

Long-time architect for Memphis Zoo prevailed over Katrina roadblocks

BY CHRIS HARRIS

Just weeks after Hurricane Katrina swept through New Orleans forcing Ace Torre and his family to evacuate, the zoological architect was back to work. He couldn't really be at work because of flooding and National Guard barriers in the city, but he improvised.

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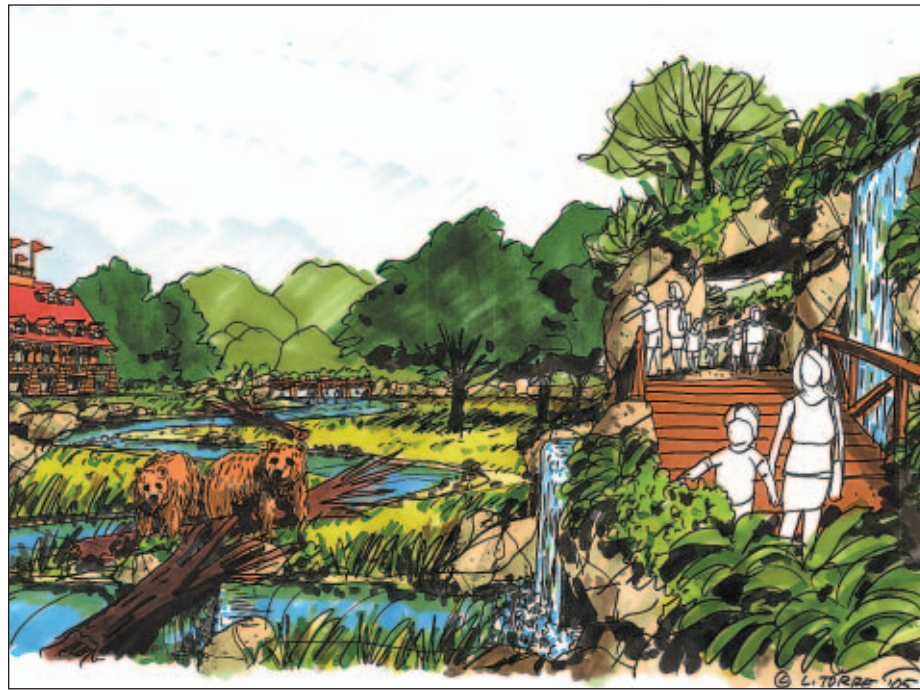
Torre, president of Torre Design Consortium Ltd., a New Orleans-based architecture firm that specializes in zoo architecture, designed the proposed grizzly bear exhibit for the Memphis Zoo while at a conference in Chicago.

The Smith Family Teton Trek, set to open spring 2009, is roughly three acres devoted to the display of grizzlies, wolves and elk.

Torre was at an American Zoo and Aquarium Association conference in Chicago just weeks after Katrina when Memphis Zoo president Chuck Brady told him the zoo wanted to have a grizzly bear exhibit.

"I wanted to create a plan that was dramatic and was something we could all be proud of," Brady says. Torre has designed other exhibits for the Memphis Zoo, including FedEx Once Upon a Farm, Helen and Jabee Hardin China, and the Carol and Jim Prentiss Northwest Passage.

"As we discussed it, on a spiral bound notebook I scribbled. And in the course of an afternoon, we came up with the



TORRE DESIGN CONSORTIUM | COURTESY MEMPHIS ZOO

The new Teton Trek area of the Memphis Zoo will be home to grizzly bears.

concept of the exhibit and how it might layout and so forth," Torre says. "It was sort of born in an exhibit booth."

It was born, but not finished. Torre still needed the actual specs of the project and a baseboard drawing for visuals. He was staying with in-laws in Westwego, La., when the National Guard began letting people enter certain areas of the city during certain hours.

"At least then you could get into the office and say, 'Well, OK, the roof is OK; the computer server is still there; all

we're waiting on now is power," he says. Torre was finally able to get a baseboard from the office. He couldn't stay there, though, so he drew out the official mock up of the Teton Trek on the dining room table of an employee — one of the few he could contact.

"My staff was spread over six states," he says. "There was no way to make an office work like an office."

Torre found out, though, that while phone calls would not go through, text messaging services worked.

"It was a little bit difficult," Brady says. However, the project was only in the concept stage. The next stage is when details are being finalized and communication is key.

About two months after the storm, Torre Design was back up and running, and the Memphis Zoo project suffered no setbacks. The firm operates in a 120-year-old Victorian house on Magazine Street in New Orleans, an area that sits at a higher elevation.

The day before Katrina hit, Torre and his employees boarded up the old home and took backup tapes from the business. "Next time I'll just take the whole server," he says. "That way you've got your full database. It's in the trunk of your car — you drive up and you're in an office and you start over."

Jumping back into work and starting over was the best thing, says Torre.

"At the end you were still left with the incredible depression of just how bad the areas that were badly hit were and still are today," he says. "This was kind of a great, fun, uplifting fun thing that came along post-disaster that you could get away from the tedium of how to re-think."

Torre and Brady modeled the Teton Trek after Jackson Hole, Wyo., home to the Grand Teton National Park. The exhibit includes a replica of Old Faithful Geyser, where people can splash through a 25-foot vertical water fountain or sit around on the rocks in the sun, a 25-foot waterfall with a foot bridge, and a stream with live fish for the bears to catch.

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