



SEA WORLD OF TEXAS

The story is very similar in the Great Basin - in the West, in the region of the Edwards Plateau. The earth is splitting apart there, quite possibly opening a seaway. It is not something that happened a couple of hundred million years ago. It only began in the Miocene (5-10 million years ago), and is going on today. - John McPhee, *Rising From the Plains*

In cyclic rhythm with the other rock was limestone. Here and again, the highway was running on this soft impure limestone. It was sea-bottom lime, from dissolved or fragmented shells, which had lithified at least ten thousand feet lower than it is now.

- John McPhee, *Basin and Range*



Shamu theme gate, main entrance to Sea World of Texas. John Redlinger, architect.

i o c e to Inland Scene

Peter Waldman

The geological basis of the Edwards Plateau, a vast limestone reservoir of water and energy that stretches west of San Antonio for several hundred miles, is the calcified sea life of a long-vanished inland ocean. In outcroppings that now dot the dry, scrubby landscape of Central Texas and whose quarried, fossil-imprinted stones today face schools, courthouses, and buildings of commerce across the state are the remains of a prehistoric marine culture. Sea World of Texas is a 250-acre complex of intensely commercial aquatic pleasure grounds recently set up on this formerly submerged lithic shelf to accommodate the popular culture of postdiluvian America. It is also a cornerstone of Mayor Henry Cisneros's economic development strategy for San Antonio - a \$170 million bet by its parent company, bookmakers Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., who previously wrought Sea Worlds in Orlando and San Diego before settling on the heartland of Texas.

Located 18 miles northwest of Alamo Plaza on the outskirts of San Antonio, Sea World seems certain to spawn myriad tributaries of lodgings and fast-food outlets. The grounds proper are prefaced by an asphalt sea of parking spaces, traversed at peak hours by super-scaled buses that deposit visitors at the five-acre entrance plaza, marked by colossal, high-tech arcades. The effect differs little from the approach to a somewhat flamboyant suburban shopping mall, save for the mist that comes each dawn from an all-encompassing sprinkler system, briefly activated to compensate for the natural aridity of the Edwards Plateau - the modern equivalent, as it were, of the *acequias* that once irrigated the Spanish mission city of San Antonio de Bexar.

Once within the compound there is much to choose from, with animals on the right and elysian fields on the left. One heads first toward the animal shows, whose monumental pavilions are easily recognizable from maps and whose entertainments adhere to strict timetables. One finds as well an unexpected treat in the modest urban condition of Cypress Gardens West, a *rambla* set in gardens whose modest scale contrasts with the purposeful monumentality of the four-pooled circus.

The pavilions of the four major shows - Shamu, New Friends, Beach Blanket Ski Party, and Spooky Kooky Castle - are dispersed and then connected up by streets and meandering paths. The pavilion and the street are two potentially powerful spatial typologies by which to construct a city, and the pavilions at Sea World, strongly grounded by passive bases cut deep into the flat ground and topped with tentative overhead canopies that compete with the low-hanging cumulus clouds, are most successful as monuments, having their own internal logic. The street, however, lacks a consistent logic that would make the trip between the variously distributed theaters worthwhile. Indeed, these mediocre passages raise the issue of why the animal shows were isolated from one another in the first place. The ancient civic typology of the forum and the economic discipline of the agora might well have been examined as models: the



Shamu Stadium.

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distinct spatial realms of the theaters might have produced urban vestibules, tensioned by the necessity for vendors, rest houses, and refreshment.

Shamu Stadium is the largest – 4,500 seats – and most powerful of the pavilions. Home for several killer whales, the seven-million-gallon pool system required a substantial cut in the ground, and the section is clearly revealed through windows in the tank's retaining walls. The stadium is partly covered by a geodesic dome and partly open-air; the stands form a theater in the round, the audience turned in on itself as in a flooded colosseum.

In Spooky Kooky Castle one encounters a more familiar setting, the traditional theater stage set. On stage, sea lions, walruses, and sea otters amuse viewers as they mimic their keepers and the TV-detective farces of the fifties. No less remarkable is the freedom of expression and the version of civic life that these animals choreograph for themselves in their own disciplined, quasi-urban environment backstage.

The other two stadiums vary the spatial typologies. The water-skiers' one-sided stadium sets up a strong orientation looking northeast toward Cypress Gardens West; a deep linear cut in the ground defines a strong meridian, pointing north. The effect of the scale (12 acres of water) would rival that of the Circus Maximus had the pavilion been located in a tight urban fabric of streets and shops. This extended stadium's potential strength is complemented by the opposing New Friends stadium. The latter's design is the major innovation of the San Antonio Sea World, according to John Redlinger, chief architect since planning began in 1985: it is the first multispecies facility of its kind, a concept that has since been retrofitted into former Shamu stadiums in the other Sea World parks. Here whales and dolphins are held in connected ponds before joining together in the choreography of "New

Friends," viewed by an audience of 3,000 sitting in the round. Together the four pavilions form coordinate points for the entire complex in terms of social and solar orientation, providing as well an awesome setting for Shamu at the western edge of this wilderness.

