

Georgia Aquarium

If you want to see the future of interpretation, there is no better place than the Georgia Aquarium. Billing itself as the world's largest, the aquarium is centered around a shopping mall design brimming with visually-stimulating, curiosity-arousing exhibits. But it is not about the planet's precious liquid of life; it is about displaying and identifying some of the creatures that inhabit it, a modern P.T. Barnum sideshow without the big top.


Not surprisingly, there is no attempt to introduce water, or the movement of the planet's water and how that process has created a variety of amazing habitats here. This is what happens when building and exhibit designers call the shots. Interpretive design gets relegated to guiding people through what was created, naming things they see (and trying to control their behavior). Interpretation is an afterthought rather than a forethought.

More and more, we create mass experiences as spectacle and sell them as meaningful experiences with outcomes. In this case, the mall-like design fosters the peripatetic atmosphere that works against the very engagement being touted.

INTERPRETATION HAS BECOME
THE DEFAULT SETTING FOR BAD DESIGN.

The "gateway" to the aquarium has to be "hands-down" one of the worst entrances to any modern facility of its size in America. It is cold, sterile, almost hospital-like in its institutional surfaces and colors. Visitor flow is mechanical and joyless. You sense that you are entering a theme park or cruise ship when the first thing they do is guide you into getting your photo taken. This is not a gateway that sings; it's one that dislocates, ricocheting with the babble of entering visitors.





There is no defining message at this point for why this place exists, and no significant effort to prepare for entering a watery world. The designers tried to provide some feeling of descent with picture-window tanks full of parading jack fish on both sides of a narrowing hall that funnels visitors inside, but it doesn't work well because it is so out of place with the overall feel of entering a sports arena. You wonder why they didn't design the entire entrance area, outside and inside, as a huge ship plunging underwater, with the jack fish seen through large portholes.

Once inside a couple of "greeters" hand out maps, telling people they can plan their own tour, which is code for "percolating through our mall without help." (The last time I was there, they were telling people they could "do" the aquarium in 1 ½ hours.) The new arrivals find themselves in a large two-story central court full of eating tables surrounded by provocative exhibit entrances: Ocean Voyageur, Tropical Diver, River Scout, Coldwater Quest, Georgia Explorer, and Dolphin Tales, plus the ubiquitous cafeteria and gift shop. The exhibit titles bear the promise of adventure, but in reality turn out to be mostly titillation masquerading as interpretation.

The River Scout, for example, is a series of imaginatively displayed species chosen for their visitor appeal rather than their contribution to any overall interpretive outcomes: piranhas, electric eels, colorful "aquarium" fish, poison frogs, albino alligators, snakes, river otters, etc. Overhead tanks provide the illusion of being under a river at various points, while crawl spaces for the kids provide the illusion of being interactive.

There are a half-dozen different types of signs scattered throughout this exhibit, primarily focusing on identification and enumeration, with a sprinkling of conservation messages.

One suspects their placement and variety of styles indicates repeated attempts by the staff to either add some meaningful information or guide behavior. Neither succeeds.

BAD DESIGN PRODUCES SIGNS.

The idea that you are a "river scout" is picked up on tangentially by posted clipboards holding "Field Notes" on the creatures in a couple of tanks, but that's all the exhibit does with the idea. At another point, there's a subtitle about "Freshwater Mysteries," but there's no indication of what those might be, and they are never mentioned again. Today, exhibit designers just add tantalizing titles and subtitles like this with no intention of doing anything with them. They become little more than background wallpaper, or something akin to seasonal decorations in a shop window, and no one seems to mind.

The naturalistic settings of the aquarium's exhibits are exceptional and must instill a certain amount of awe for the planet's watery habitats and their creatures. But you never really feel that such waters cover most of the planet. They are just super-sized tanks that you are looking into – giant versions of those you once had in your bedrooms and classrooms. All the other exhibit "galleries" are similar in style and substance: much ado about nothing. As spectacle, it is hard to beat the Georgia Aquarium; as interpretation, it is hard not to. There's just not much there.

Imagine this alternative. Instead of finding a shopping mall court, the visitors enter to discover an enormous three-dimensional model representing the planet's various landforms associated with water. A 20' high mountain in the middle is sculpted in hills and valleys as it slopes down to the surrounding seas. There are actual rivers and waterfalls, lakes and ponds, various kinds of wetlands, and both frozen and

sun-drenched shorelines. On one side the landscape is blanketed with temperate forest, on another, rainforest. One side becomes barren and ice-covered, while another sprouts palm trees.

A costumed guide walks around on this model explaining the movement, temperature, and amount of water in each area:

"The Georgia Aquarium exists to celebrate the watery communities and creatures that share their homes with us. Never forget: as landlubbers we are guests in their watery world. Most of this planet's surface is covered by water and most of its 'passengers' live in it."



Periodically, clouds suspended from the ceiling of the open court release appropriate amounts of rain as the guide walks (and climbs) from area to area, while explaining the movement of water on Earth. Thunder and lightning, wind and rain, plus hot and cold air herald the changing conditions.

As the guide enters each new climate area on the model, she changes a part of her costume – a different kind of umbrella, a new coat, etc. – and her behavior changes accordingly:

"Gosh, it's cold here. When you see our Beluga Whales in the Coldwater Quest just over there, remember how cold it is where they live."

Occasionally, the guide reaches into one of the areas where water moves or collects and plucks out a creature that visitors will be able to see later as they explore the various aspects of our watery planet in the exhibits surrounding them. *"Don't miss seeing this little beauty when you check out Earth's rivers and lakes in the 'River Scout.'"*

The guide could even pick up a couple of plastic bags and bottles floating up on shore, although Coca Cola might object since the Visitors Center for this behemoth is next door and the company gave the land for the aquarium. Of course, the guide could have some fun with this and pick up a Pepsi bottle instead.

Such an introduction could provide context for the watery habitats highlighted and the natural processes that shaped and molded them, instead of being circus wagons, albeit highly naturalistic ones, surrounding the open court. A collection place, in this case a collection of animals that live in water, should help visitors grasp the language of place, but what is the language of rivers and oceans and reefs, and how are they "dialects" in the language of Earth itself? Just as Coca Cola is a product of place and process, so are the creatures of this watery planet. But here they are viewed almost as brands themselves – the iconic rather than the structural.

One of the most disturbing parts of the aquarium is its dolphin show. Everyone connected with this amateurish production should be embarrassed. And subjecting the poor caged dolphins to this kind of banal display should be a criminal offense. This is an off-the-rack show gussied up with bits of audience participation, plus special sound, water, and lighting effects; led by an energetic cast trying valiantly to act and sing its way through a hokey storyline. (You have to feel sorry for the human performers as well as the dolphins.) It is hard to believe how lame this is until you see it for yourself. This is neither interpretation nor education. It is not even good entertainment. It's using captive animals for mere human diversion.

The Georgia Aquarium is not about the Earth's precious liquid of life, but about displaying and identifying some of

the more entertaining creatures that inhabit it. Surely, one doesn't sense that the planet's waters are in deep ecological trouble because of the human impact upon them. On the contrary, from what you see in the aquarium, they seem to be thriving, and that's a great loss.

For years the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California was a shining star in the aquaria firmament. It is revealing to go there today and compare what you see with what's been done in Georgia. Monterey Bay seems to be more and more dominated by aquatic-themed play areas for children, while the Georgia Aquarium is more and more about using aquatic creatures for spectacle and show. P.T. Barnum would be proud; professional interpreters should be troubled.

