



DESIGN

BY ZAHID SARDAR

Swimming With the Big Fish

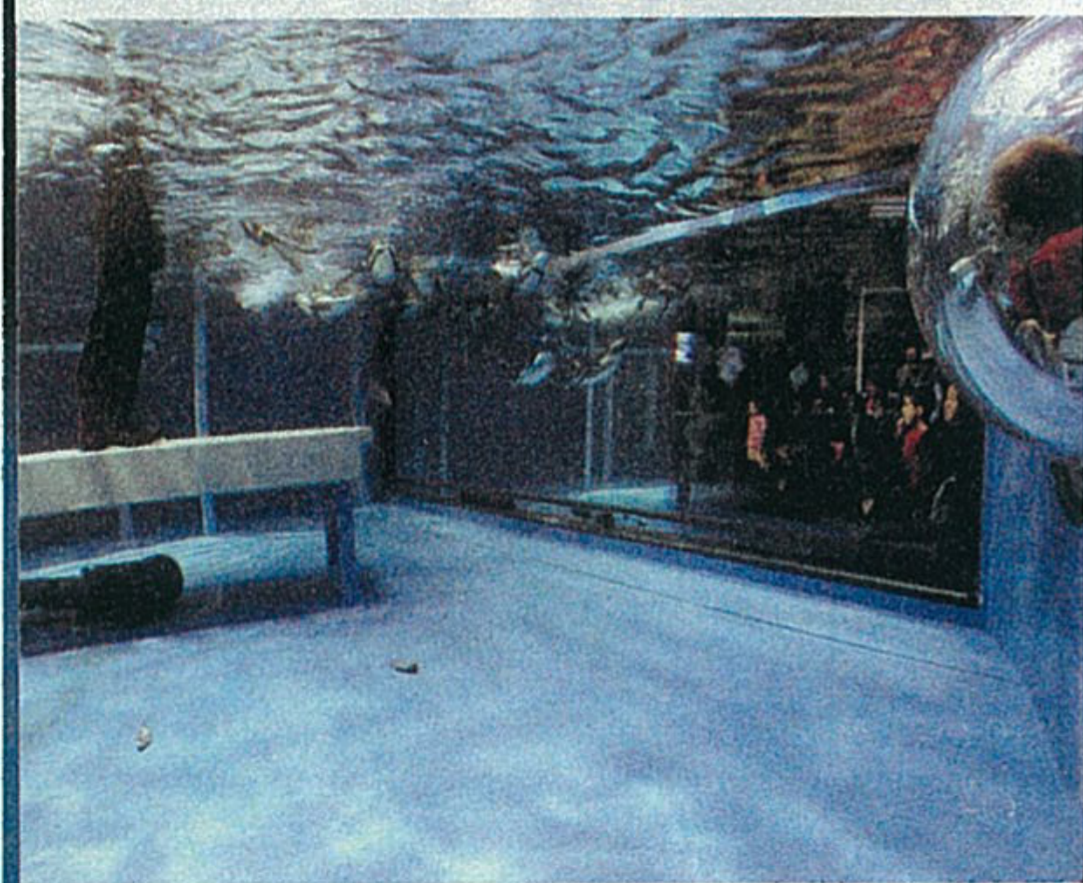
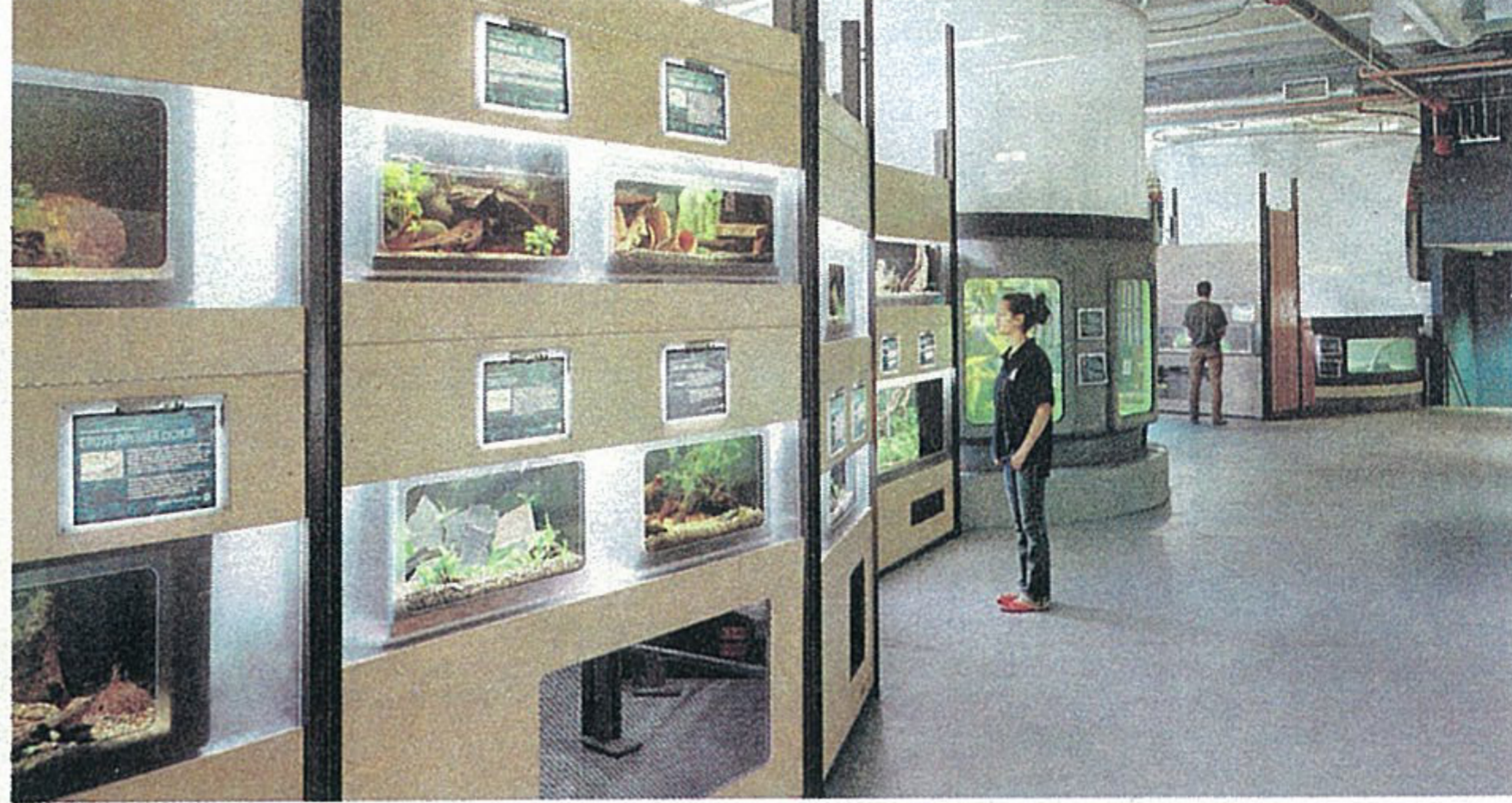