The penguin exhibit and the Coral Reef offer dramatic relief and are spatially and typologically distinct from the other pavilions. Strongly internalized volumes, they are dramatically lit from above. Given the strength of the sun outside, it is a relief to survey the polar world from spotlight darkness within the penguin exhibit hall, where it "snows" daily. Penguins and other polar birds are viewed first from a people mover in a delightful sequence of regimented orientation, then from a raised ramp where one has the chance to make one's own map, retracing steps to recapture points of vantage. The Coral Reef includes two huge tanks with reinforced glass walls, the larger containing a variety of sharks, sting rays, and sawfish, the smaller thousands of tropical fish.

The streets between the exhibits have the disappointing lack of intensity of a half-leased mall: too little activity scattered over too vast an area. With time, the street may fill in with future exhibitions. In the meanwhile, observing the beginnings of intermittent "lush" garden landscapes, one wonders why water has been stretched so far and so inconsequentially. The creators of Sea World might have learned from the Villa d'Este at Tivoli, where water is concentrated in orchestrated sequences rather than scattered in fine mists to create a thin veneer of green on the landscape. Judiciously placed fountains, water walls,

and demonstrative water theaters would have benefited Sea World far more than attempts to re-create a wilderness that never was.

Leaving the Coral Reef, I took a short detour through Cypress Gardens West. Named after the famous natural tropical gardens of Florida, these Texas gardens are a successful artificial landscape of shadowy dark green and rushing clear water. Here the visitor encounters a properly intimate foil to the vast pools that establish the "turf" of the animals on exhibit. Here one can sit beside rushing waters, stare into silent ponds, listen for echoes. In this concentrated 16-acre garden one finds both a systematic density and individual features that suggest an alternative model for the entire 250-acre park. Here people "ramble" in proximity to one another, almost as though responding to social and spatial conventions of an urban order. The concentration of shade and society, dominated by the sound of lively water, works as an oasis, an accessible mirage amidst the enduring grain of the limestone.



Nonaquatic mammals, Texas Walk. Above: Howard Robard Hughes, Lawrence Ludtke, sculptor, 1988. Below: William Barret Travis, Glenn Goodacre, sculptor, 1988.

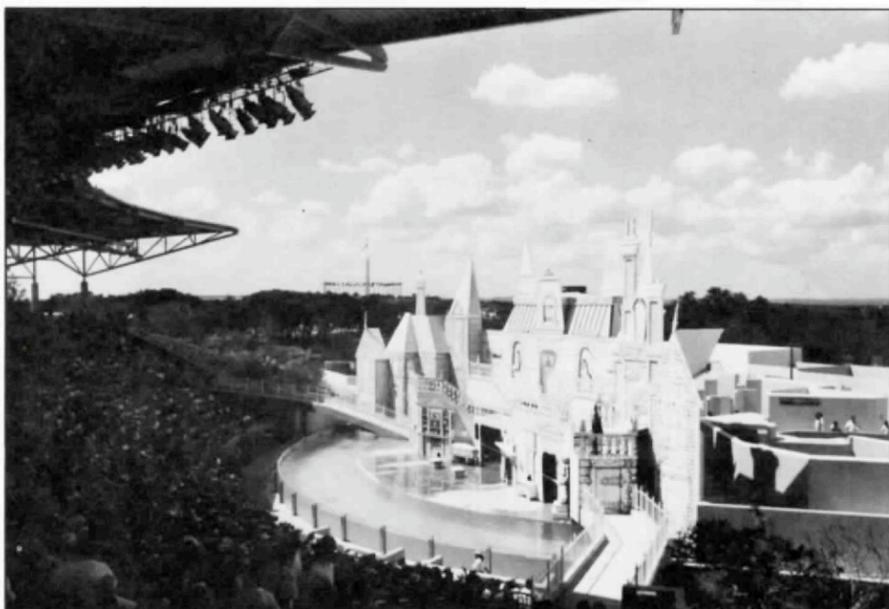
Today Americans partake of prosperity and amusement on a scale as big as Texas. It is only superficially anomalous that San Antonio, almost equidistant between the two oceans that limit the continent, is now home to the world's largest marine-life showcase. But here Sea World lies, with hidden logic, at the heart of what once may have been the greatest sea ever – an unintentional reclamation of geological time and a viable, if only partially realized, destination for late-20th-century travelers in the midst of one of the driest spells on record. ■



Cypress Gardens West.



Boy and a dolphin, Marine Mammal Pool.



Spooky Kooky Castle.



New Friends Stadium.