



England's largest zoo development project in Chester was designed by the Berlin architectural firm dan pearlman Experience Architecture.

Wild animals and rare plants, unique landscapes and distant cultures – there's much to discover on the Islands, which opened in phases this summer at Chester Zoo.

Once reaching Coral Sands beach on Panay Island you are immersed in the fascinating island world of Southeast Asia.

Here a team of conservationists has left some traces on Islands. During the expedition, visitors can encounter equipment, notebooks, sketches and observation posts.

On their journey they become part of the research team, discovering the uniqueness of this region's flora and fauna as well as learning a lot about their fragility and their treasures.

The immersive environment at Chester Zoo was developed by the internationally renowned Berlin architectural firm dan pearlman. For over fifteen years, dan pearlman has designed brand and leisure environments from its former factory floor offices in Berlin. In designing zoo and recreational facilities, creating a narrative is one of dan pearlman's strong suits.

"We tell stories by turning them into built reality", says CEO Kieran Stanley.

The architects' portfolio includes the unique master plan development of Hanover Zoo with its immersive environments including Yukon Bay, a fictional gold rush town and home to wolves, caribous, polar bears, seals and penguins; an amphibious safari through the Lost Valley at Everland Resort in South Korea; as well as both strategic development plans for Berlin's Zoological Garden and Tierpark amongst others.

In 2010, while looking for a strategic partner as part of its future development plans, Chester Zoo teamed up with dan pearlman. The first step was developing a master plan for the zoo located in North West England not far from Liverpool and Manchester. As the first project of Chester Zoo's expansion plan, which envisioned adding a new 74,500 m2 site, Islands quickly began to take shape.



Islands still under construction © Chester Zoo



Here, zoological requirements were not the only concern; aesthetic enhancements, strengthening the role of the off-season and greater operational efficiency are also tasks that zoos must confront more consequently in order to safeguard their futures. “We take an integrative approach”, explains Kieran Stanley, “which of course meant not only getting zoologists and curators on board right from the start, but also involving the zoo educators, facilities management, the marketing and communications team as well as personnel from F+B, services and merchandising.”

The architects had to develop a highly complex solution that takes all areas into account and comes together on an experiential level. Chester Zoo is one of the world’s best zoos and is a strong advocate for species conservation globally. This commitment – the zoo operates ten of its own endangered wild animal protection programmes and supports sixty additional projects – was to be showcased as the immersive environment’s primary focus.

dan pearlman developed a storyline that revolves around the Chester Zoo team of conservationists and centres on Southeast Asia, establishing a direct connection to the zoo’s conservation program. England’s largest zoo development project reconstructs the daily life of nature conservationists and gives visitors a chance to experience their work in a unique way.

Islands is modelled after the six islands of Panay, Papua, Bali, Sumatra, Sumba and Sulawesi. In order to make the immersive environment as authentic as possible from the beginning, an holistic approach, by architects, landscape architects and communication designers was developed, which not only involved the visitors moving by foot over land, but also foresaw a 450 m Lazy River boat tour.



Fourteen boats individually designed in Southeast Asian style can accommodate 238 people at a time for fifteen minutes of animal watching and enjoyment. “Deceleration, experiencing unusual perspectives and proximity to the animals are the main features of the boat ride”, says Kieran Stanley.

Lazy River boat ride



The architects designed and constructed a total of fourteen Indo-Pacific style structures as well as a variety of building types including stall facilities, visitor buildings, a boat station and several bridges down to the smallest detail. They were also responsible for designing the aviaries, the climbing structures and the extensive modelling of the terrain.

The Monsoon Forest represents a modern contrast and architectural highlight. The show house, designed from the ground up by the Berlin architects, stands out for its highly efficient form and function. Because only the roof is primarily visible from the outside, it blends seamlessly into the landscape. The roof's airy ETFE-membrane also allows the transmission of UVA and UVB rays, important for both animals and plants. Awaiting visitors inside is a jungle pathway flooded in daylight, a biotope with paths leading through various levels of rainforest, where occasionally it actually does rain.



Inside Monsoon Forest show house © Chester Zoo

personally involved will get excited about animal and nature conservation and hopefully become an advocate for the conservation of their natural habitats.”

