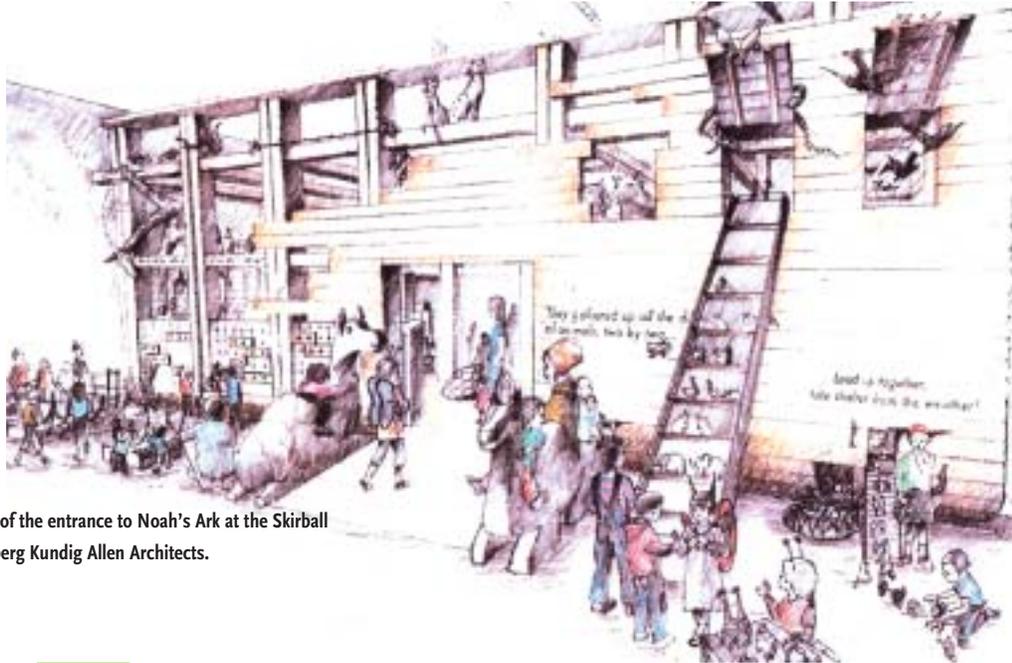


The Making of Noah's Ark at the Skirball™



The Asian elephant presides over the entrance to Noah's Ark. Almost all of the materials used to make the elephant are Asian in origin, including a gong from Thailand, vegetable steamers from Laos, handmade Lokta paper from Nepal, and bronze Thai rain drums engraved with decorative elephants. The deer sports shoe horns as ears. The elegant, endangered Grevy's zebras are fabricated from wind turbines and keyboards.

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An early sketch of the entrance to Noah's Ark at the Skirball by Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects.

Noah's Ark at the Skirball is a feat of artistry and engineering. The architecture, exhibition design, and special effects are the result of intensive collaboration among a dedicated team of educators, architects, artists, and designers.

AN ARK COLLECTOR'S INSPIRATION

Several years ago, Skirball founding president and CEO Uri D. Herscher visited with Skirball trustee and philanthropist Lloyd E. Cotsen at his home. There he encountered an extraordinary folk art collection of more than 120 Noah's Arks from around the world, lovingly acquired over many years by Cotsen, who recently generously gifted the collection to the Skirball.

The story of Noah's Ark—with its universal message of the need to shape a future together—seemed just right for the Skirball. "It is truly the story of humankind, a story of hope and second chances," remarks Herscher.

CREATING AN ARK

With a story in hand, the Skirball team—Sheri Bernstein, Marni Gittleman, Myna Herscher, and Robert Kirschner—embarked on a five-year mission to build an ark. In consultation with Moshe Safdie, the architect who designed the Skirball, they handpicked forty architectural firms from around the country to submit design proposals, guided by concepts like soulfulness, whimsy, creativity, and innovation. Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects won the competition with a compelling proposal that featured a live olive branch embedded in the presentation case. Based in Seattle, the firm is known for designing civic and residential buildings with a deep respect for nature. This would be their first children's museum project.

One of the biggest decisions the team faced was whether and how to depict the character of Noah. In the end, everyone agreed that the role of Noah would be played by each visitor.

"We wanted to focus on the dignity and potential of every individual," says Sheri Bernstein, director of education and project director of Noah's Ark at the Skirball, "and to instill in children and families a belief in their ability to make a difference in the world."





“In our world of high technology and plastic toys, the reminder of humble materials built with people’s hands—and not a machine—is important. It helps us realize that our roots are in the natural world.”

—Jim Olson, architect



BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME: THE ARCHITECTS BEHIND THE ARK

A well-designed object—think of scissors or a wheelbarrow—needs no instructions. Noah’s Ark at the Skirball has no wall labels telling visitors what to do, yet each day the galleries come alive as children eagerly explore every crank and pulley, crawlspace and catwalk, loading ramp and climbing wall. Coyotes are calling, wind is howling, rain is pouring, and children are not just reacting to such effects but are themselves the actors who create them.

