The University of Southwestern Louisiana's New Iberia Research Center (NIRC) may just throw a monkey wrench in the way the design of educational facilities is approached.

Although this center's inhabitants — approximately 4,700 monkeys and apes representing 16 different species — are non-human primates, the facility may lead to changes in the way we educate our own.

"The classroom of the next century will be much more than just a bunch of rooms with seating for children at individual desks," says Alan Bacque of The Meleton Bacque Group about the new center for behavioral and medical research on primates and small mammals, located on Highway 182 between Lafayette and New Iberia.

The NIRC facility, which is one of the largest primate research centers in the United States, is the perfect example of combining instructional teaching with technology and research.

Planned with a three-tiered design which allows for advancing levels of security, the building serves as headquarters for administrative personnel, classroom teaching, laboratory research, and climate-controlled animal housing and behavioral research.

A reception area for visitors, offices for the director and staff, four classrooms and a large multi-use auditorium compose the first section of the building.

It is linked to the second by a lunch and coffee room with indoor and outdoor sitting areas. Security systems guard entry into the second area.

The second wing houses the NIRC's 12,000-square foot laboratory, which functions just like a hospital lab and thus has the same safety and compliance requirements. However, the volume of lab work performed at this center is roughly twice the amount done at two local hospitals each year. 

"Efficiency is very important in designing for laboratory space," Bacque says, noting that the firm has done considerable laboratory work over the past 20 years, which was helpful in providing for the NIRC's design needs.

A large open general laboratory area is at the center of this space, with areas for serology, hematology, immunology and general work space. The area is open to a large 30-foot high barrel vault space with north-facing glass end and indirect lighting.

Surrounding the central lab are a full complement of specialty labs for clinical chemistry, radioactive medicine, bacteriology, virology, tissue culture, bio-chemistry, pathology, histology, cytology and support spaces.

The NIRC is accredited by the American Association for the Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care.

Both indoor and outdoor cages were also necessary. In fact, the unusual looking cone-shaped metal roofs of the round, grain silo-style animal cages even inspired the architects' idea for the curved metal roof form of the building.

"The main thing for our group as the designers was in working directly with the people who would be working at the NIRC — the doctors and researchers who use the different areas.

"We had to know their wants and needs for the facility," says Bacque. "And this wasn't a one-time conversation. It was on-going. We would meet back with them and kept them involved with the entire design process."

It might have been said that The Meleton Bacque Group had gotten a monkey off their backs when they completed the New Iberia Research Center.

The architects believe it was an opportunity to combine teaching and instruction with cutting-edge research and technology — a true-life case of monkey-see, monkey-do.