

A historic mural depicting a prehistoric landscape is seen through steel beams erected as part of the Peabody Museum renovation project.



Above, Kailen Rogers, associate director for exhibitions at the Peabody, shows renderings of the new museum to article author Kira Goldenberg, center, and Arnelle Larose, exhibitions intern at the museum, in August. Below, a workman uses a jackhammer to break up old flooring in the museum. All photos: Judy Benson



Yale's iconic natural history museum being transformed physically and culturally

ALREADY A PREMIER EXHIBIT AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION, PEABODY BEING REMADE FOR A NEW ERA

By Kira Goldenberg

A shiver ran through me as Tim White, the director of collections and research at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, opened a padlocked plywood door and then parted one of the air-tight metal doors within it.

There, without the glass that normally shields them from interlopers, were three American bison, standing placidly amid rolling Western plains. They have been dead for 150 years: legend has it that the bison were shot by Wild Bill in the 1870s. But they looked uncannily alive, quite capable of pulling some *Night at the Museum*-style capers if left unattended.

The bison and their taxidermied neighbors in the museum's North American Diorama Hall have been wowing visitors since the exhibit—many of its murals painted by the same artist who did the dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History—first debuted in the 1940s. They are one of just two parts of the Peabody, which opened in 1876 and has been in its current building since 1924, that will remain unchanged when the museum finishes its first major renovation in more than 90 years.

By late last summer, the 1920s building had been pared back to its studs. Special protective walls were built around the dioramas and two historic murals—the Age of Reptiles and the Age of Mammals—that will connect the Peabody's past as a groundbreaking physical science museum to its future as an institution with more classrooms, more light and more display space.



An American bison appears to graze beside its calf in the short grass plains of the West, one of the historic dioramas at the Peabody Museum. Photo: Judy Benson



As the Peabody is being rebuilt from the inside out, former exhibit halls are filled with scaffolding, beams and construction equipment. Photo: Judy Benson

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PEABODY RENOVATION WILL ENHANCE EXPERIENCE FOR KEY AUDIENCE: SCHOOLCHILDREN

The Peabody Museum renovation brings a great asset to Connecticut students: updated educational resources and facilities.

The museum has been an educational asset for generations of schoolchildren throughout the state, and the reimagined museum will bolster this offering, starting with an entrance dedicated to school groups with the capacity to handle up to three buses at once.

Before the renovation, the Peabody lacked a separate entrance for school groups, leading to overcrowding, noise and chaos in the shared public lobby. School groups will also have access to new classrooms, storage, programming and a lunchroom, Manager of School and Teacher Engagement Tom Parlapiano said.

“Everyone in the Education Department is excited to have a modern teaching facility where we can guide students as they explore science using the exceptional resources of the Peabody Museum,” he said.

Even before these improvements, the Peabody was a big draw for schools. In 2019, pre-pandemic, 444 youth or school groups visited the museum. With new resources devoted to serving students, those numbers can grow without compromising the general public’s visitor experience.

