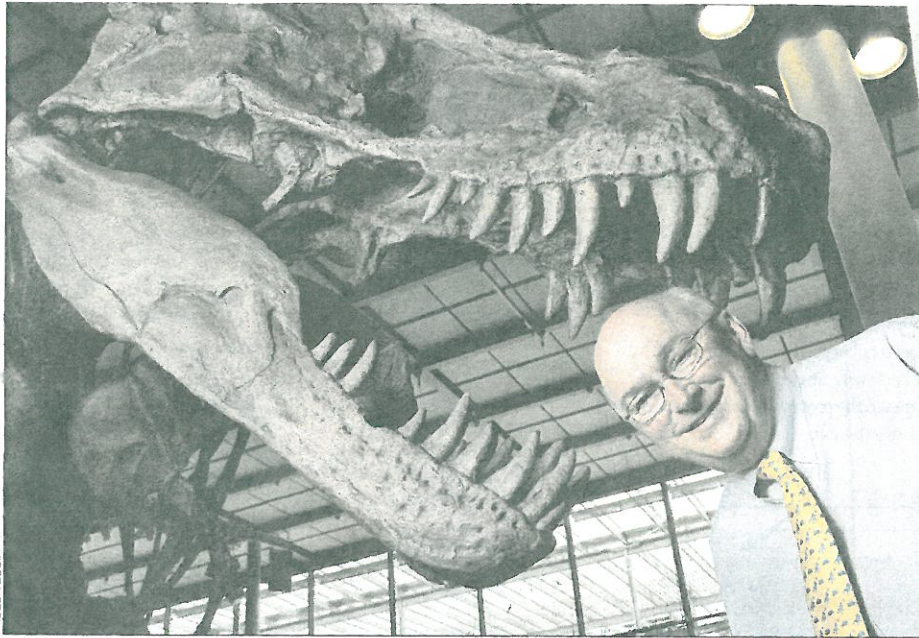


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PAOLO VESCIA

"We're the same great institution ... going through a kind of re-ignoration," says executive director Farrington.

City bitten by science

New California Academy seen as a 'huge draw'

BY SARAH DUXBURY
San Francisco Business Times

Natural history will be made Sept. 27 when the new \$488 million California Academy of Sciences throws open its eco-doors to the public.

Superlatives have swirled for years around the project: It will be the greenest museum ever; it is the only U. S. institution to have a planetarium, natural history museum and aquarium under a single (living) roof; it will surpass Alcatraz on the most-visited-attractions list.

Opening day, in keeping with the project's superlative nature, will be entirely free, thanks to Target Corp. For Sunday, Sept. 28, the Academy has already

pre-sold nearly 350 tickets for staggered entry times — a move to try to control crowds and with them, the guest experience.

Opening weekend will be a community party, with hourly performances on the music concourse bandstand, food stalls, face painters, a rock climbing wall and science activities to appeal to those waiting in line or keen for a festive day in the park. The Academy has also partnered with UCSF for free parking. Shuttles will connect the UCSF garage and beach parking lots with the museum. In the week before the Academy opens, Muni will introduce its brand-new "culture bus," a \$7 ticket that links Union Square, the Asian Art Museum and the de Young and Cal Academy in Golden Gate Park and will run every 20 minutes.

The opening has drummed up such enthusiasm, the yet-to-open Academy already boasts 30,200 members. The temporary Howard Street location closed in

SEE ACADEMY, 57



Age of aquarium: Farrington says the Academy project has gone swimmingly. Coral for the aquarium was grown on Howard Street, the museum's former, temporary home.

ACADEMY: New \$488M natural science museum prepares to open its doors

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

January 2008 with 12,715 members and the old full-strength Golden Gate Park Academy had just 16,019 members when it closed back in 2004.

In short, for opening weekend and the foreseeable future, the Academy of Sciences expects to be a zoo.

The project has been 10 years coming and carries a price tag of \$488 million, of which the Academy has raised \$465 million. It has received over 60 gifts of \$1 million or more, and over \$20 million has been raised specifically for the endowment. The meat of it began back in 2000 when architect Renzo Piano descended from the roof of the old Academy with a sketch of a living roof that, at 36 feet, was the same height as the old structures, but whose gentle undulations echo San Francisco's hills.

