

# LIVING SEASHORE

## BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

AIA BALTIMORE EXCELLENCE IN DESIGN AWARDS

*Category: Cultural/Institutional*

Living Seashore is an interactive exhibit at the National Aquarium of Baltimore that gives visitors the opportunity to go explore the shore and touch the animals that live between the tides. The habitat was designed to replicate the wondrous beaches and waters of the Mid-Atlantic seashore. The exhibit spans 2,700 sf and contains 5,331 gallons of saltwater, which is home to 20 species and 150 animals.

The project goals and challenges included:

- Designing a new exhibit that embodies the Aquarium’s new brand “to engage, connect and inspire guests through personalized and relevant experiences.”
- Transform a formerly dark, small and underutilized back of house space into a state-of-art exhibit providing hands-on and real-world experiences to promote exploration, discovery and environmental awareness.
- Introduce a variety of interactive components – touchpools, integrating media and living exhibits – where guests can interact with animals, Aquarium staff and each other.
- Create an environment that support the Aquarium’s conservation goals and operational procedures to improve animal care, particularly in touchpool exhibits.

As guests enter Living Seashore, a tall sand dune with beach grass, seaside goldenrod and other native plants, welcomes guests with a glimpse of rays swimming in a curved acrylic touchpool, vivid murals and sounds evoking a day at the beach.

Just beyond, a textured “slice of the beach” invites guests to touch seashells, seaweed and other objects. These living exhibits help guests connect what is washed up on the beach to the animals that live there.

Flip panels and videos encourage guests to “dig”—move parts of the wall—and discover where objects come from and their importance to a healthy beach ecosystem.

In the beach area, guests can turn objects over using interactive touch tables to explore the beach or play a scavenger hunt. Text, images and videos bring inanimate objects to life – bird feathers, egg cases and seashells. A beach scene mural takes guests visually to the water’s edge and extends the space. Lively images of children playing in the sand, shorebirds and fishermen trigger memories of time spent at the beach.

A large, stunning cylinder displays the sandy seafloor environment. Two digital 15-inch touchscreen monitors and multiple layers of family-friendly content identify animals, foster conversation and help guests build powerful connections to exhibit animals.

An expansive floor to ceiling mural reveals an abundance of life thriving in our local waters. The underwater scenes provide a contextual backdrop for interpreters and the glowing window on the touchpool of pulsing moon jellies. Mixed media gives a sculptural effect to each mural. Textured layers compliment tactile/dimensional elements throughout the gallery.

Dappled, blue light sweeps guests deeper under water as the ocean shelf descends. A long rectangular touchpool filled with translucent, pulsing moon jellies draws guests over where Aquarium interpreters engage guests in conversation and handling instructions.

Three sleek digital touch screens invite guests to make a personal pledge to celebrate and protect our resources. After pledging to take action, guests can look for their name on a projected “Wall of Shore Heroes.”

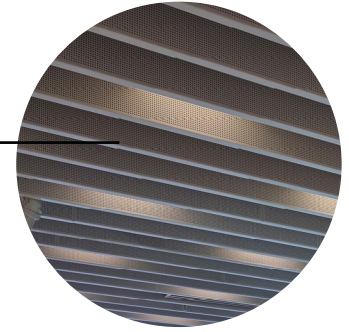


A shift in exhibit design pedagogy aims to fully immerse guests by creating an environment that blurs the line between habitat and gallery. The gallery unfolds as an interwoven series of events along the cross-section of the beach, from the dune binoculars, to the wet sand tactile wall, to the main touchpool and finally to the jellyfish.

## LIVING SEASHORE GALLERY OVERVIEW



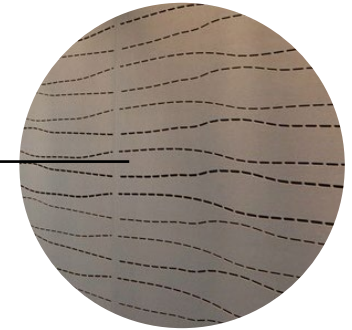
*The exhibit is designed to replicate the cross-section of the Mid-Atlantic seashore from sand dune to ocean.*



*The linear baffle ceilings act as a unifying element representing the sky but the foam filled perforations serve to limit the spread of noise of large groups of guests.*



*As guests use the hand rail, they are able to feel the grains of sand used to form the concrete, bringing them back to the overall theme of a day at the beach.*



*Perforated wall panels line the edges of the space and fade into the background allowing exhibit elements to stand out while limiting the further spread of noise.*



