



THE HENRY DOORLY ZOO ENTRY PAVILION

CLIENT: Mutual of Omaha and the Henry Doorly Zoo

SERVICES: Design, Fabrication, Installation



The Situation

For decades, Mutual of Omaha has supported educational programs focused on wildlife, the environment and natural ecosystems. The company's long term sponsorship of The Wild Kingdom television series made it a pioneer in building public understanding and support for animal protection and environmental conservation.

So it was only natural for Mutual of Omaha to get involved when Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo needed to renovate its 20 year-old entry pavilion, a "welcome center" through which 1.5 million zoo visitors passed every year.

The Challenge

Mutual of Omaha assumed a lead role on the project, and it wanted to create a dynamic new space that would provide an engaging, interactive experience for both kids and adults.

Mutual of Omaha asked VEE to play a vital role in the renovation. Our task was a complete re-design of the pavilion, and the assignment came with several key planning considerations:

- The pavilion had to remain consistent with the zoo's master plan, which focused on total immersion themes that accurately replicated environments and ecosystems from around the world.
- It had to be an active educational space that could deliver both staff-led and self-directed learning experiences.
- There was strong desire to integrate interactive technology and learning stations into the pavilion.
- Numerous small animal exhibits (snakes, spiders, etc.) were currently in the pavilion and had to remain in place.
- Budget restrictions would not allow major structural changes to the building, so we had to work within the existing footprint.





The Solution

With all these planning considerations in mind, we felt the design solution had to suggest an authentic, natural “in-the-field” educational environment. We recommended the idea of an “Exploration Station”, borrowing major elements from a remote jungle base camp to create a welcoming space that invited the zoo visitor to join a learning expedition.

Upon entering the pavilion, the visitor becomes immediately immersed in an explorer’s world highlighted by:

- The base camp hut, a thatched roof structure with rough-hewn post construction and bamboo railings. The hut is outfitted with a variety of props to extend the base camp feel – shipping crates, barrels, bundles of supplies, satellite dishes, etc.
- An electronic interactive map of the zoo – when the visitor touches an exhibit button, an LED illuminated pathway appears to show the way to the exhibit.
- A “jungle aviary” built from enormous carved vines that ran 25 feet from floor to ceiling and supported the netting that kept dozens of tropical birds contained within.
- Illuminated and simple graphic interactive units depicting the zoo’s history, its research activities, guest services, and current and upcoming exhibits and events.
- Themed “bamboo and thatch” display stations around the full perimeter of the 4,600 square-foot space. These structures included a variety of interactive kiosks and integrated existing and new displays to make the base camp theme cohesive throughout the space.

All this and much more was designed and built from scratch in VEE’s studios in Minneapolis, shipped to Omaha and installed by our crew. The entire project was scheduled and managed in four distinct phases.

- Phase I: conceptual design for the entire space.
- Phase II: the floor plan, elevations and detailed design treatments for all elements.
- Phase III: the final content, text and graphics for every sign, kiosk and display in the space.
- Phase IV: manufacture and install all themed elements, new displays and interactive kiosks

Thanks to Mutual of Omaha, the Henry Doorly Zoo now has an entry pavilion that transports visitors into an immersive learning experience the minute they walk through the doors, setting the stage for a great day at the zoo!