THEMATIC PLANNING OF ZOO EXHIBITS:
A Review of Exhibit Design in Furthering the Aims of the Zoo in
Education and Conservation

by

TAN CHIA CHIA
HD99-1256Y

Submitted to the School of Design and Environment
on October 2, 2000 in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Architecture

ABSTRACT

Zoos are primarily set up with the aims of recreation, education and
conservation through the exhibition of animals in simulated environments.
These environments are often constructed with the basic spatial requirements
needed by the animals and modified to suite the various lifestyles in their
natural habitats. This, being only part of the whole equation, has to be balanced
with other aspects like visitor and staff requirements which again is a matter of
negotiations that will finally lead to decisions that are best for all.

Animals are often exhibited in simulated environments that best depict the
nature of their natural habitats (Figure 1). The tactic of employing illusions to
create larger spaces, closed environments and natural surroundings can be
seen in many zoos and functional buildings are sometimes hidden or disguised
as well to ‘fit into’ the overall feel of the environment.
Conservation has always been an integral part of a zoo's agenda and zoo planners have also recognised the need to bring forth the message to the visitors as well. Thematic planning is one such direction taken by some zoos in furthering the aims of education and conservation.

Exhibit design is no longer only about hiding human structures to simulate natural environments, it has moved on to increase people's understanding of their relationship with the natural world as well. Themes are adopted for various exhibits to emphasise the cultural components of the environment to introduce visitors to the cultures that relate to the animals, fostering understanding and replacing misconception in an entertaining and educational way.

This dissertation is thus aimed at reviewing this new direction, where built structures are taking on roles of education rather than merely being functional. Reference will be made to projects in the Singapore Zoological Gardens, namely the Fragile Forest and the Ethiopian Experience (currently under construction), the depth of the theming and how well it serves to further the aims of education and conservation in the zoo. Would this then serve to portray the zoo more as an environment where animals and man interact rather than as a 'living museum'?