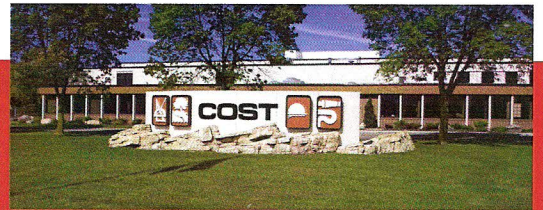


The Art of COST

by Martin Palicki



InPark's editor-in-chief does a little Midwestern bonding and pays a visit to COST of Wisconsin

Behind the fantasy facades and intricate rockwork that are integral to so many guest experiences at theme parks, waterparks, zoos, and casinos, there's a team of talented artists and artisans. Now in its third generation of family ownership, COST of Wisconsin (COST) has fine-tuned a specialized team to support the visitor attractions market with fabrication and construction services.

The company started out in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1957, creating rock environments for the Milwaukee County Zoo, and quickly began adding more construction services to its portfolio. As the company expanded in response to increasing demand, it moved from Milwaukee to Germantown and then to its current headquarters, Jackson (all in Southeast Wisconsin). Convenient shipping logistics are one of the advantages the company enjoys in its central US location. COST also has offices in Seattle, Orlando, and Winnipeg.

Touring the Wisconsin shop with Executive V.P. Lance L. Stanwyck, we learned that it covers 140,000 square feet and the company has

200 full time employees. The recent economic downturn has had an impact, but mostly in terms of which markets are flourishing. "We did a lot of casino work until 2007," said Stanwyck. But as that market slowed down, zoo and museum work started to increase. Stanwyck attributed the rise to revenue sources shifting from government funding to attendance fees. Zoos and museums have been upgrading their facilities, recognizing the need for more themed environments to entice visitors. [See InPark's AZA report on page 18 for more information about new exhibition directions at zoos and aquariums.]

The theme park market is also picking up. We saw solid evidence of this first-hand on the COST shop floor, in the form of giant Roman columns being fabricated. (They were later installed at the entrance of Six Flags Great America's new Goliath roller coaster.)

COST of Wisconsin divides up its core services into three groups: Fabrication (25%), Shop Drawings & Fabrication (50%) and Design/Build (25%). "Clients come to us for more than just building things," said Stanwyck.

The company is especially proud of its model work. Even with digital technologies advancing, oftentimes a scale model is still the best option for determining how an area will look and function when complete. Scale models are not only used for approvals, they serve as a construction tool for fabrication and construction. "Knowing a project works in model form saves cost and time down the line," said Chris Foster, VP, Sales and Marketing.

The company also uses technology to supplement artistic skills, recently acquiring a 5-axis cutter to carve out complex designs. But will there be a time when the artist disappears from the equation? Could 3D printing change the formula? "The blending of artistry with technology is a great marriage," said Stanwyck. "We will never get to the point where artists are not necessary. Whether the artist carves a model or the final piece, you still need an artist."

On the consumer side, Stanwyck feels the technology we all have in our pockets has changed things. Our cultural attention shift towards phones has led us to interact directly with one another less. But it seems that has, in an ironic way, helped boost the demand for high-quality fabrication and sculpture. "The most popular attractions are those where guests move through an actual environment," said Stanwyck. "A virtual stimulus is never as effective as a natural one."

That enduring need for placemaking has helped COST of Wisconsin survive and thrive over more than half a century of doing business. The team at COST also credits their focus on pleasing the customer as a major factor in the company's success. As Jon J. Stanwyck, president of COST says, "If the client's dream is met, then my goal is accomplished." ...

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