

Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Plans to Add a 3.5-Acre Park

It will have 11 theme areas, with the first phase slated to finish in July 2011, in time for the opening of the new exhibition halls for "Dinosaur Mysteries." The museum celebrates its centennial in 2013.

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The stretch of Exposition Boulevard around the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County has been a busy construction site, with the museum's renovation taking place alongside work on the Metro's new Expo Line.

The first phase of the renovation will be unveiled in July with the opening of the rotunda of the 1913 building and the adjoining hall housing the "Age of Mammals" exhibition. But the museum has even more plans for its campus.

On Thursday, the museum will announce that a 3.5-acre, \$30-million park is in the works on the south side of the street, part of the major makeover the museum is undergoing inside and out as it heads toward its centennial in 2013.

"We have the space," said museum President and Director Jane Pisano as she stood on a balcony overlooking the site's pulverized concrete, contoured earth and machinery. "And we also have the climate — we can be using this space the entire year, except for the few days when it rains."

A year ago this area of the museum, or the North Campus, was taken up by two parking lots and a walkway and staircase to the second-floor entrance. Now one parking lot has been demolished, and the other is being rebuilt into two stories. In the future an

elegant white tubular steel bridge will bring visitors into the building.

It's all part of what Pisano calls the "pursuit of a more compelling mission for a natural history museum in the 21st century."

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The Pollinator Garden, for example, will focus on butterflies, bees and flowering plants. The Urban Wilderness will feature native California plants and the birds and insects who live among them. The Home Garden will reflect what people might have in their own backyard — citrus trees and vegetables — and provide education in water conservation and biodiversity.

One of the structural innovations will be the fencing at the entrance plaza. It is a combination of hedges and vertical posts that act as a fence for people — the posts will be positioned closely together — but allow smaller critters to pass in and out.

Interactivity is key, so there will be classes and demonstrations going on throughout the day, as well as the experiential "Get Dirty Zone." The "Stramphitheater" is a multipurpose terraced area next to the bridge.

"It will be used in the daytime for classes or demonstrations or for eating a sandwich from the cafe," says Don Webb, president of Cordell Corp., which has been overseeing the master plan and construction. "In the evenings you can do cinemas or concerts." In addition, CO Architects has collaborated on the museum's master plan and designed its car park and bridge.

Overall, the museum intends to help visitors identify and appreciate the flora and fauna of the Los Angeles area. "We're not only looking at native species, we're also looking at introduced species," says Brian Brown, the museum's curator of entomology and a member of the North Campus planning committee. "I like to say we're doing representative plantings."

He and his colleagues like to point out the wealth and diversity of our habitat. "Los Angeles County has about 501 bird species," says Kimball Garrett, staff ornithologist, "the largest bird list of any county in the entire United States." In Exposition Park alone, he has surveyed 159 bird species that pass through or make their homes there, including those ubiquitous wild parrots.

"Aside from the plethora of birds," says Mia Lehrer, whose company Mia Lehrer + Associates is designing the landscaping, "there are trees from 35 countries. We did an inventory here, and there are jacaranda from Brazil, ficus from the Canary Islands and Australia and Malaysia, and even an English oak."

Webb notes, "The irony is that most natural history museums are solely indoors — a very unnatural environment. This puts the natural back in natural history."