That's when the parties involved really began to seize on the opportunity of the project.

In the interim, two city bonds for \$140 million were approved by voters; 38,000 creatures were moved across the city to temporary Howard Street digs, and then back into Golden Gate Park; and a team of hundreds broke ground three years ago on a structure that is expected to receive LEED platinum certification. The coming days are the final contraction of that 10-year odyssey.

The natural history exhibits are mostly installed, and over 75 percent of the Academy's fish have taken residence in their new tanks. Birds soar through the southern rainforest dome; four scien-

tists and a giant Rubbermaid bin recently helped an anaconda into its new abode, and a rare albino alligator adds a stark flash of the new to the recreated alligator swamp. Scientists are making three to four trips a day to shuttle as many creatures as possible to the new Academy in time for opening day. It's still early to tell if the building lives up to its compromise, but the solar canopy around the roof perimeter has so far generated more power than expected. A new film, "Fragile Planet," is cued up to play in the 300-seat Planetarium dome, where there will also be daily live broadcasts from the international space station.

"We're the same great institution with the same great scientific collections and many of the same scientists and educators. ... Africa Hall is back, and the pendulum is proving once again that the world is still rotating, which is reassuring," said Gregory Farrington, executive director of the Academy of Sciences. "At the same time, the Academy is going through a kind of re-invigoration and redefinition that is so unusual. I like to say that it's rare that an institution of this sort is lucky enough to have a good earthquake. ... The physical earthquake has resulted in the complete physical reinvention of the institution."

Dream space

Building a dream physical space whose scientific and environmental attributes are an extension of the Academy's mission allowed the institution to reconceive its exhibitions and integrate its far-flung research into the public programming.

Exhibitions and behind-the-scenes scientific research have been integrated so that scientists performing research are their own exhibit, and actual collections are on display. All major exhibitions in the Academy either highlight a threatened region or species or build directly on the work of Academy field scientists.

Excitement around Piano's design afforded the Academy the ability to exceed even its own grandest ambitions.

"Our fundraising success and the momentum that developed really enabled us to go for some of those upgrades to reach the highest level of quality," said Bill Patterson, chairman of the Academy board of trustees. "We think of it as a cycle. If we invest in a quality experience and provide the 'wow' factor, people are more likely to come back and reinvest in the Academy. It started with hiring Renzo Piano and going for LEED platinum certification; we were setting our standards and getting people's validation that they wanted that quality. ... We were fortunate we had the support we had when we had it."

Investing for greater return

Such early, strong financial backing led to certain capital investments and upgrades as plans progressed. For example, the Academy had a range of choices of what kinds of technology it could use in the planetarium, and it was able to invest in superior-quality equipment that it believes will provide a far greater return in terms of the visitor experience and the Academy's mission to educate the public, Patterson said.

Arup did the eco-engineering, figuring out how to make Piano's design adhere to green standards, and Webcor was the general contractor. SWA Group did the landscape architecture.

Two new restaurants will open with the Academy on Sept. 27: a casual cafe from Charles Phan of the Slanted Door and a more upscale, sit-down affair from Loretta Keller. Her restaurant will have a separate entrance and will be open for dinner.

"It's going to be a huge draw for the city, and I don't say that lightly," said Joe D'Alessandro, president and CEO of the San Francisco Visitor and Convention Bureau. "It's such a unique facility, people want to see the building whether they are interested in the exhibits or not."

The CVB has taken groups of meeting planners and international tour operators through the Academy at different stages of construction, and all have expressed interest. The former is looking for offsite meeting or event space, and the Academy is already booked for such gatherings through the end of the year. And tour operators are adding it to their itineraries.

"For San Francisco as a destination to be a success, we need to have new things going on; we need to add new attractions," D'Alessandro said. "This is a jewel in the crown of what San Francisco has to offer visitors — people are fascinated by it — and I think the buzz will last us a good time in terms of people saying 'I have to get to San Francisco to see that.'"