

STUDIO GANG REVEALS DESIGNS FOR AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY EXPANSION



COURTESY STUDIO GANG ARCHITECTS

Natural Order

On November 4, the American Museum of Natural History Board of Trustees approved Studio Gang Architects' conceptual design for its \$325 million, 218,000-square-foot Richard Gilder Center for Science, Education and Innovation. It will be the first major expansion since the Rose Center for Earth and Space was completed in 2000.

The original 1877 master plan by Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould proposed a rectilinear, four-quadrant plan with symmetrical street-facing facades. Although it informs the museum's design identity, in reality, it was never fully realized as subsequent buildings were tacked on to the existing structure. As a result, the 25-building museum is difficult for visitors to navigate.

When founder and principal Jeanne Gang first approached the expansion in 2013, she worked from the inside out. "Initially, we wanted to understand the DNA of the additions and discovered that there is a building right in the center of the campus. With a few edits we realized we could create a nice, clear circulation loop around that building and complete a north-south, east-west axis," Gang said.

Gang identified three buildings that, if removed, could allow her to achieve her goal of connectivity while realigning the building on an axis the way it was originally intended. The rest of the design unfolded from that central point, allowing 80 percent of it to be built on the museum's existing footprint. Its central exhibition hall will be a curving, soaring concrete and glass space akin to a light-filled subterranean cave—a space you would imagine that the half-million schoolchildren who attend each year might dream up. And that is important: When asked what motivated the decision to expand, the museum cited the need to deepen the impact of its work in science education, both for children and for the higher education programs it offers.

For Gang's team, this translated into crafting a space that facilitates a sense of discovery without taking away from the museum's collection. "It is such an iconic building as a void," said Gang. "So, what we asked ourselves was how do you make a base that's very memorable and iconic as a void? It's not an 'object building.'"

Gang's answer was to create walls that wrap out to structural arches and smoothly continue through to the outside, beginning with sinuous interior reinforced concrete walls and ending as a stone and glass facade.

Critics of the expansion have pointed out that it will encroach on about a quarter-acre of Theodore Roosevelt Park and necessitate the removal of a few trees. However, Gang was extremely conscious of this move. "We pulled back as far as we could go and still make meaningful connections to the new building," said Gang. "It was a negotiation between getting the building to function and respecting park and the green space."

Studio Gang worked with Reed Hilderbrand to integrate the building into the park. Rather than delineating the building with a plaza, the green space will be pulled up to the walls to create a seamless transition from the park into the building. The nine trees will be replaced with 17 new trees initially, with plans to plant more as the site progresses.

The expansion proposal will undergo a rigorous approval process: mainly focused on its environmental impact and historical preservation. The Parks Department will draft a scope for the Environmental Impact Statement and will hold a public meeting spring 2016. Then, the application will be sent to Community Board 7, where another public hearing will be held before the Landmarks Preservation Commission will review the application.

If all goes well, construction will begin in 2017 and the goal is to open the Gilder Center in 2020 as the conclusion of the museum's 150th anniversary in 2019.

OLIVIA MARTIN

The proposed interior of the Gilder Center Central Exhibition Hall in the Museum of Natural History.

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