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Virginia's Natural History Gets a Fresh Face

CRYSTAL FRANCE

Construction has begun on a new building for The Virginia Museum of Natural History (VMNH)—an 89,127-square-foot museum at 21 Starling Avenue in Martinsville. John W. Daniel & Company of Danville won the construction contract in 2003, beginning a 3-year process of planning and building.

Building construction is expected to be finished by late 2005 and the facility should open to the public in late 2006. However, construction is not the only phase that must be completed before the building can open. Exhibits must be carefully planned, designed, built, and placed in the museum.

After a proposal process that included designs from nine exhibit design companies, VMNH officials narrowed the field to three finalists. Reich + Petch Design International, in association with Blue Sky Design, of Toronto, Canada, was selected following a formal design presentation to develop the working plans for the exhibits and oversee their installation into the new museum. "I have been very pleased with the quality of their work to date," says Tim Gette, Executive Director, "and am anxious to start developing these exciting exhibits for our new museum!"

Paul Martinovich and Tony Reich, who just completed work on the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History's Hall of Mammals, have been meeting with VMNH curators, researchers, and directors for the past three months to determine the story line and context of the new exhibits.

VMNH JOINS SMITHSONIAN AFFILIATE PROGRAM

The Virginia Museum of Natural History has recently been accepted into the Smithsonian Institution Affiliations Program. VMNH will celebrate this recognition with a Smithsonian Weekend event on November 13-14 at the Museum, which will include a formal signing ceremony on Saturday, November 13, at 2 p.m. and the annual Museum Open House on Sunday, November 14 from 1-5 p.m.

As an affiliate, the Virginia Museum of Natural History will receive access to the more than 142 million objects in the Smithsonian's collections, from spacecraft to American cultural artifacts to fine art. The program provides a greater public access to the Smithsonian's collections and allows the affiliating organizations to incorporate Smithsonian collections into a variety of exhibition, educational, and/or research programs.

In addition, the Virginia Museum of Natural History will be able to utilize outreach services offered by the Smithsonian Institution. Outreach services include curriculum development for local schools, and hosting Smithsonian traveling exhibitions, workshops and lecture series given by Smithsonian scholars and scientists. The Smithsonian also shares staff expertise in areas of conservation, collections care, and exhibition development with its affiliates.



They are able to view the planning process with the visitor in mind.

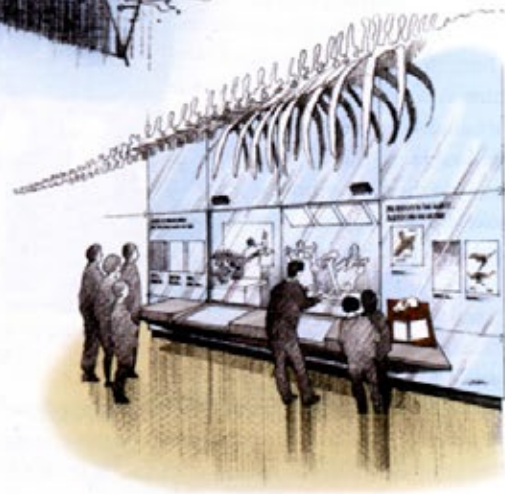
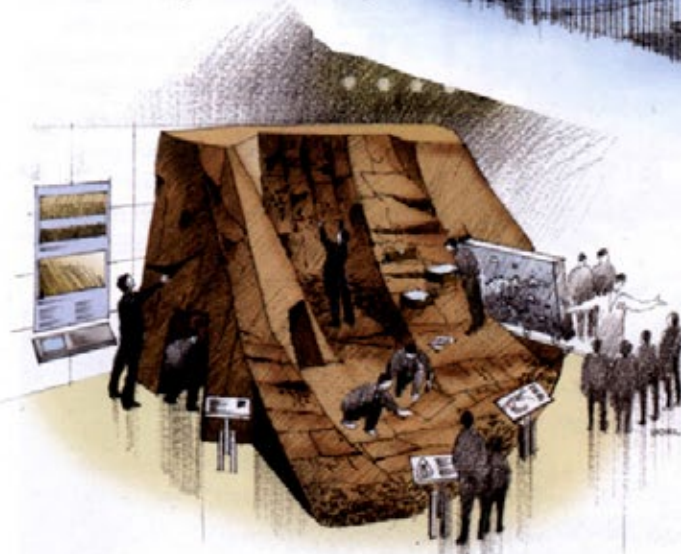
What's the end result? We won't know until 2006 when the museum doors open, but there is a preliminary design plan now in place.

According to Reich, many museums are perceived as "flat and one-dimensional." That won't be the case with the three-dimensional exhibits that are planned. Visitors will be immersed in learning firsthand about Virginia's natural history. All senses will be used as they explore and discover alongside the Museum's world-class researchers in a journey into Virginia's distant history.

"This journey," says Martinovich, "will begin about 300 million years ago and end in the present, highlighting current research and new information about our environment and the species that inhabit it."

One stop on a jaunt through the museum will be the Solite Quarry. The quarry, located in Pittsylvania County, is considered by many scientists to be one of the top five fossil sites in the world. Glass windows in the floor of this exhibit will enable the visitor to see underneath the quarry. Panels may pull out of the face of the quarry allowing a glimpse at what lies inside the sedimentary shale. A tunnel through the quarry will encourage younger visitors to take a look at the inside.

Other planned exhibits include a huge model of an insect that was recently discovered near Virginia Beach and a close look inside a Virginia Coal Swamp. Windows overlooking research laboratories will enable public interaction with VMNH's



Exciting interactive exhibits at the new Virginia Museum of Natural History, clockwise from top center: The Great Coal Swamp, the reconstruction and conservation labs, and the Solite Fossil Quarry. Opposite: Interviewing the newly-discovered bug from Virginia Beach.

scientists. Artifacts from the museum's permanent collection will rotate within the exhibits, ensuring endless discovery opportunities.

The Reich + Petch design will implement a "multi-faceted, layered experience," appealing to visitors of all ages. All exhibits will be curriculum-based and tie back to the Virginia Standards of Learning. Gette expects that the 12,000 square feet of state-of-the-art exhibit space will attract more visitors to the museum from a wider field and give VMNH higher visibility on a state and national level.

The Virginia Museum of Natural History is an agency of the Secretary of Natural Resources for the Commonwealth of Virginia and is located in Martinsville with a branch at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

The museum is open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m. Members are always admitted free. Non-member fees are \$5 for adults, \$4 for seniors, and \$3 for children 3 to 11; children 2 and under are free.

For more information about membership or volunteer opportunities, please call (276) 666-8600 or visit www.vmnh.net.



Over 25 years, we have evolved our viewpoint about design to create extraordinary moments and opportunities for people to have experiences that change their understanding and perspective of the world they live in.

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