



Now if you yearn to walk through the Tunnel of Lost Souls and disorient yourself, you can do it in New Orleans. Or, if you want to see the world's largest tire, which at 13.5 feet tall and weighing more than 6,500 pounds, you can also do that in New Orleans. In fact, you can do both at the same place. Just go to the busy corner of Decatur and St. Peter's—Jackson Square in the French Quarter—and visit the Ripley's Believe It or Not.

The McDonnell Group is the local contractor for the conversion of an existing space of approximately 11,000 square feet into a Ripley's Believe It or Not. The project, which is scheduled to finish in mid-June 2003, taking just 100 days. Besides renovating the space, The McDonnell Group is responsible for installing all exhibits.

The owner of Ripley's Believe It or Not is Gumbo Development, L.L.C., Orlando, Florida, a franchisee of International Theme Park Services, Inc., (ITPS), Cincinnati. Ken Vondriska, CEO of ITPS, says choosing The McDonnell Group to ready the museum was not a matter of going after a low bidder.

"We interviewed five different contractors, all local," says Vondriska. "We reviewed all their credentials." He says of The McDonnell Group, "We felt they could pull it off in budgetary constraints."

Vondriska explains the design-build experience of The McDonnell Group got his attention. "We felt that they could get the job done," he says. "They weren't the lowest bidder."

Although ITPS aims to surprise visitors of its theme parks with the unexpected, it wants only a predictable course when it contracts for construction services.

"The work The McDonnell Group is completing for ITPS is varied and has to meet exacting specifications. It includes all interior modifications to the building, the installation of all exhibits and some fabrication," says Vondriska.

Timothy Terrell, project architect with Williams and Associates Architects, New Orleans, represented his firm on the Ripley's Believe It or Not project. As the local architect on the job, he says he visited other franchises to get a feeling for what the client wanted.

Like others who worked on the project, Terrell says he was taken by the "odd exhibits." And he enjoyed working to design the space and infrastructure to accommodate them according to the template ITPS provided.

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"Doing cabinet and exhibit installation was a new experience for The McDonnell Group," says Allan McDonnell, president. Some 500 exhibits fit into the renovated space, and this effort requires working carefully in a small area. ITPS has a manufacturing facility in Canada that makes all exhibits.

McDonnell says he is very pleased that his company won the contract for the job. "We had some pretty stiff competition," he says, pointing to older firms who competed. "It was nice to be selected."

ITPS has a good feeling about the visitor flow the museum will have. "This is one of the most traveled intersections in all of Louisiana, a magnet," says Vondriska about the busy site in the French Quarter.

Because of the location of the museum, there are still a few details pending. "We have to keep in the confines of the Historical Society," says Vondriska. That means getting special permission to put a huge chunk of granite, and a horse made of car bumpers at the entrance.

Nevertheless, when visitors get inside Ripley's Believe It or Not, they will be able to soak in "the unusual nature of the museum," says Vondriska, in hundreds of ways. Surprises, curios, and just the oddest bits and pieces of real life imaginable—or unimaginable—are all part of what Ripley's Believe It or Not offers. •

