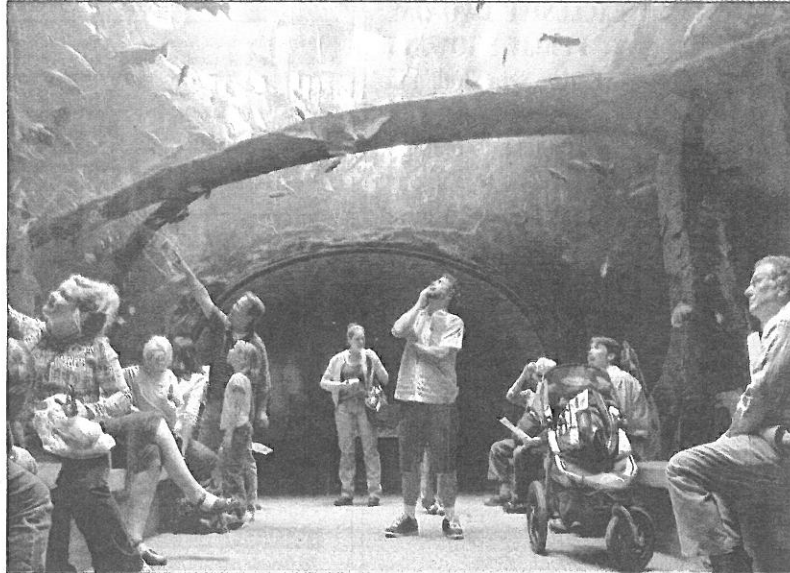


SCIENCE ACADEMY'S DAZZLING REBIRTH



MIKE KEFKA / The Chronicle

Bob Lake (center) watches as fish swim overhead in the tunnel of the Amazon rain forest exhibit at the new academy.

REALIZING A DREAM: Years of planning, fundraising culminate in cultural gem

By John Coté
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

It started with a bad idea. In a talk at a January 1997 Chamber of Commerce luncheon, Mayor Willie Brown proposed that the California Academy of Sciences and neighboring M.H. de Young Memorial Museum be moved out of Golden Gate Park to the Transbay Terminal downtown, a bus station slated for redevelopment.

A move by the de Young was already being considered, but the thought of the academy leaving the park hit like a bombshell, and San Francisco residents didn't like it.

Both institutions had been indelible features of Golden Gate Park for decades.

The academy — with its natural history museum, planetarium, aquarium and live animal exhibit — was aging and, like the de Young, was quake-damaged, but it had been an icon for adults and their children for more than 80 years.

The people who ran the academy rejected Brown's idea, too — for different reasons. Relocating would require an expensive land acquisition, and downtown parking was scarce.

Yet they knew something had to be done with the dilapidated buildings that housed the oldest natural science center west of the Mississippi, and if Brown's proposal did nothing else, it started them thinking about the academy in ways they never had.

"As soon as you allow yourself to start dreaming big, you start to realize, maybe it could happen," said Meagan Levitan, who handled the Academy of Sciences' community outreach at the time.

On Saturday, the dream will be realized when the new academy, a \$488 million architectural and environmental gem, makes

► **ACADEMY:** Page A15

THE PUBLIC UNVEILING

After more than 10 years of planning and construction, the California Academy of Sciences invites the public to visit its new \$488 million building in Golden Gate Park.

When: 9:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday

Where: 55 Music Concourse Drive, Golden Gate Park

Admission: Free, Saturday only

Information: (415) 379-8000 or www.calacademy.org

SFGate.com

View previous stories, videos and photo galleries of the Academy of Sciences' four-year renovation and the huge undertaking of moving 20 million specimens. sfgate.com/calacademy.



REBUILDING AN ICON: New structure an architectural, environmental triumph

By John King
CHRONICLE URBAN DESIGN WRITER

When the California Academy of Sciences opens the doors of its new home Saturday on the Music Concourse at Golden Gate Park, visitors are sure to linger over such exotica as the albino alligator in the simulated swamp, or the macaws from Costa Rica skittering amid trees rarely found outside rain forests.

Here's another bit of advice: Take time to savor the structure itself — a commanding work of architecture as stylistically adventurous as the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum across the way, but open and inviting and utterly at home.

Most attention aimed at the academy so far has focused on the living roof with its native plants that cling to steep mounds inspired, architect Renzo Piano has said, by the local terrain. Academy officials also emphasize that their new home is designed to earn a coveted Platinum rating from the U.S. Green Building Council.

But even without such hooks, the academy is a captivating addition to the city.

Piano, whose Renzo Piano Building Workshop is based in a hillside studio above Genoa, Italy, has become the architect of choice for cultural institutions seeking a world-class design that won't upstage what's on display. His buildings are always exquisite, but some leave the impression of an architect suavely going through the motions.

The academy, by contrast, is fresh as can be — even though it incorporates details from its predecessor, a makeshift agglomeration constructed between 1916 and 1975 that was demolished in 2004 to make way for

► **REVIEW:** Page A17