

University of Massachusetts Amherst

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Alumni Profiles

Zoo Designer Focuses on Making a Difference



*Someone told me it's all happening at the zoo.
I do believe it, I do believe it's true.
—Simon and Garfunkel*

For Nevin Lash '78 (environmental design), owner with his wife Gail of [Ursa International](http://www.ursainternational.org/) (<http://www.ursainternational.org/>), truer words were never spoken. Based in Atlanta, Lash offers leadership in planning and building tomorrow's conservation and education facilities in zoos worldwide. "We design educationally-based exhibits, from great apes, bears and big cats to small monkeys, birds and reptiles. We take what we do seriously and know that it makes a difference in the world."

Currently Lash is involved in several projects. At Zoo Atlanta he is renovating and expanding the tiger exhibit he designed 20 years ago into a multi-species Carnivore Complex for Sumatran tigers, clouded leopard, sun bear and hornbill. Lash is also completing the design for phase two of that project, adding habitats for binturong, fossa, bush dog and coati. At the North Carolina Zoo, he is designing a major expansion of the polar bear exhibit. At the National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium in Dubuque, Iowa, he is working on a harborside plaza. "This is a bit outside the box for us," Lash says, "but we are slowly turning it into a 'zoo' project by adding a 'living stream' to the otherwise animal-free zone."

Lash notes that he tends to work alone—at home, away from the demands of a traditional design firm. "Gail's years as a zookeeper allow for preliminary reviews prior to presenting to my clients any ideas that might be questionable. If she buys it, I am more confident that my clients will too. If I can't get her support, it doesn't leave my desk."

Becoming a zoo designer isn't something that just happens. Lash began as a landscape designer, working for various land planners, landscape architects and architects in Philadelphia. "At one point I was even my own boss" he says, "with a design-and-build garden company until I joined Coe Lee Robinson Roesch that specialized in zoo design." As senior associate/project manager for the Zoo Atlanta redevelopment, Lash worked on the team that transformed the 100-year-old facility into a modern zoological park. "My world expanded ten-fold."

For ten years Lash fully immersed himself into creating award-winning exhibits and master plans at top US zoos: Brookfield Zoo, Denver Zoo, Woodland Park Zoo (Seattle), and others. Moving to Atlanta in 1993, he married the Zoo Atlanta biologist and began a more balanced life. A year later they formed Ursa International with a goal to help zoos plan and build improved animal facilities.

"Our first big commission was a new tiger habitat for the Dallas Zoo," Lash says. "We changed the 20 x 40 foot barred cage into a two-acre Thai bamboo forest, complete with Thai house, rice paddies, bamboo barriers and a modern holding and management center for up to seven cats. Since then we've worked on more than 50 projects at 30 institutions and in ten countries." including the Rome Zoo, Zoo Ljubljana (Slovenia), several projects for The Dian Fossey Gorilla Foundation in Rwanda, and work for Conservation International in Madagascar. Their Chimp Haven project in Shreveport Louisiana, done for NIH to house chimps no longer needed for research, offers a more humane and less costly environment than the regional primate centers. It is the only nationally funded primate sanctuary in the world.

"There is a deep relationship between the way a city thinks of itself and how they support their zoo and treat their animals," Lash reflects. "I've been working with Zoo New England for the past eight years. We rebuilt [gorilla] Little Joe's interior habitat so that he could safely rejoin his group after repeatedly climbing out of his enclosure. Besides

securing the habitat, we made it more enriching, adding lots of climbing opportunities, soft substrates and close-up viewing for visitors. Franklin Park is still one of the great missed opportunities for Boston and one that I hope will find an audience. It is one of the great U.S. cities without appropriate financial support for their zoo.”

Lash hasn't forgotten his UMass roots. “My college years were wonderful. UMass allowed me to create an individualized study program that made me into a lifelong learner. As a freshman I enrolled in “Global Survival,” an experimental multidisciplinary program. Our seminars and workshops explored the future and looked at harsh realities: overpopulation, energy, cross-cultural communications and environmental decay. My education was geared to a life of service and away from exploitive pursuits.”

During his second year, Lash participated in Earth School, another alternative education program. “Twenty of us arranged independent study within our majors as well as additional credits for our daily self taught seminars,” Lash recalls. “We lived cooperatively in a house in Washington, MA, invited UMass professors and professionals to come teach us, go for hikes, and generally learn from each other.”

That's when Lash met Tullio Inglese, an Amherst architect who specialized in integrating nature with culture. An internship with him opened new horizons. “Tullio was a great role model. He taught me about passive solar architectural design, environmental community planning, and a design process that included model building and full-size prototypes. I took a wide range of courses and studios offered in LARP as well as architectural coursework at Smith and Hampshire colleges.”

Being self-employed, Lash acknowledges, is conducive to a balanced lifestyle. “When I have work, I can work very hard and not waste time with office politics and administrative tasks. When I don't have work, I can relax and enjoy nature and culture, travel and home. We breed Coton de Tulear dogs, a rare breed from Madagascar. So we have lots of dogs and puppies in our big Victorian house.”

Lash loves interacting with students. He's been back to Amherst a few times to give lectures and participate in studios on zoo design, but he is also involved in university programs in Atlanta and Philadelphia. “I tell students not to focus on zoo design yet,” he says. “It's important for a landscape architect to get experience with a variety of projects. Zoo design is so wide ranging. To be successful requires lots of tools. Be a good designer first, a zoo designer second.”

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