

MEMO:

To: Nicky

From: James

Re: Fort Worth Zoo Gallery Project

By way of introduction let me say that this project has the potential of being extraordinarily exciting and rewarding, and could be developed into one that set new standards in the field, in much the same way as the Kimbell did in its time. In order to realise this potential, it is important to, on the one hand, be visionary and courageous, while on the other hand, avoid the several pitfalls of "commonsense" pragmatism that would risk making the project just another feature of the "great mundane ~~fact~~".

First of all, the material you sent me was very good, and seemed to hit all the right notes. In particular, seeing the collection as a way of talking not only about the animals, but about Victorian ideals of romance and exploration seemed very apropos.

Since this project is still firmly in the pre-programming phase, I am just going to make a few comments, in no particular order, about the various possibilities we could consider in approaching the project.

1. *The facility is not just a gallery*

In order to avoid alienating those members of the public intimidated by the institutions of high culture, and to amplify and integrate the facility into the fabric of the whole zoo experience, the gallery should be seen as an *indispensable part of the zoo visit*, as an interpretive centre, an educational centre, a discovery theatre, whatever. By being perceived as just a gallery, it risks being left out.

2. *The experience should be transparent*

The object of integrating such a collection into the whole zoo experience is to bring the visitor into a new relationship with the subject of the art (the animals) the art itself (its vigour and expressiveness) and the culture that created it (a Victorian world of exploration and adventure). This should be accomplished without being made explicit, as no-one likes being preached at, nevertheless, it must be seen as educational, in order to warrant the visit. Much like EPCOT at Disney World, or a World's Fair, it should attract by promising education, surprise by *being* fun, and remain *subversively*

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educational. This way, people come back to have fun, justify it to themselves as educational, and actually learn something in the process.

3. The object is overlap

In order to bring the visitor into a new relation with the material, a key strategy is juxtaposition. There are several key layers of that inhere in the collection:

- a. The animals in the paintings can be seen in the zoo
- b. the idea of the "wild" is disappearing, as are the animals
- c. painting is a way of seeing
- d. painting tells you about the painter, not just the painted

These different layers can be evoked together to provide a rich experience. By having the art in one place, the animals in another and the interpretation of the Victorian explorer somewhere else, one risks not being able to stimulate people to put the pieces together. You can never tell people to have an insight, but you can make it possible.

4. The vehicle is the collection

The core of the programme is of course the Kuhnert collection, and its display and preservation is of prime importance for many of the same deeply-felt art-historical reasons that Rick Brown speaks of in his awesome and brilliant programme for the Kimbell (the vision for which, and the clarity of we should aspire to).

Nevertheless, the quality and the small scale of the collection make it possible to consider integrating it with other functions of the zoo, functions that involve more than passive viewing. In this way it can become even more educational, while remaining in many ways "transparent".

For example, in addition to the small library and a space for traveling exhibitions (which should be in addition to, not supplant the main collection) we can imagine a space where children could see animals at close range to paint or photograph them, a "discovery area" where they could explore a zoo-like terrain, looking for animals themselves, or a space where an artist-in-residence could paint or draw and talk to adults and children. The object is to involve, to integrate, to explore; the message of the paintings is also about the thrill of exploration and discovery.

3. The building should be small

Due to the small size of the collection, and presumably a limited budget, the building form itself should be kept small and compact; a pavilion scale, a

conservatory scale, a jewel-like oasis in the zoo. This does not mean sacrificing the kind of programmatic complexity I have been mentioning. If the core functions are kept compact, and the surrounding terrain used to the fullest, partly covered, tent-like enclosures for viewing, niches, paths, walkways above and through, the integration of the building and its site would be very successful. The building would become an outpost of exploration with a heart of introspection, very Victorian in its purity of motive.

4. The architecture should be singular

In order to accomplish the above aims, I suggest, as did Rick Brown, a deliberately singular and self-sustaining architectural form. Even recognising the possibility of future expansion, I strongly suggest that the architecture of the gallery be conceived of as a piece, a single, purpose-built statement.

This is not to say that expansion must be eschewed, rather that this "core" building be seen as the centrepiece of what could become a series of pavilions, fragments of discovery scattered in the zoo landscape. Even more apposite, the strategy I propose would demand that while the core of the gallery be a self sufficient piece of architectural excellence, programmatically its "edges" must be designed from the start to allow for a variety of activity and integration with the landscape and the zoo's inhabitants.

I hope this fires the imagination, as I think the possibility of creating not only a piece of architectural excellence, but a pioneering example of conceptualisation, is very strong indeed. I will close with a few comments about process.

First, I am beginning to think that the idea of an AIA sanctioned architectural competition would be a good one in many ways, as it would generate a large number of ideas, and generate a great deal of valuable publicity. I do think, however, that the brief must be very clear and concise, in order to avoid the unfortunate situation of having no solution one really likes in the end. The alternative is to determine the brief very tightly indeed, then approach a short list of architects/design teams for a limited paid competition. Finally of course you can just decide on an architect and get the ball rolling that way. What did Rick Brown do?

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I would also try to emulate Rick Brown's approach in other ways. Despite his visionary and laudable concern for the viewing public ("the overwhelming majority of people using the building will not be art historians, other architects or progressive artists...") he did not compromise the quality of the building to either prevailing populist taste, nor especially to the pragmatic, "commonsense" concerns about expansion, availability of certain materials and petty budgetary issues. The Kimbell is very much a tribute to his clarity of vision and his willingness to retain it. We should start off trying to do likewise.

be quite heretical, as I am trying to redefine the very idea of "gallery" in order to reveal the possibility of new kinds of trans-disciplinary experience. The problem is always, if it's not a gallery, what is it? I suggest we continue to call it a gallery, but not allow ourselves to be too constrained the

by the definition.