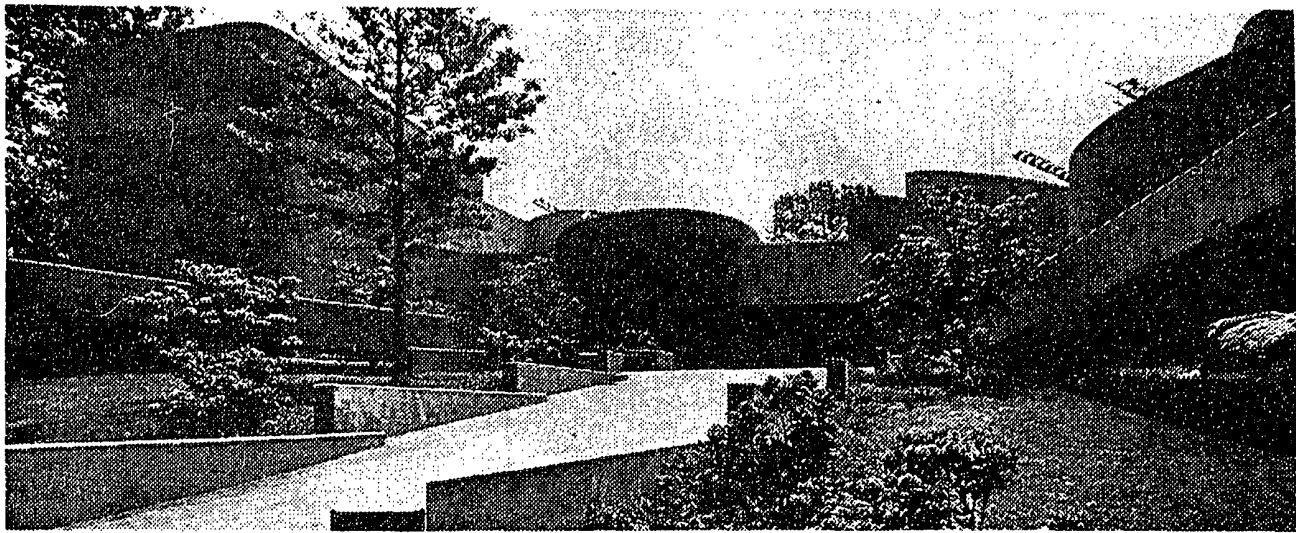


New Bronx Zoo Building a Rara Avis



Entrance to new World of Birds building at the Bronx Zoo. Concrete walls wrap around spaces of specific exhibits. The New York Times/Patrick A. Burns

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

There are no flies on New York's Bronx Zoo. It entertains, informs, instructs and proselytizes, and it uses the tool of architecture to do so with singular skill. The World of Birds, being officially unveiled this week, is the second spectacularly specialized exhibit building to be con-

structed by the New York Zoological Society in three years following the highly successful World

An Appraisal

of Darkness, for nocturnal animals, in 1969. After members' previews today and tomorrow, as part of the annual garden party, it will open to the public on Friday. The \$4-million structure is the gift of Mrs. Lila Acheson Wallace, co-founder of Reader's Digest.

These new buildings, both the work of the architectural firm of Morris Ketchum Jr. and Associates, demonstrates an extremely sophisticated policy of zookeeping and of architectural-ecological environment.

The Lila Acheson Wallace World of Birds has been developed in close association with the Zoological Society's general director, William Conway; the ornithological staff, including Joseph Bell and Donald Bruning, curators, and Jerry Johnson, curator of exhibits and graphic arts.

Both buildings are impres-

sive as art, science and theater. Together they add immeasurably to the unquenchable wonder and delight of this paradoxical city—so consistently capable of delivering the best that it bothers to do so only occasionally, and so rich in resources that it throws them away.

The zoo has been delivering the best and enriching its resources since 1898. It has a distinguished architectural tradition that began with a fine master plan in 1899 by Heims and LaFarge, one of the prestige architectural firms of the time.

The Ketchum office is doing the master planning today. (In contrast, the neighboring Botanical Garden has been going steadily architecturally downhill.) But zoo planning and building have changed radically from then to now.

The still-handsome Baird Court Promenade of 1901 to 1910, which provides entry after one passes through the beautifully scaled Paul Manship animal gates of 1934, is classical and formal. Its near-orange brick buildings with limestone trim have proper academic detail from Doric to Renaissance, and animal bas-reliefs. The complex presents one of the city's most pleasing urban vistas.

Some of the original elements of the scheme, such as

the Reptile House, the rebuilt Flying Cage, the Sea Lion Pool and the Rockefeller Fountain, are, as the zoo puts it, still "operational."

The elephants are in their old home, the Elephant House of 1908, south of the Baird Court, "a classical palace with a Byzantine interior," according to "A.I.A. Guide to New York City," "with a high dome and terra cotta decoration that could serve as the capitol of a banana republic."

New quarters now in planning will have less reference to past architectural splendor and more attention to natural habitat. But old buildings will be saved.

The new buildings, significantly, are a far cry from this kind of turn-of-the-century Beaux Arts urban landscape. They are non-buildings, in a calculated sense. And they have been carefully inserted in natural settings. The change has been from a museum of living things to a living ecology.

The World of Birds, deceptively monumental in photographs, fits the landscape with felicity—as it is meant to do. Form follows function in a meticulous packaging of the exhibition program.

The result is an asparagus-like bunch of cut-off cylinders, ellipses and free forms joined by ramps. The point, however, is not to create a

far-out monument, but an interior of simulated natural environments.

The rough-hammered concrete block walls actually wrap around the spaces of the specific exhibits, which range from Australian outback to tropical rainforest, complete with real waterfalls and audiovisual storms. It is surefire drama and painless education. And fun.

The ramps tie the exhibits together in a prescribed circulation pattern, from forest floor to treetop viewing. Skylights supplement natural illumination, making the building a hothouse for natural vegetation.

Several exhibits are open-fronted, and the viewing route leads directly through two of the most dramatic settings, with birds swooping around one's head.

This is stylish, dramatic and creative architectural problem-solving that adds an extra dimension of pleasure to the building's programed intent—to show birds in their varied natural habitats, functioning normally, so that the visitor shares and understands that world for a miraculous brief time.

Between the Heims and LaFarge buildings and the new construction there has been a revolution in zoological theory and architectural design. The World of Birds illuminates both brilliantly.