



These Walls

The Oklahoma Aquarium

BY KIRBY LEE DAVIS
THE JOURNAL RECORD

TULSA - City of Jenks planners thought they had found a capstone for their downtown antique district.

While they have yet to reach their dream to extend Main Street to the Arkansas River, by building the 71,000-square-foot Oklahoma Aquarium they achieved much, much more. Even before it opened, the \$20 million waterfront museum spurred development of a new hotel and the RiverWalk Crossing shopping center in Jenks, ending the city's sales tax drain.

Paid for primarily with revenue bonds, the aquarium's construction and debut offered skeptics tangible evidence that riverfront development works, which helped inspire voters to approve Tulsa County's Vision 2025 revitalization project. An even bigger prize came last year with River District Development Group's plan for a \$1 billion lifestyle center just south of the aquarium.

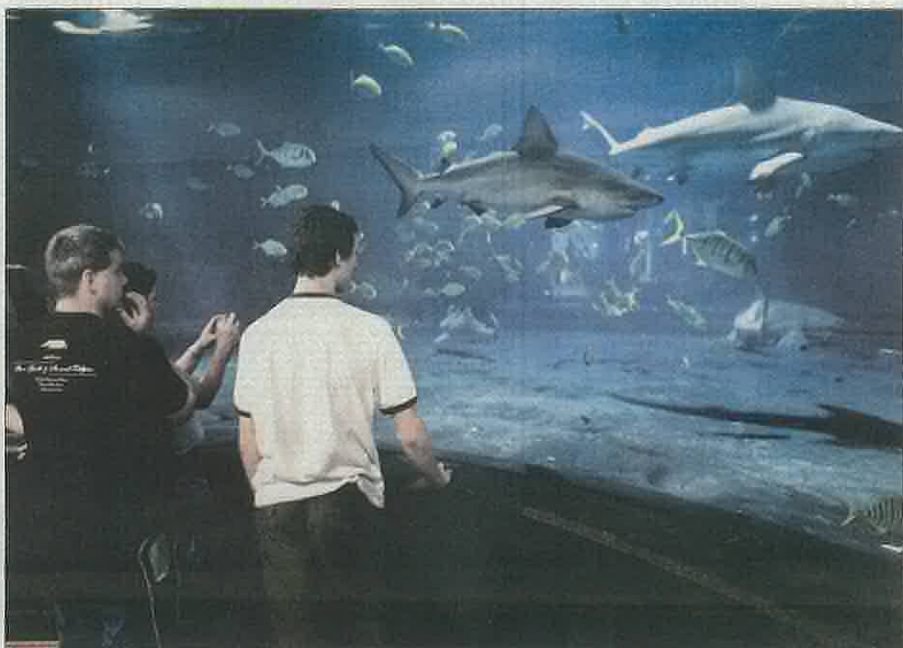
Now five years old, enjoying its strongest attendance since 2003, the aquarium district redefined regional economic dreams - a frustrating irony to many outside Jenks, since the museum directors had once targeted Tulsa's shores.

"I think it played a pioneering role, to sum it up," said Kenny Alexopoulos, the aquarium's director of science and mechanics.

The ball started rolling in 1984, when biologist Doug Kemper and physician Palmer Ramey Jr. scribbled notes on a napkin for an Arkansas River aquarium. Kemper, who has participated in similar projects in Seattle, Baltimore and New York City, nurtured the plans as Ramey helped form a supporting foundation. By 1992 they had proposed an 80,000-square-foot freshwater and marine research facility for Tulsa River Parks land, its 200-plus exhibits using 1.5 million gallons of water. But problems with finances and the targeted 71st and Riverside location sidetracked their efforts.

A welcome mat unrolled in Jenks, its city leaders seeking some way to plug the sales tax creep from their 20-square-mile community. Soon both sides saw the aquarium as a tourist magnet anchoring a new commercial district, broadening the Jenks economic base beyond its iconic antiques.

While city leaders developed a revenue bond package, and the aquarium foundation gathered millions from donors, architect Viviana C. Varnado with Gary Sparks Cos. (now Crafton Tull Sparks) crafted a downtown redevelopment program to extend Main Street to the aquarium site while implementing several cosmetic and infrastructure improvements. In studying the city's history and architecture, from its rustic train depot to the Jenks Chamber's white and green cottage home, she completed her plan with a new tower, as the gateway for traffic entering Jenks from the river.



A patron snaps a photo as others look on at an exhibit at the Oklahoma Aquarium in Jenks.

PHOTO BY RUF STELL



The Oklahoma Aquarium in Jenks is along the banks of the Arkansas River.

PHOTO BY RUF STELL

That tower's seashore styling carried over to the aquarium's multi-pinnacled design. Varnado outlined three buildings connected by covered walkways, each steel-framed structure hatched in white vinyl siding on brick, topped by an ever-green roof. The soaring entryway opens to

a restaurant, classrooms, offices and research space on the left, the exhibits and gift center to the right.

"Most aquariums are built one way, to follow the exhibits," said Varnado. "This aquarium is laid out so that you, as an observer, can choose your own path."

The highlight sits at the southern edge, a 450,000-gallon shark tank that allows visitors to walk under the water, shielded by an acrylic bubble made by Reynolds Polymer Technology of Grand Junction, Colo.

"When they brought it in, it fit perfectly in place," said Alexopoulos. "It was a perfect fit."

As The Ross Group of Tulsa finished the structure over an 18-month period, aquarium leaders found they had an unexpected asset in Alexopoulos. The biologist combined an artist's touch in crafting exhibits with a forger's skill to ornament them. He also engineered not just the displays, but many of their electronic systems, saving the aquarium millions.

"He's a regular Leonardo," said Varnado.

The 1-million-gallon Oklahoma Aquarium opened its 130 exhibits on May 28, 2003, garnering national acclaim and attendance of 500,000. That has since settled at about 400,000 per year.

This year the aquarium filled the last of its original 65,000-square-foot display space with the new Hayes Family Ozark Stream exhibit. That prepares the museum for its first physical expansion, a sea turtle exhibit.

"This year has been the best year we've had since we opened, which in today's economy is pretty remarkable," said Alexopoulos, who attributed the boost to higher gasoline prices and lowered vacation budgets.