

Natural History Museum is set to dive into L.A.'s cultural scene

The huge fin whale that will greet visitors at the museum's high-tech entrance is just one part of a major renovation soon to be unveiled.

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The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County's famous fin whale is enjoying a rare quiet morning — one last moment of serenity before its surroundings change completely.

The 63-foot whale skeleton, which hung horizontally for more than 60 years in the museum's original 1913 building, is now suspended in a diving position from the ceiling of the nearly completed Otis Booth Pavilion. This is the museum's brand-new entrance, a six-story-high, multimedia-infused glass cube filled with sunlight and a view of surrounding greenery.

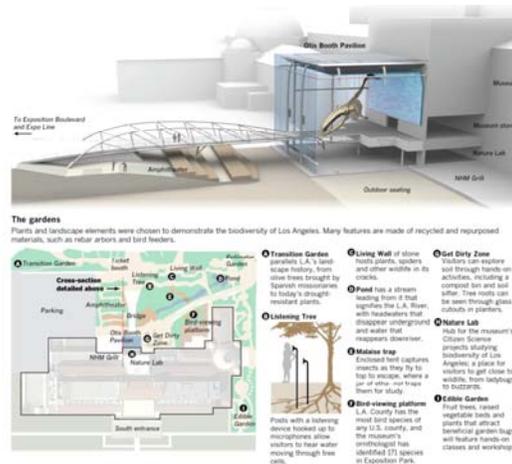
The pavilion is fully tented at the moment, draped in a white curtain hiding the construction within. As a gentle breeze passes through, the cloth ripples, creating waves of sunlight that seem almost aquatic.

Hanging midair with its nose pointed down, tail swinging upward and fins stretched out at both sides, the fin whale has something of a proud, Olympian quality, not only leading the way forward for the museum but serving as a bridge for visitors between beloved museum favorites and the new, high-tech experience to come.

On June 8 the curtain lifts on the Otis Booth Pavilion and its whale of a host.

The new entranceway faces 3 1/2 acres of the new Nature Gardens, with a thicket of wild grasses, lush oak trees and geometric succulents, all dotted with fluttering butterflies.

It also faces Exposition Boulevard and the light-rail Expo Line, which is as much a forward-looking statement as it is a practical decision. The museum hopes to maximize foot traffic and bring itself in sync with a new generation of museum-goers.



Sources: Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Cordell Corp., CO Architects, Google Earth
Credits: Graphics reporting by Julie Sheer

"There are a lot of young people riding the subways," says NHM director Jane Pisano. "It's the future for L.A. So, here we are."

The Otis Booth Pavilion and gardens are just two new elements in the museum's decade-plus, \$135-million reinvention. The last few years have seen a restoration of the museum's original building and its historic rotunda, completed in 2009; the new Age of Mammals exhibit, which opened in 2010; and a completely reimagined Dinosaur Hall, now airy and sunlit, after its 2011 debut.

Nearly every aspect of the museum has been touched by renovation — more than 60% of its indoor space has been altered — from a new cafe and refurbished elevators to additional permanent exhibits, multiple areas for "citizen science" and an expanded, updated temporary gallery space. All renovations are now complete. After a black-tie celebration for the museum's centennial year on June 8, the new Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County officially debuts in its entirety to the public on June 9.

The overhaul, funded with private donations, revenue from membership and admissions as well as annual funding from L.A. County totaling approximately \$15 million (44% of the museum's budget), is as much a philosophical renovation as it is a physical one, says Pisano, who joined the staff in 2001 when the board of directors was just beginning to rewrite the museum's mission.

"We had a sense that we could do more, that we could do better," Pisano says. "It was like: 'Well, what *is* a 21st century Natural History Museum?' And we've been on a real search to try and identify that."

With an eye toward the museum transitioning into a truly indoor-outdoor institution — one that with the new garden is as much a museum of nature as natural history — Pisano worked with existing staff, pooling ideas, and hired an impressive team to lead them forward. The project was directed by Don Webb of Cordell Corporation. It included Karen Wise, vice president of education and exhibits, who steered the vision for the Nature Gardens and indoor Nature Lab, a hub for hands-on experimentation; landscape designer Mia Lehrer, who previously worked on the L.A. River Master Plan and the overhaul at Dodger Stadium; lead architect Fabian Kremkus, who designed the Palomar Medical Center in Escondido.

It seems to be paying off. Annual attendance at the museum has increased, jumping from 674,655 in June 2002-July 2003 to 851,860 in July 2011-July 2012.

Museums across the nation are undergoing changes of similar scope to stay relevant and keep attendance up in times of rapid technological, economic and cultural change.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington will soon embark on a renovation of its Dinosaur Hall; it sent a fact-finding team in January to visit L.A.'s newly remodeled Dinosaur Hall for inspiration. The California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco completed a \$488-million project in 2008 in which it rebuilt itself, from the ground up, with an eye toward more integrated exhibits and green design.