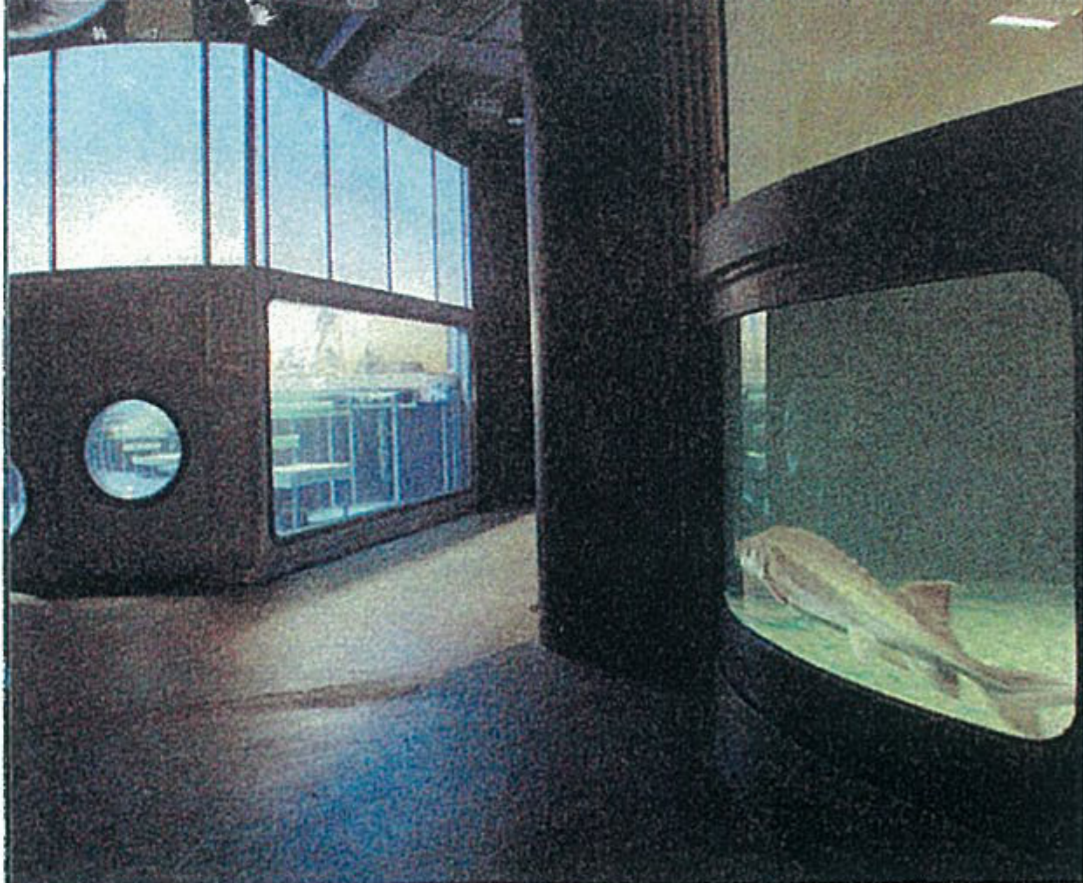
Designer Tom Fienes' temporary Academy of Sciences presages wonders to come