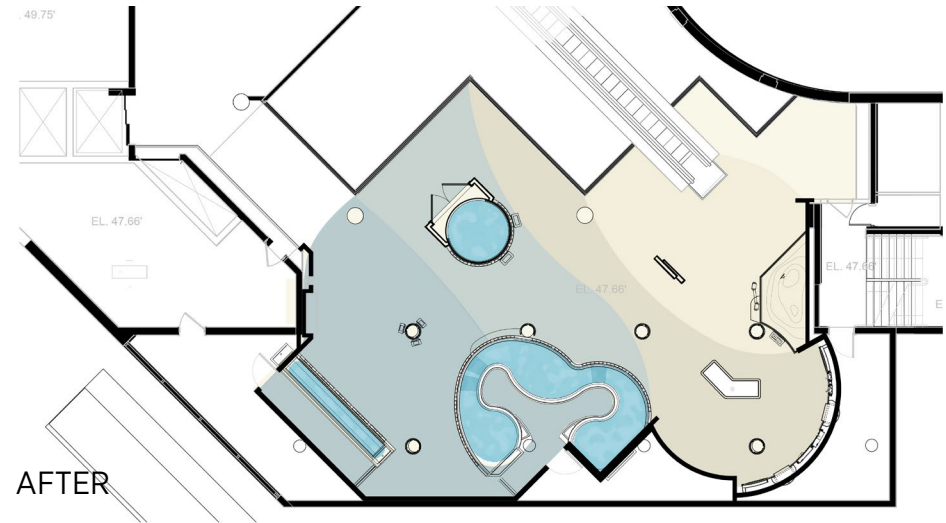
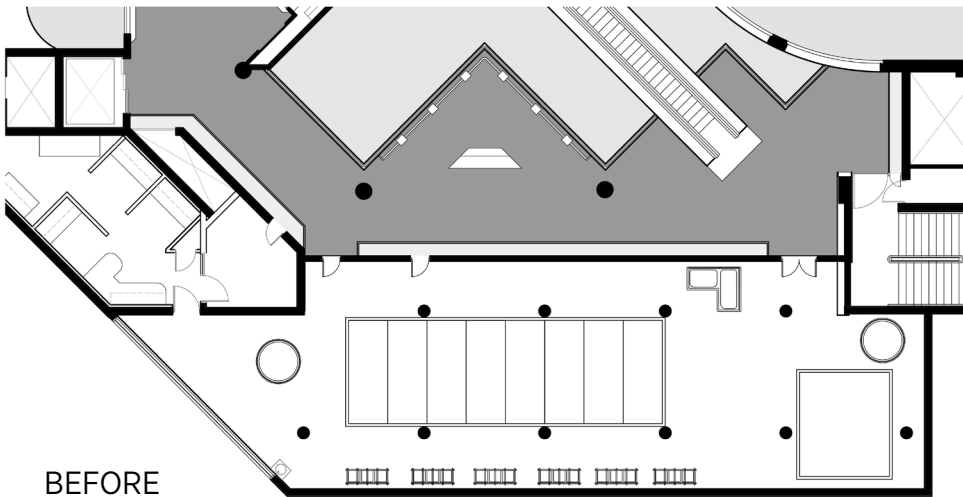
*The existing concrete columns were repurposed and wrapped with 'Shore Hero' graphics—stories about real people, like them, engaged in conservation action.*



*The floors transition with the lighting and the exhibits to help embrace the idea that guests are traveling from the sand dune to the water.*

## SPACE TRANSFORMATION

The transformation of a formerly back of house area into a busy interior gallery turned the allocation and use of space into a critical challenge. In order to accommodate the fluctuations in visitation throughout the seasons and support comfortable flow, the layout offers multiple paths, including a way to bypass the gallery.





At the gallery's entrance, guests are greeted by a tall sand dune with beach grass and other native plants while vivid floor to ceiling murals and sounds evoke a day at the beach. A glimpse of rays swimming in the curved acrylic touchpool invite guests to venture further into the gallery.



Guests are taken through the different experiences of a day at the beach. They are encouraged to touch seashells and seaweed on the tactile wall, learn about a beach's ecosystem and play informative games on the interactive touch screens.



Each complimentary element reinforces the Big Idea, "Explore the wondrous beaches and waters of the mid-Atlantic seashore to discover new and familiar friends that share this coastal treasure with us" through consistent messaging.



## HANDS-ON EXPERIENCES

Along the edge of the touch pools, visitors are invited to graze their hands over various animals. For added accessibility and comfort, the team maximized touchpool access to accommodate up to 35 guests at one time.





**NEW AND OLD**  
 The individual exhibits were designed to reflect the look, feel, and interaction of really being at the beach while certain materials and elements serve to highlight and pay homage to the existing 1979 building's pure geometries and board formed concrete textures.



## OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

After Living Seashore opened, a summative evaluation was commissioned to investigate the experience of visitors. The evaluation focused on the planned target audience of 5-12 year old children in families. The results found that visitors rated the gallery very favorably.



# 94%

*of visitors stopped at the Shore Touchpool.*



# 68%

*of visitors took away messages of conservation and environmental ethics when going to the beach after interacting with this gallery.*



# 63%

*of visitors gave their experience a high rating (a '9' or '10' on a 10-point scale) making it one of the most highly rated of the aquarium's six popular galleries.*