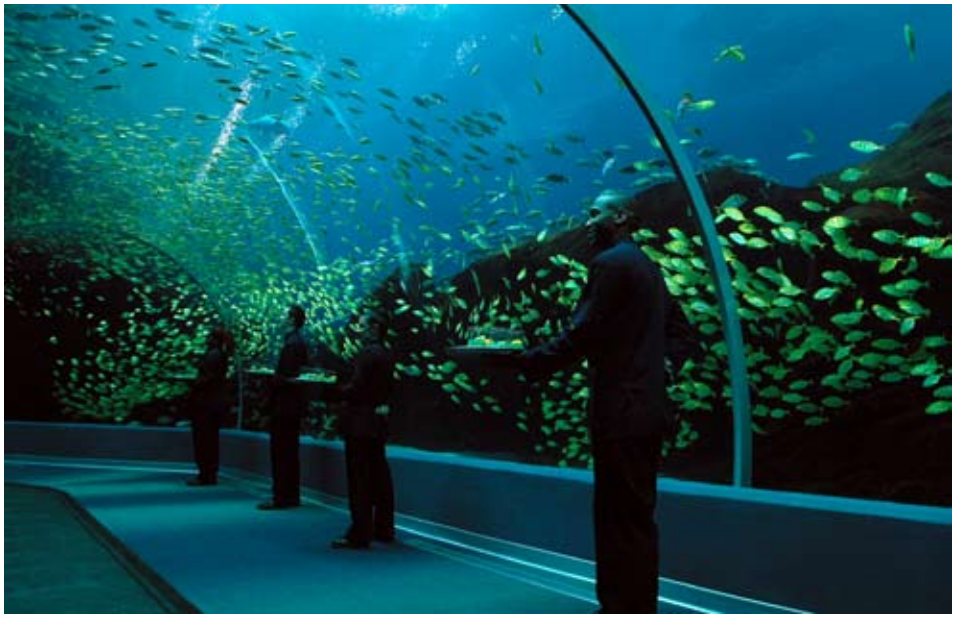
Research and education make up 25 percent of this $250 million facility. The Learning Loop is located entirely separate from the general public area with its own entrance, lunchroom and five wet labs, giving school groups the opportunity to focus on the lessons at hand. A Veterinary Services and Conservation Medicine facility fills 5,800 square feet and holds 26 treatment tanks.

A Meaningful Legacy
Interview with Bernard Marcus, Founder

Q: What inspired you to build the world's biggest aquarium?

A: No one has ever been able to put everything together in one place. Aquariums usually focus on one area – the river or icy water or the ocean. Each one of our galleries is an aquarium in itself.

When I started out, I said, "This has to be entertaining, it's got to have the wow factor." I brought in people from theater and film to achieve this. The "fish people" are all environmentalists and interested only in the fish, so they found it difficult to work with these creative people. But they got on with it



A wall of fish speaks for itself, eloquently.

Kathleen Whyman is Deputy Editor of Attractions Management magazine, which is published by The Leisure Media Company Ltd. in Hertfordshire UK. TEA thanks Leisure Media for their permission to use this article in the 2007 Thea Awards program. Visit www.attractionsmanagement.com.

and all these creative ideas came out of that combined group.

It took about five months for everyone to realize that presenting the fish in a new kind of environment would be so much more exciting for people, and it would create what the "fish people" want, which is to really highlight the fish.

Q: How are people reacting to it?
A: It's astounding to watch the visitors. They stop in front of something and just stare! In most aquariums you have to go in one line from exhibit to exhibit and if people stop, the whole line stops. Here, if one gallery is full, you just come out and go to another gallery. We built it this way so that people can spend time here, they don't have to rush around. We've timed it and the average stay is about three hours.

Q: What impact will it have on Atlanta?
A: I think it's going to have a tremendous impact. The atrium can host 5,000-10,000 people in an evening, and we can also feed them, so I hope we're going to bring conventions here. I also hope it's going to help the city and the state's economic welfare. We estimate it is going to bring in $1 billion over five years. I actually believe it's going to bring in more than that because I think we're going to see a tremendous amount of building around this area with more hotels, restaurants, museums and places to go.

Q: What made you decide to build it?
A: I started out with very little and now, thanks to the success of my hardware stores, I have everything I want. I'm Jewish and was taught at an early age that you have to give back. I'm so grateful for what's happened, and how good the people in Georgia have been to me, that I want to do something magnanimous. I chose an aquarium because everybody loves them. I could have bought the biggest yacht in the world for $200 million, but it would have been self-indulgent. I'm getting much more joy seeing everybody enjoy this place.

Opposite: The aquatium contains unique spaces for special events (top) but the fish are still the natural stars of the show (bottom).

Below: The atrium is the hub of the facility.

A Theatrical Experience
Interview with Gary Goddard, Designer

Q: What is your involvement?
A: I was brought in as part of the original team three years prior to opening, to be the entertainment design consultant on the whole aquarium project. The aim was to make this aquarium different from any other in the world and get away from the cement walls and cement floors of many aquariums. We've used tiles, terrazzo on the floor, a lot of glass and metal ribbon strips to resemble rippling waves.

Q: What were the challenges?
A: The essential challenge of an aquarium is that there will always be a glass wall between you and the fish. That's a given, that's not going to change. I wanted to find a way to break through that. The way we do it in theater is give people an emotion so they feel much more connected to the stars of the show. In this case the stars are the fish, so we've enhanced what's in the room to help connect people to the fish more. The themed music and lighting are a big part of that and, to some degree, the overall design. In some of the galleries the design is a little bit more contemporary, and in some it's a little more themed.

Q: How have you made the galleries different?
A: In the freshwater gallery we've made a glass corridor and put the fish above and beside visitors, so they're actually looking at the fish from underneath the "river" instead of from above. Visitors walk down an area and see one thing, and then come around a corner and see something else. It's like a walking theater.

In the larger galleries – in the coral reef section, for example – we put a trigger device in so a wave jumps every two minutes. We've composed an original piece of music that peaks right when the wave hits, then settles back down as the ripples settle, and then builds up slowly in time with the wave again. I think that makes the whole experience unique and, again, theatrical.

The center of the aquarium is a big plaza with the galleries leading off it. Visitors can choose where they want to go. In a lot of aquariums you start in one place and end in another – you don't get to go backwards. We wanted to get rid of the linear kind of thing and give people choices. That led to the idea of the plaza. We didn't want it to feel like a train station, so livened it up by making the room multi-leveled. Tables and chairs spill out from the food area into the plaza and there are screens showing moving images.

Q: How did you work with the "fish people?"
A: We had to find a balance. They told us what the fish's natural habitat is and we worked around that to try and enhance it. That's how we evolved the process. We've created a great showcase for the fish – they really are the stars.

Q: Tell us about the 3D/4D show.
A: Bernard Marcus felt we needed something here besides the fish, so we decided to have a show, something state-of-the-art. Everyone will enjoy the show, but seeing it with families and kids who are laughing and screaming – that's what we do this for. The families came out raving, so we're happy! The show is called Deepo's Undersea 3D Wondershow. It teaches children about fish and the importance of the sea in our environment.