“One of the best ways to engage people and have them grasp the issues being covered in the exhibit is by approaching it from a variety of different levels,” says Alan Maskin, principal of Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects. Maskin, head of its exhibition design studio, has a background in early childhood education. “You do not just see it, but you can touch it, you can hear it, you can feel it.”

Filling 8,000 square feet of gallery space, Noah’s Ark accommodates up to 125 visitors at a time. “At the very beginning we did a lot of research on the real ark, Noah’s Ark,” explains Jim Olson, who founded Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects in 1966. “The Bible actually spells it out and it was bigger than a football field. To a little kid, the real ark would have been like a city block full of buildings. It was huge.”

To create a feeling of spaciousness, the architects used hidden mirrors and techniques such as separating the elements of the ark from the building so it appears to “float” in space. The principal building material, as it would have been in biblical times, is natural wood.

The gallery walls feature life-size silhouettes of animals on the move; graphics by Ed Andrews of Somelab.



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A hedgehog sports surgical tubing (though it looks like pasta!) for quills, metal thimbles as eyes—and a smile.



"In the first room," Olson notes, "visitors experience the ark before the flood—raw lumber, under construction, new. In the second room, as after a long journey, the wood is weathered, like driftwood. There is also a human element here that is very important. In our world of high technology and plastic toys, the reminder of humble materials built with people's hands—and not a machine—is important. It helps us realize that our roots are in the natural world."

Like the Skirball, says Olson, the firm is also values-driven. Olson explains, "We like to take every project and make a better world in one way or another.

This one is so important because children's lives are just beginning and the influences they have at a young age really do make a huge difference."

BRINGING ANIMALS TO LIFE

The ark and its nearly 400 animal inhabitants—from plush toys to sophisticated and sometimes witty puppets and sculptures—are designed to appeal to both children and their adult family members alike.

Maskin worked closely with Brooklyn-based artist Christopher M. Green and designers at Lexington, the custom fabrication house which generated the technical plans and added its experience and creativity to crafting the exhibits and animals.

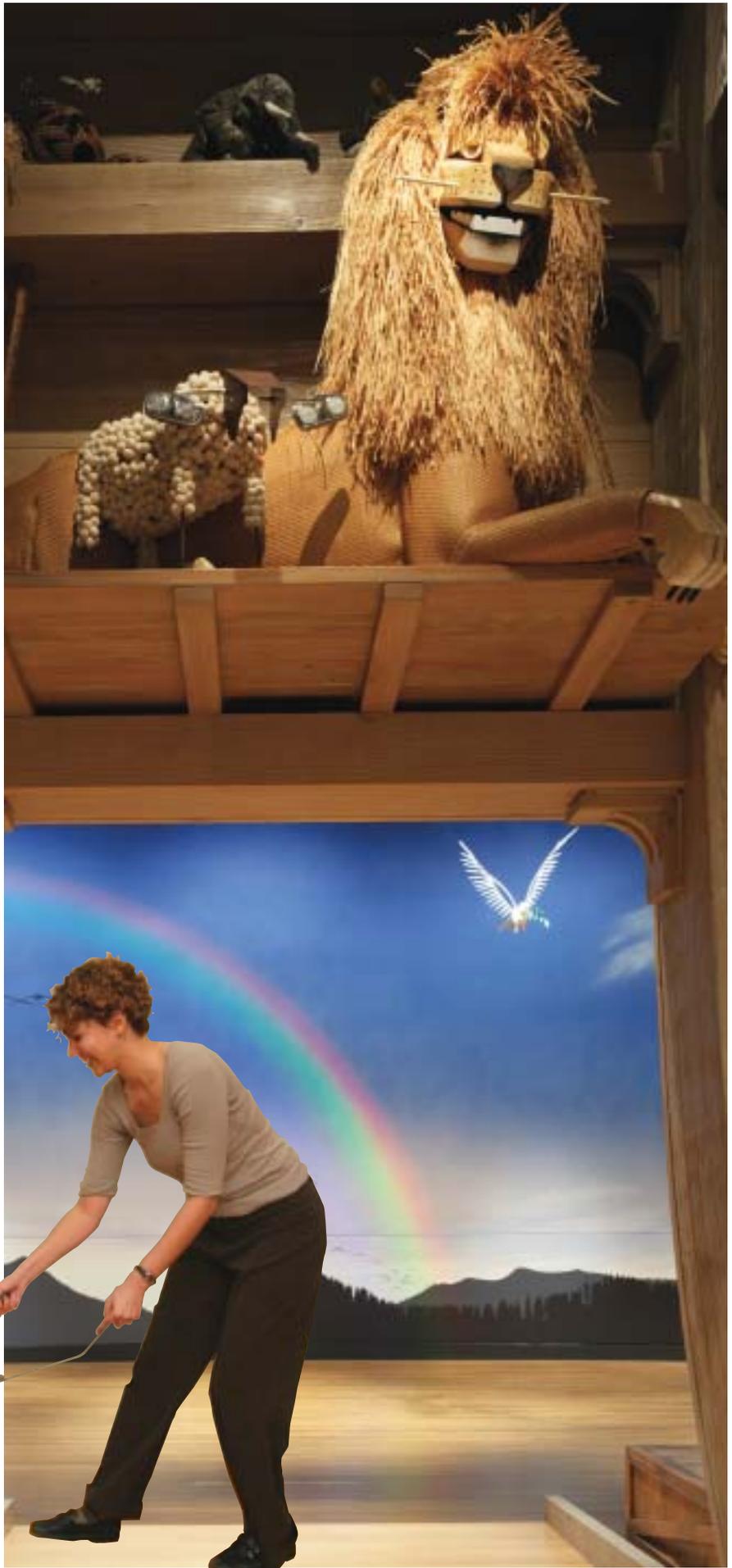
With a background in the rich tradition of puppet theater, Green created the large, kinetic, “foreground” animals that actively engage visitors to the Noah’s Ark galleries.

