

# the house of weber

the story of two brothers merging architecture and engineering to create a dynamic creative firm in Louisville

by Martin Palicki

**Q:** What do volleyball, Tomb Raider, and Indiana all have in common? **A:** They all came together unexpectedly to help grow The Weber Group into a successful design-build firm in the themed entertainment industry. The Louisville, Kentucky based Weber Group received the contract to fabricate gigantic props for the Tomb Raider attraction at then Paramount's King's Island. The studio provided props from the movie for Weber to replicate, except the ride pieces were 60 ft tall, exceeding the height of the company's current studio.

The company's two principals, brothers Donny and Tom Weber sought out a new location and found one in nearby Sellersburg, Indiana. An indoor volleyball center was closing and was looking for a buyer- fast. The location had ample office space and a spacious workshop area, with very high ceilings. The Tomb Raider props fit in perfectly, though these days you are more likely to find a giant lupine sculpture for a Great Wolf Lodge or a bulbous baobab tree custom built for one of the company's many zoo clients.

But even before the volleyball facility move, Donny and Tom were well on their way to building the company. The two started the company in 1983 after receiving their architecture degrees a few years prior. Initially, they offered design-build solutions for clients, but found that the idea was a little ahead of its time. So they split the company into two groups, one focused on design and architecture and the other on fabrication and building.

Shortly thereafter they met the developer who had just started to grow Kentucky Kingdom from a 10-acre park into a 50-60 acre property. In 1992, Tom and Donny sold the company to that developer, and worked for him as a department within the park for five years. That work, planning and building out all facets of the park, was their education into the theme park industry.

When Kentucky Kingdom was sold to the Six Flags brand, they started up the company once more. They immediately began a fruitful working relationship with Six Flags' management team, completing projects for many of their parks. By this time, the concept of a design-build firm was becoming more popular, and The Weber Group took advantage of that trend.

Weber Group blossomed from there, and continued to do work with companies like Paramount, Great Wolf Lodge, Cedar Fair, Herschend, and Nickelodeon. They also started branching out into museums, zoos, resorts and waterparks as well as continuing their traditional design build practice in commercial environments and multi-family housing.

"We owe a lot of our success to picking clients who have done well, and provided sustainable



Kids (and a few adults) splash and play at The Louisville Zoo's Calistoga Splash Park, designed and built by The Weber Group. Photo by Robert Kemnitz, courtesy of The Louisville Zoo.



Weber Group designed and built the station's themed exterior and props for Six Flags Great America's new attraction, *Buccaneer Battle*. Photo courtesy of Six Flags.

growth," said Tom Weber. Although he admits not every decision has been the best. He points to their decision to not work with the fledgling soup and sandwich shop now known country-wide as Panera Bread.

These days, the company focuses on three areas of business: themed and branded entertainment, traditional commercial design build, and facility maintenance. The combination has helped to even out the stability of the company during boom and bust economic periods. Although more and more, Tom and Donny are seeing the different disciplines come together. According to Donny Weber there is "lots of potential for branding. Branding can be applied to virtually everything."

"We are creating memories for people," explains Tom Weber, "by making environments and experiences that stand out."

For example, Weber recently designed and installed a giant Baobab Tree and other immersive elements at the Cincinnati Zoo New Main Retail Store. The tree was fabricated in their plant, disassembled and rebuilt on site, perfectly integrated with existing supports and structural beams. Weber also created the Columbus Zoo Polar Playground as part of the Polar Frontier Exhibit.

The company was also responsible for the theming of the station house for Six Flags Great America's *Buccaneer Battle* attraction. The building, designed to look like a fortified pirate's hiding quarters includes cannons, crumbling walls, and period architecture. The station sits as the anchor of the ride's impressive theming, which takes riders on an interactive and wet journey.

The Weber Group also recently purchased a state of the art 5-axis mill router and 360 degree

scanner allowing them to create custom characters and sculpts with exacting precision. The new piece of equipment and a video of it operating can be seen in the company's website, <http://www.webergroupinc.com/customcuts.php>.

The mill router was a significant investment, especially given current economic conditions. But when asked about the future of the industry, the brothers aren't worried. "We have always known this industry is about change, and we constantly have to morph ourselves to meet new potentials," explained Donny.

"Yes, we need to maintain a certain level of quantity of projects," says Tom, "but we are really here to increase the level of quality on projects. At the end of the day, we just want to be able to say we've helped create something fun."

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