

BAY AREA AND CALIFORNIA

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ACADEMY OF SCIENCES | *The architect*

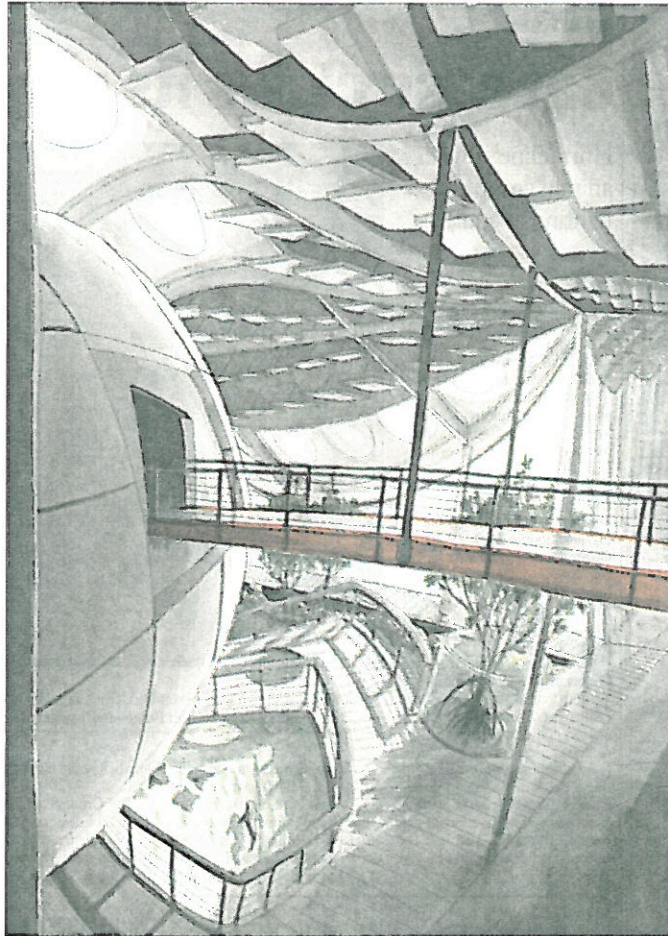


Illustration by Paul Madonna

An artist's rendition of the interior of Academy of Sciences that officially re-opens Saturday.

SUSTAINABLE DESIGN AND A LOVE FOR LIGHT



MICHAEL MACOR / The Chronicle

RENZO PIANO: "The little pieces of the (solar) cells, they allow light to slice through as if you were in a forest, under leaves."

By John King
CHRONICLE URBAN DESIGN WRITER

From the start, architect Renzo Piano had a clear vision for the new California Academy of Sciences. He wanted it to feel rooted in Golden Gate Park, with a green roof and glassy walls.

But as he visited the finished creation Thursday, seven years and \$488 million after he was selected in an international competition, Piano seemed most delighted by a design touch added late in the game: the grid of solar cells embedded in the glass roofline that extends 30 feet beyond the academy walls.

"The little pieces of the cells, they allow light to slice through as if you were in a forest, under leaves," Piano said, gesturing at the tattoo-like reflections traced against the one stone wall that remains from the original academy in the park's Music Concourse. "You get the sun, but also a vibrant shadow that is not flat and stupid."

Piano, 71, arrived in San Francisco on Wednesday night for a round of events and interviews in connection with the building's opening.

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Roof a work in progress

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tion with the academy's official re-opening Saturday. As caterers arranged tables and spreads of fresh fruit for a \$750 fundraising dinner that includes a chance to mingle with the architect, Piano moved through the commotion with courtly ease.

He long ago shed the establishment-rattling image that came with the building for which he still is best-known: 1977's brashly metallic Centre Pompidou in the heart of historic Paris. Working from Paris and his native Genoa, Italy, Piano now specializes in re-

fining cultural facilities and such select commissions as the recently built headquarters for the New York Times.

Within this body of work — which in 1998 brought Piano the Pritzker Architecture Prize, his profession's highest honor — the academy is unique. It folds together an aquarium, a planetarium and a natural history museum as well as lab space for roughly 100 researchers. Layered on top is the most public exhibit of all, the undulating roof's 2.5-acre spread of native perennials and wildflowers.

For now, the roof is a work in progress. It includes patches of dirt amid the lupine and beach strawberry runners.

"If I was making the roof like a beautiful Swiss landscape, it would have no soul," Piano mused. "Morally, this is very inter-

esting. It may take more time, but it makes more sense."

The roof is the most obvious example of an emphasis on sustainable design that has drawn wide attention; indeed, one interview Thursday was with a BBC film crew. The solar cells fit in as well, since they help generate energy for the structure.

Yet Piano also wasn't shy about exercising his prerogative as the leader of a small army of architects and engineers.

This was the case with the 35-foot-tall, floor-to-ceiling glass walls set in the middle of each side of the broad rectangular structure. Sustainability engineers championed glass that would be tinted to deflect heat from entering the building — the "green" thing in terms of reducing energy use.

Piano wanted ultra-clear panes.

He had the last word.

"I don't care as much about heat gain as letting in light," he shrugged.

In addition to the choreographed build-up to the academy debut, Piano will conduct an informal seminar with 300 architecture students from the California College of the Arts and UC Berkeley. The students will gather in what Piano calls "the Piazza," the glass-walled courtyard in the center of the academy.

Piano shook his head when asked if such interaction with students is part of his routine.

"I've probably never done this," he said. "It only works in a building so open, where you can see everything."

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