With Islands dan pearlman has created a new habitat for orang-utans, macaques, hornbills, Sumatran tigers, crocodile and others animals. All twenty-two species living in the immersive environments, some of which are part of Chester zoo's actual conservation programmes, have been situated based on their actual geographical habitats.

Stunning views of the animals, including underwater views into the tiger or crocodile pools, transform the encounter for visitors into an emotional experience. “Our job was to create a setting that would allow visitors to experience the wildlife and the nature of Southeast Asia in an authentic and engaging way”, says Stanley. “Only someone who feels



Kieran Stanley | CEO dan pearlman Experience Architecture

What are your demands in planning a zoo?

“Every zoo is different and has its own unique signature. This is important to identify. In terms of a zoo’s strategic future direction, it’s important to develop a viable vision that takes into account all parties as well as the welfare of animals. At the beginning of a partnership I want to understand the zoo. What its goals are, what cultural background it has, what its priorities are, its zoological, educational and operational objectives.”

Why is the storyline, the creating of a narrative so important?

“Storytelling not only serves to create an emotional connection, it’s a strategic tool first and foremost. By engaging in dialogue with the parties involved I learn a lot about the requirements of the new design from the various points of view. Storytelling allows us to connect all areas and objectives with a narrative and to emphasize the zoo’s signature.”

Why were you fascinated by the Islands project from the very beginning?

“We were given the opportunity to create something completely new and unique on a site outside the existing zoo boundary. The idea behind Islands, an expedition that familiarizes visitors with the Chester Zoo’s conservation program, is extremely evocative. The people behind the project were also fantastic. Chester Zoo had a lot of trust in us.”

Ida Mai Hess | Project Manager Islands

What were the biggest challenges for you as project manager?

“Planning a zoo, especially a large-scale project like Islands with a volume of 40 million pounds, involves a great number of people from a variety of disciplines to achieve one goal.

As project manager it was my job to accommodate and coordinate the different ideas and wants of all parties. I was also the communicational interface between Chester Zoo’s project management team and the team at dan pearlman. The project was really very complex. In order to assure continuity in communication we travelled regularly to Chester and conferenced regularly via Skype or telephone. We were able to bridge the physical distance this way and succeeded in getting everyone around the same table so that we could come up with a unique solution.”



Björn Persche | Architect & Design Direction

Where does the idea for an immersive environment come from and how would you describe the creative process from the first sketches to the completion of the construction?

“Certain parameters, such as the types of animals and individual priorities, play a role in shaping a zoo’s direction. Even the hard facts such as enclosure sizes and restaurant floor space have to be considered from the start.



Once this is determined, extensive research follows. We have to know a lot about a region's landscape and architecture, the culture, traditions and its character in order to design the immersive environment as authentically as possible. In the beginning this means sitting in front of a blank page and putting down the first lines.

With every month, every internal and external meeting, the ideas and designs become more and more concrete. In executing the planning things get technical and very detailed. You focus on a specific aspect and don't lose sight of it during the planning phase – this is a challenge at times but also makes things fun. We're creating a world out of nothing, which is really great."

Gunther Gottelt | Architect

As an architect you were part of the construction supervisory team responsible for artistic supervision working on location in Chester. How do you ensure that the creative efforts of architects and landscape architects that go into the planning is maintained over a number of years and how do you make sure that it is properly implemented?

"It's important that everyone involved understands the ideas behind our planning – an appreciation of this usually generates added motivation. During the construction phase we made regular site visits, communicated our concept and got everyone involved. Good planning of this type is only completed once its implemented."

Julius Strauß | Landscape architect

A landscape resembling six different Southeast Asian islands was to be created on a 74,500 m2 site in North West England. This already sounds a bit mad. How does one go about realizing such an endeavour from the perspective of landscape architecture?

"Islands is a landscape driven experience and we focused on the layout of pathways and sightlines, the plantings and the use of different materials. Of course we had to adapt to the climate conditions and at the same time not lose site of the big picture.

We worked a lot with perennials that also grow well in Southeast Asia and palms, bamboos, giant rhubarb and tree ferns. The arrangement of the animal enclosures allowed to create a sense of landscape variety. Since we played around a lot with various colours, structures and surfaces, we were able to achieve perceptible shifts in impressions.

Now, shortly before the opening, everything is coming together. Particularly successful is the route of the Lazy River and the greenery alongside it – just like a river in the jungle."

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