

Award for Outstanding Achievement Noah's Ark at the Skirball

setting sail again



by Ryan A. Harmon

Two by two would be highly underestimating the number of guests who flock to experience Noah's Ark at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles on a daily basis. This unique interactive attraction has been drawing families by the thousands since its debut on June 26th, 2007.

Six years in the making, the \$5 million, 8,000-square-foot Noah's Ark exhibit invites children and families to immerse themselves in the timeless, ancient story of the great flood, which has so many parallels in diverse cultures around the world. The project received funding from Wells Fargo Bank and former Neutrogena president Lloyd E. Cotsen.

Located in LA's mountainous Sepulveda Pass, just north of the Getty Center, the Skirball Cultural Center is a destination for Jewish cultural studies, entertainment and exhibits. Here, in the expansive south hall, the story of Noah's Ark has added a delightful children's space to the facility.

Stepping into the exhibit, guests find themselves dwarfed by a parade of full-size animal pairings, artfully brought to life from an ingenious combination of recycled household materials. The menagerie is comprised of more than 300 sculptures, semi-kinetic sculptures and puppets, representing 150 different species. These exhibits are the work of a creative design and engineering team headed by Olson Sundberg Kundig

Allen (OSKAA) including OSKAA principal Alan Maskin AIA, project manager Stephen Yamada-Heidner, designer/puppeteers Chris Green and Eric Novak. Extensive support was provided by Lexington's talented team of fabricators, sculptors and scenic artists, directed by project manager Howard Smith and VP design Patti Drum.

The level of craftsmanship and the apt use of found materials in the menagerie earned Noah's Ark a glowing testament in the New York Times (April 29, 2007). "Every animal Mr. Green designed for the ark features something scavenged or repurposed," wrote NYT journalist Jori Finkel. "A pair of flamingo puppets have pouchy pink purses as bodies and fly swatters as feet. The jaws of the crocodiles are formed from a violin case (for the female) and a viola case (for the male), with the humps made from pieces of a car tire. The zebras' haunches consist of black-and-white rotary ventilator turbines and their manes are made of salvaged organ keys."

In addition, science museum-style interactives combine with a number of simple, yet well-themed, hands-on experiences that invite children and adults alike to conduct a storm, help construct the ark and bask in the glow of a beautiful rainbow.

As they proceed through the exhibit, guests discover the destination of all the creatures big and small: the ark itself. At 75 feet wide and 17 feet tall, the wooden ark accommodates up to 125 guests at a time. Aboard the floor-to-ceiling vessel, filled to the rafters with whimsical animals, families can play, build, climb, explore and collaborate.

Within the ark's interior is a magical soft-play area where little ones can spend hours climbing through hollow trees and crawling across an extensive network of overhead corridors and caverns — all safety-netted.

The final stop is a large activity space in which guests can take part in a variety of related arts




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and crafts experiences. One example is the planting of a seed in a portable box of soil that can be taken home and grown in one's own backyard — a symbol of the importance of life and the care of our environment. A retail store rounds out the 60- to 90-minute Noah's Ark experience, offering dozens of animal- and environment-related children's books and toys.

Noah's Ark is the brainchild of Skirball's founding president, Uri Herscher, who had always wanted the center, which opened in the 1990s, to include a children's area. He directed the Skirball's designer, Moshe Safdie, to include a flexible gallery space with this in mind. Eventually, Herscher found specific inspiration in the miniature "folk ark" collection of Skirball trustee Lloyd E. Cotsen. (Cotsen later donated the collection to form part of the exhibit.) "Noah's Ark is about second chances," Herscher told the New York Times. "And it is about diversity: different animals learning to live together under a single shelter."

TEA's recognition of the Skirball Cultural Center and the team of innovators who made Noah's Ark such an engaging experience will, it is hoped, be an inspiration to other museums and cultural centers around the world to explore and utilize the magic of environmental storytelling in projects of their own. 

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