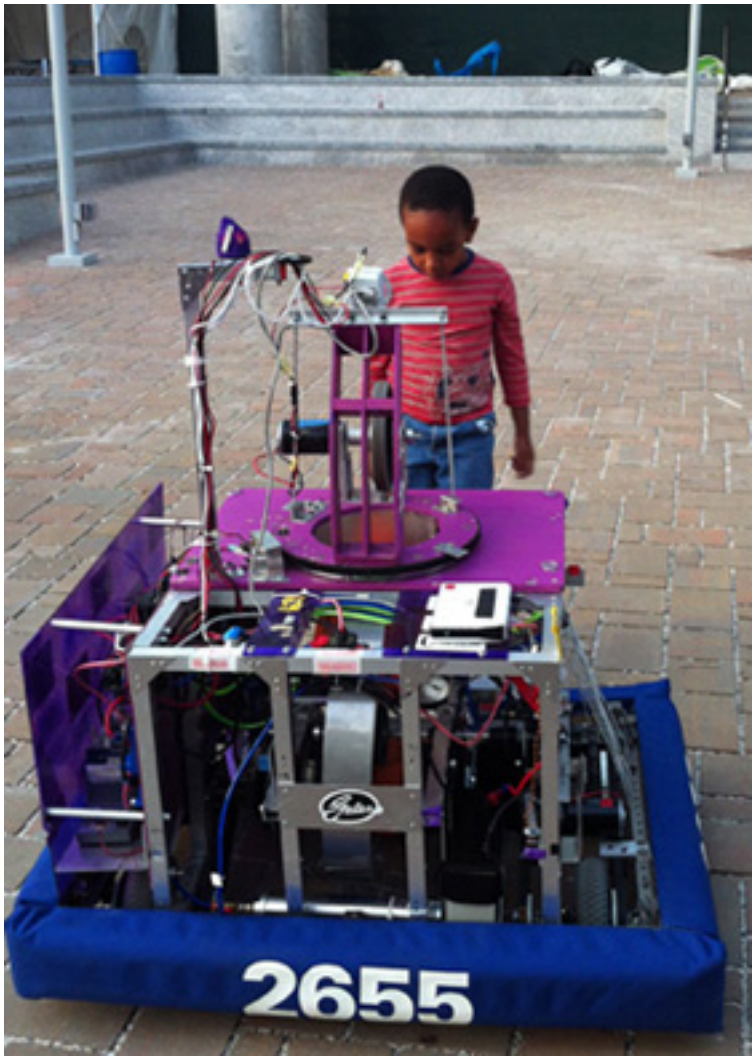
Written by Irma McClaurin
Monday, 23 April 2012 11:13



Science permeates our lives. Yet for most of us, it is still something “out there.” The opening of a new 80,000 square feet addition to the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh changes the game and takes museums and science to a new level. It is the size of the Science Museum of Minnesota’s entire exhibition space (70,000 sf) and temporary exhibition space (10,000 sf) combined. This newly opened Nature Resource Center (NRC) situates Raleigh, a bio-tech and technology mecca because of the Research Triangle Park, as the site of one of the largest science museums in the country, and possibly the world.

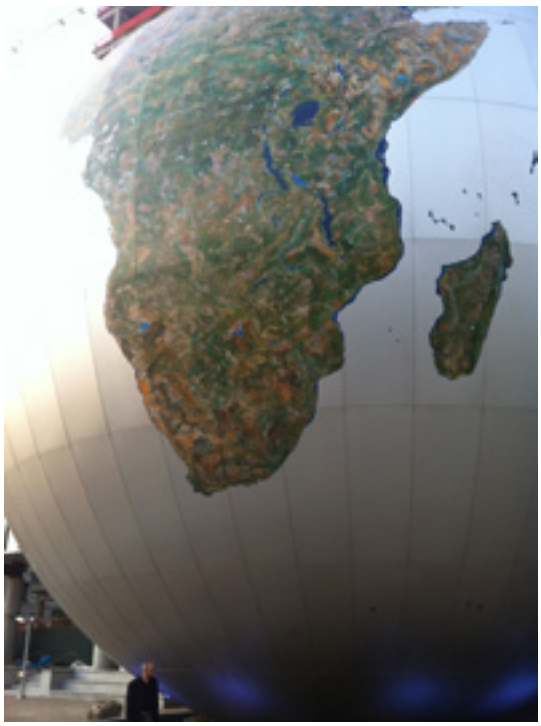
Eleven years in the making from idea to planning and execution, and built at a cost of $56M equally distributed between the new facilities and exhibits, the recently launched NRC expands the scope of the NCMNS making it, without a doubt, first among the next generation of museums.

According to Betsy Bennett, the Museum’s Director and a sister anthropologist, with the new

addition, “there is nothing like this museum in the country today, and we’ve had people from New York say this will put us …[among] the world’s best natural history museums. So we’re among those fabulous history museums. We’re already the largest natural science museum in the Southeast.”

Traditionally, museums have been static—built around collections: dinosaur and other skeletal remains, arrowheads, pottery, textiles, and stuffed remains of extinct animal species, for the most part. Yet, with the advent of technology, museums have had to create new visions and become interactive to remain relevant. They have become increasingly interactive, relying upon changing exhibits built to engage on topics like gold http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/gold/), water (http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/water/), and even race (http://www.smm.org/travelingexhibits/race).

Hands-on science is about engaging museum goers in the everyday life of museums, establishing them as the architects of their own experience by making them “science detectives,” miniature physicists and astrophysicists, kid-size paleo-archaeologists, and, of course, future scientists.



Among the new Nature Resource Center’s highlights is the three-story globe of the SECU Daily Planet, albeit more high-tech than Clark Kent’s Daily Planet, with its multimedia cornucopia of local and international scientists, according to David Kroll, the Science Communications Director in his article “How Do We Know?” in the North Carolina Naturalist, the museum’s

premier magazine. “The NRC expands the Museum, physically and programmatically, by inviting visitors to experience and participate in the process of the scientific method: How do we know what we know?”

The NRC builds upon the latest technology with support from local and nationally renowned sponsors like SAS, Progress Energy, Rex Hospital, and NASA, to name a few. There are interactive touch screens, smart tables, real time chat areas with “experts and lab staff,” ongoing video interviews with scientists from around the world, a medical robotics lab, an animal hospital, the WRAL Weather Center, and even a science version of the sports bar—the Science Café that will “feature eight big-screen TVs to display scientific developments locally and internationally.”

From top to bottom, the building is environmentally “green” (hoping to achieve minimally LEED Gold certification upon completion) with recycled materials from the previous buildings that were on the site, LED light fixtures, and a green rooftop, with telescopes to boot.

This is certainly not our parents’ museum. The Nature Resource Center of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences lays the foundation for the next iteration of museums. It is at the forefront of a science frontier, daring to go where no museum has gone before. And for both children and adults, it offers innumerable opportunities for them to do hands-on science up close and personal, dialogue with local and international scientists in real time, and learn how to truly become global citizen scientists as part of their everyday lives.

To learn more, visit:

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