Kira Goldenberg

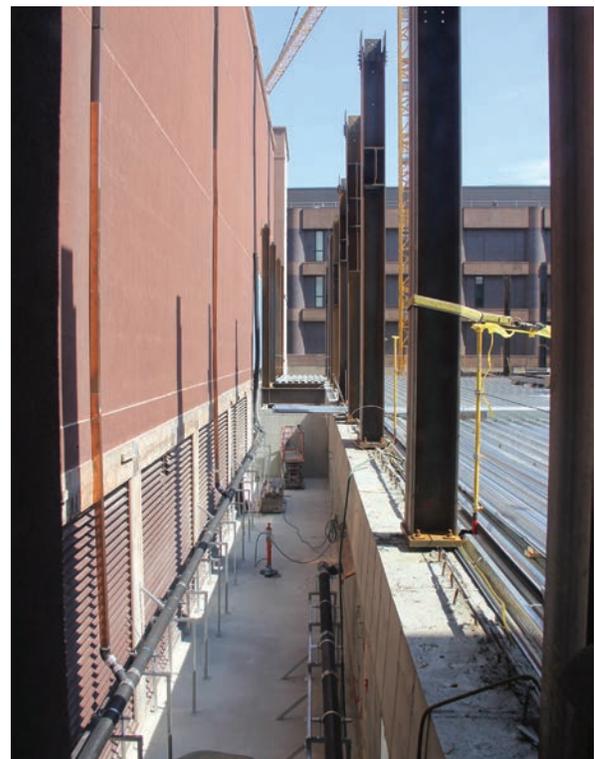


Two renderings show what the new Peabody museum will look like. Images provided by Reigh & Petch Design International / Centerbrook Architects and Planners



Construction work is taking place on the exterior as well as the interior of the museum. Photo: Judy Benson

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The renovation was announced in 2019, made possible thanks to a \$160 million donation from Edward P. Bass, Yale class of 1968, a longtime donor to science and conservation-related causes. It will allow the museum to completely modernize, integrating contemporary best practices and technology into a structure that wasn't previously built to include it.

Slated for completion in 2024, the project excites staff because of the increased number of objects that will be on display, with 50% more exhibition space. An entire section on ancient oceans, for example, will be installed for the first time, along with integrated classroom spaces that will allow for more real-life immersion in the eras and objects under scrutiny.

"If someone wants to teach a class using a mastodon skull, that's not ridiculous. We can do that," said Museum Director Dave Skelly.

But the project is, crucially, just as much a narrative overhaul as it is a physical one: Peabody staff is working to change the tenor of the museum. Instead of being a place where scientists are experts doling out knowledge to the public, it is becoming one where what we know is constantly changing, both based on new discoveries and on including historically marginalized voices.

"The idea that we needed to be able to allow more different people to tell stories and do it more often—that was fundamental to the whole project," Skelly said. "It's been very clear for a while that museums need to adopt a more inclusive posture. The expert behind the curtain telling you what it is—that's not a way to think about this."

That means making concerted efforts to bring more voices, both within and outside of the science world, into the mix.

"What we're increasingly thinking about is the authority by which we hold materials and the authority with which we interpret them for audiences," said Chris Norris, the museum's director of public programs.

The dioramas are case-in-point: the murals, painted in the 1940s, depict a landscape untouched by human intervention even as the animals that stand beside them had to be pursued, killed and preserved to create the tableau. They are, essentially, a history of human storytelling—which in the West has been overwhelmingly white and male—as much as they are scenes that convey scientific information.

When the Peabody reopens in 2024, the dioramas will remain but the ways available for visitors to interact with them will be vastly different and larger. That's because three college-aged alumni of Sci.CORPS, the museum's high school career readiness program, teamed up to craft shortened explanatory text focused on sensory description, select poetry by people indigenous to the landscapes depicted, write guided questions, and even create games for future visitors to use while engaging with the exhibit.



NATASHA GHAZI

"What we're really doing is figuring out which stories we want to tell and how we want to tell them," said Natasha Ghazali, one of the Sci.CORPS alumni. The Yale College senior spent the latter half of high school as a Sci.CORPS member, helping guests in the Peabody's two diorama halls interpret what they were seeing.

"It flips the script for who is an expert in museum spaces," Ghazali said. "We wanted the exhibit and the writing in the exhibit to be more accessible and less about rich white professional science men. This has to be a space for more people to come as they are and learn however much or however little they want to."

The Sci.CORPS alumni are working under the guidance of Neeti Jain, a National Science Foundation graduate fellow and a master's student at the Yale School of Environment.



NEETI JAIN

"They're bringing voices into the curation process that I think the museum doesn't always get," Jain said. The objective is to turn what was formerly a dry process of reading facts and figures into a more immersive experience with touchpoints that appeal to a broader array of visitors.

That's the goal for serving future visitors museum-wide. Beyond the dioramas, collection displays are being completely reimaged, both philosophically and physically.

"I was at eye level with these carved skulls from New

Guinea that were in one of our anthro halls,” Skelly recalled, reminiscing about a childhood visit. “They were still there just a couple years ago. That’s a long time to have one exhibit up.”

