



# Inklings

Bulletin of Interpretive Ideas

June 2004 Volume 4, Issue 2

## Current/Recent Project List

- Interpretive Sign and Brochure Design, Stormwater Management Demonstration Project, Porter County (IN) with *J.F. New & Associates*
- Interpretive Sign Design, Latimer Woods, Bloomington Parks and Recreation (IN)
- Interpretive Sign Design, Chilo Lock and Dam, Clermont County Park District (OH)
- Exhibit Planner, Chilo Lock and Dam, Clermont County Park District (OH), with *Lifespace Design*
- Exhibit Planner, Mansfield Mill, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with *Lifespace Design*
- Exhibit Planner, McCormick's Creek State Park, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with *Lifespace Design*
- Interpretive Planner, Lincoln State Park, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with *Lifespace Design*
- Interpretive Plan, Prophetstown State Park, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with *Lifespace Design*

## Interpretive Center Design: *Making It Functional*

When the opportunity comes for a new interpretive center, it is important to keep interpretation in mind during the initial planning stages. Questions to ask include:

- What is the interpretive theme for the center?
- How will the exhibits explain this theme?
- How much space will be required for the exhibits?

It is important to answer these questions before the building design process takes place. For example, if limestone geology is an interpretive theme at your site, a limestone wall that visitors can see and touch can be incorporated into the building design. If you would like a life-sized replica of a flatboat, display space (plus a way to get the exhibit through the door) needs to be part of the design.

### Other design considerations

**Traffic Flow.** Your exhibits must be designed with a progression of information based upon a unifying theme. Proper placement of walls and exhibits will ensure that visitors follow the intended path.

**Comfort.** You will not accomplish your interpretive goals if your visitors are uncomfortable. Visitors expect restrooms, drinking fountains, a cool place in the summer and a warm place in the winter.

**Entryway.** Glass doors create an inviting atmosphere by allowing visitors to see what's inside. A welcome/reception area with space to congregate sets the tone for a

positive experience.

**Windows.** Interpretive centers are frequently located in scenic places. Large windows providing wildlife viewing areas allow you to extend your exhibit options beyond the nature center walls. Beware of too many windows, however, as they eliminate exhibit wall space.

**Lighting.** Keep lighting versatile by using track lights. These can be redirected as exhibits change or are moved. Spotlights are also used to draw attention to a particular exhibit.

**Program Area.** You will need an indoor area for conducting programs.

Generally, more people attend indoor programs than hikes. If you intend to work with schools, your program area needs to accommodate at least 35 people. Consider movable seating rather than auditorium seating. This allows the room to have multiple uses such as workshops, meetings and demonstrations.

**Work Space.** The most frequent complaint from those who work in interpretive centers is that there is not enough storage and work space. This is because the interpretive center is also the headquarters for the interpretive service and their programs, not only exhibits. The tools of an interpreter are not easily stored (i.e., stuffed animals, artifacts, hornet nests). A lot of shelf space is needed. Design a work area with room to



*A view of the Ohio River from the Chilo Lock and Dam interpretive center enhances the site's theme: Living and Working with the Ohio River*



Inklings  
Interpretive Ideas  
P. O. Box 355  
Okemos, MI 48805-0355  
517/347-0861  
schools@voyager.net  
Lise Schools, Owner

prepare programs and workshops. In addition to a public reception area, an office that is off limits to the public needs to be incorporated.

If these aspects are considered before the building is designed, your facility and those who staff it will be more efficient. You will be able to provide your visitors with a high quality interpretive experience.