Facing page: Ssssnake Alley's bentwood slats form a slithering display corridor for terrestrial and arboreal snakes at the temporary academy. This page: Near the snakes, one of the cylindrical storage tanks converted to a display case with a cutout window. A nylon scrim overhead foils leaping fish.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD BARNES

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Top to bottom: The new South African penguin habitat, shown from outside and inside, engages children. Top right: Informative illuminated placards complement most displays.

Like picture postcards alive with messages, designer Tom Hennes' new windows cut into recycled cylindrical storage tanks and aquariums with acrylic scrims beckon the viewer several leagues under the sea. The tanks are topped with Lycra fences to net leaping fish.

The temporary exhibits of giant fish, deep sea creatures and reptiles — condensed from 26,000 square feet to 12,000 square feet — are so absorbing, with sparkling, illuminated text panels, that it is hard to imagine them as transplants from the dank, murky Steinhart Aquarium at the California Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park. The original building — which housed the aquarium, a natural history museum and the Morrison Planetarium — is undergoing an unprecedented rebuilding and extension designed by Pritzker-winning architect Renzo Piano.

In the six-story SoMa warehouse that will be the academy's home for the next four years, "We've tried to show water as life," says Hennes, founder of Thinc, a New York exhibition design firm. Walls are painted a marine blue, and ocean-bed gray floors mitigate daylight that spills in from streetside windows. Hennes, once a lighting and set designer for off-off-Broadway productions, adds a sense of theater. Because of the lack of space, he decided (in collaboration with academy biologists) to thrust the behind-the-scenes care of 6,000 animals center stage. Holding tanks now double as display cases; yellow catwalks from tank to tank and seismic braces liven the industrial design but also provide top-side views of the animals during feeding times.

"The new academy will have more tools to see connections between exhibitions," says Hennes, who provided one computerized wall for information. He wants people to understand links between geography and evolution. Thinc hopes to develop a display that allows even sightless visitors to feel fish swimming past a thin membrane wall. "But we are also designing

for the well-being of animals," he says.

New three-story high coral reef tanks, a touch tidepool and special habitats for South African penguins (with lighting that mimics the diurnal cycle of South Africa so that they can molt on a regular schedule) are all prototypes for the new academy. Ssssnake Alley, constructed with curved wooden slats under a sinewy arbor for snake exhibits, is also practical. Arboreal snakes are placed higher, and terrestrial snakes in glass cases set closer to the ground are low enough for toddlers to get a better look.

Among many impressive international projects Thinc worked on, one theater experience called "Manatees — the Last Generation?" for SeaWorld of Florida gave the audience a sense of being underwater, surrounded by manatees. For the academy, Hennes wants to go beyond such thrills.

"I want to open new ways of seeing," he says. "I used to think immersion like the park experience was enough, but that's only part of it. The real goal is to understand what people think about years after they experience an exhibit. What will they remember?" he asks. An avid naturalist and a teacher, he wants "to sensitize children to the natural world."

Hennes doesn't believe natural history museums do that. Instead of a "hall of wonders" with old-fashioned dioramas, he wants to emphasize interactive displays like those at the Aquarium.

"Exploration is great for piquing curiosity," he says. "When you do that, people stay longer. They come every year, every month, and sometimes every week." ♦

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