The museum’s iconic brontosaurus skeleton—the first-discovered of the species, named by Yale paleontology professor O.C. Marsh in 1879—is getting a refresh. (It was Marsh who convinced his uncle, George Peabody, to donate funds to create his namesake museum.) Updated scientific knowledge has revealed that the way the fossilized structure long stood as installed, with its head high and tail brushing the ground, was an inaccurate representation of how brontosauri moved across the Earth. They actually walked with head and tail off the ground, in more of a horizontal line parallel to the ground. When the skeleton is re-installed, it will reflect this update, with the neck and tail floating above visitors’ heads.

This, though, puts it at odds with the brontosaurus depicted in the Age of Reptiles mural. It was painted in the 1940s by Rudolph F. Zallinger, who started the project while he was still a fine arts bachelor’s student. He created innovatively realistic plant and animal ecosystems reflecting the knowledge of his era.

“That is something that we will be calling attention to, this artistic artifact that commemorates the science of 1942,” said Kailen Rogers, associate director of exhibitions. “The answer is not just, ‘let’s repaint the mural.’ We’re always adapting as we learn new information.”

That new information is now something the Peabody is seeking as it rebuilds its exhibits. Conservator and paleontologist Mariana Di Giacomo, who is from Uruguay, is writing about South American fossils in both English and Spanish. Museum officials are discussing the return of significant artifacts to the descendants of their Indigenous creators. For objects that remain, they are working to make

tribal voices an integral part of exhibiting them. Rogers is even part of a team partnering with Sanctuary Kitchen, the New Haven-based food organization run by area immigrants and refugees. The Peabody team is planning a storytelling workshop for the chefs there this fall with hopes that some of those stories will eventually inform related exhibits.

“Our goal,” Rogers said, “is to make more people feel that the Peabody is a place for them.”

MORE INFORMATION:

<https://peabodyevolved.yale.edu/>

Right, Tim White, left, director of collections and research at the Peabody, and Christopher Renton, associate director for marketing and communications, open doors protecting the Amazon jungle diorama. Below, workmen prepare one of the rooms for creation of new exhibit space. Photos: Judy Benson

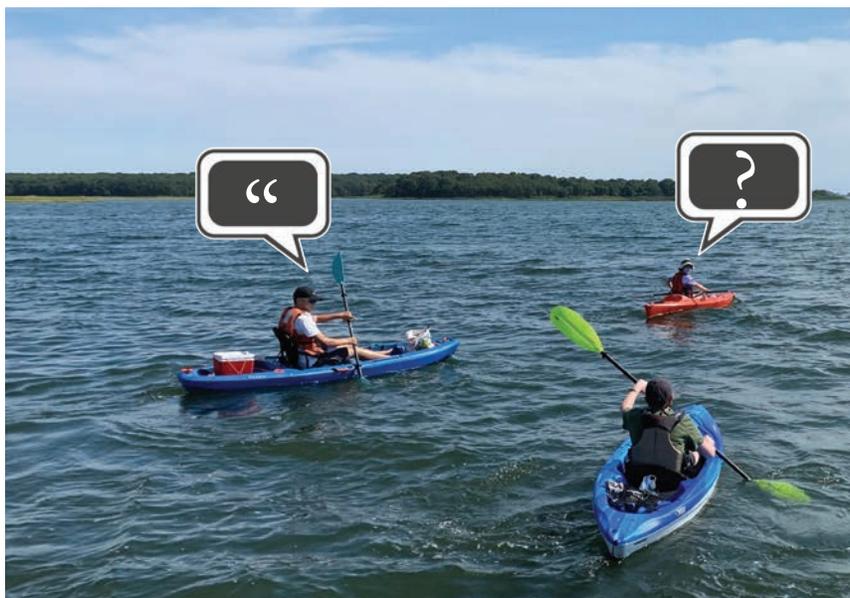


Photo courtesy of Veronica Rollinson



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judy.benson@uconn.edu

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