Green says of his hands-on creations, “The inspiration just really comes from stuff, just going out and walking through an antique store and being like, those are ears! And so I bought the shoehorns and put them on the deer. And I picked up a boxing glove and knew its shape could form the body of a kiwi bird.”

Besides durability, the kinetic sculptures and puppets had to be transparent (ensuring that visitors would be able to see the parts that make up the whole and how they operate); sustainable (using mainly recycled or repurposed materials); and safe (preventing potential harm or injury to children).

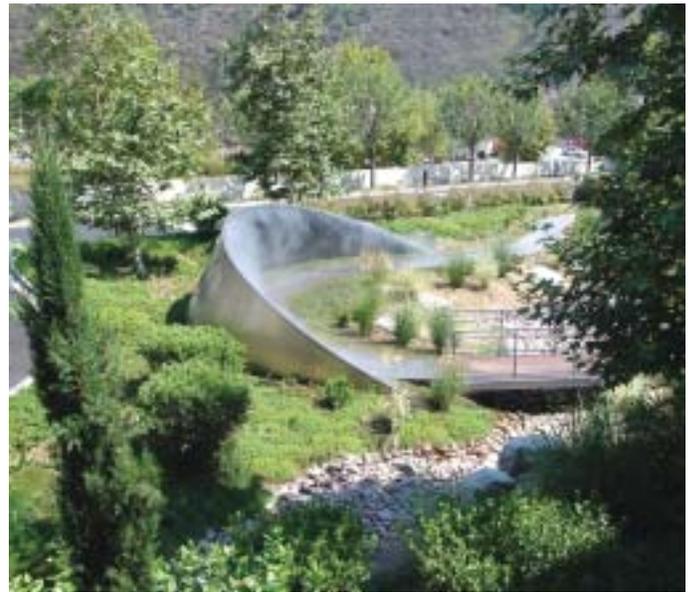
The Skirball and the project design team participated in spirited brainstorming sessions, with Maskin presenting sketches. Lexington fabricators laid out materials: catcher’s mitts for turtle shells, disco balls for elephant eyes, and fans for owl wings. Together they created the hundreds of fanciful animals that populate the ark, including visitor favorites like the Norway rats made of croquet balls and the iguana made from a handsaw.

Skirball educators operate the flamingo puppet fashioned from pink spools of thread, a pink handbag (discovered on E-bay), and fly swatters. Photo by John Elder. The lion and the lamb are perched above the gallery. The lamb is made of folded metal, bicycle rearview mirrors, tufted wool, steel reinforcing bar, and rust patina. The lion boasts straw as fur and chopsticks as whiskers. Gallery photos by Grant Mudford.



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BELOW: A reindeer is among the nearly 400 handcrafted animals aboard Noah's Ark. RIGHT: A view from the north of *Rainbow Arbor*. Photo by Ned Kahn.



MAKING RAINBOWS

Noah's Ark at the Skirball culminates in a unique interactive sculpture in the arroyo garden. Created by MacArthur Prize-winning artist Ned Kahn in partnership with Skirball

Cultural Center architect Moshe Safdie, *Rainbow Arbor*

(2007) extends the final thematic chapter of the Noah's Ark experience—rainbows—from the galleries into the great outdoors.

The curved metal form reaches twelve feet high and forty feet wide, rising from a base of smooth, gray rocks. Visitors approach the sculpture along a pathway and across a teak bridge, and are welcome to stand beneath its cool mist and to touch its perforated surface. At times of day when the sun shines directly on the sculpture, natural rainbows appear in the mist, inspiring a sense of wonder.

Kahn and Safdie wanted to look at the whole garden space as a cohesive environment. Kahn explains, "We asked, how can we make this more interesting and attractive, make it more than just an interstitial piece of land?" They spent time wandering around, listening to people's ideas and concerns, considering the landscape and drainage issues. "We wanted to create a real rainbow—an ephemeral, fleeting light pattern in the sky, not really there, transparent—so that you could actually wave your hand through it."

Kahn continues, "Of all the pieces I've ever done, I can honestly say that this one has been the most positively received by the public. Hanging out there, it's been sweet watching people—grown-ups as well as kids—interact with the piece. I saw a guy in his sixties walking in, spreading his arms out, raising his face up to the sky."

