

WHAT YOU'LL SEE INSIDE GEORGIA AQUARIUM

By David Pendered

A closely guarded secret finally is out: The Georgia Aquarium will have five huge displays of aquatic life, including a deep-water ocean exhibit, a rare Indo-Pacific coral reef, and a 50-foot fishing trawler for kids and adults to play on.

A see-through tunnel beneath the open ocean exhibit will let spectators get right next to the aquatic creatures. A river exhibit tour will feature a tunnel or long walkway with transparent walls and ceilings, according to blueprints of the exhibits.

The plans — acquired by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution through the Georgia Open Records Law — show an incredible attention to detail. Aquarium officials declined to discuss the details of the blueprints Friday.

Live red oak trees, river birch and butterfly bushes are marked on the plans. All are to be selected by hand and transplanted, the blueprints indicate.

Some exhibits will be packed with displays of what appear to be artificial rocks. Designs for 22 different facades for the rock installations are drawn on the blueprints. The plans specify particular shades of paint made by Sherwin-Williams.

With its exterior nearly complete, the Georgia Aquarium looks from the outside like the modern Noah's ark pictured in renderings that Bernie Marcus released at the groundbreaking in 2003. Marcus donated \$200 million to design and build the Georgia Aquarium as his gift to the city where he and Arthur Blank started the Home Depot Inc.

Marcus has urged state and local leaders to leverage his gift into a sweeping improvement of downtown Atlanta.

Marcus also wants to create a pretty cool aquarium.

"It's a symbol of a vessel of preservation with the purpose of being used for . . . education and the promotion of marine life conservation," Marcus said at the ceremonial groundbreaking. "That's really what this whole thing is about, and I think you're going to find it very exciting."

A wealth of aquatic venues

The five displays are called galleries and include:

- **Open Ocean:** A tank called Ralph that may contain 2 million gallons, enough to fill two Olympic-sized pools, bisected by a glass tunnel for spectators.
- **Coastal:** A display with exhibits of an Indo-Pacific reef, one in the region covered by the Indian and Pacific oceans. This could eventually house a rare living reef, because the Georgia Aquarium hired a scientist from Hawaii who is a specialist on reefs, and has received permits for vast varieties of coral.
- **Cold Water:** A tank called Bob, the aquarium's second-largest, which is to be flanked by five smaller tanks and surrounded by live trees and bushes. The plans do not indicate whether the gallery is for fresh or salt water. But there's a strong likelihood it will be salt, based on plans two years ago that 90 percent of the exhibits be devoted to ocean creatures.
- **Fresh Water:** A tunnel beneath a river-based exhibit and lots of artificial rocks, including a play wall for kids with a massive face on one end.
- **Georgia Quest:** A big playroom for kids and adults, with an interactive fishing trawler, lighthouse, boathouse and a right whale theater, one of several theaters planned.



The aquarium's collection of tanks will hold 55,000 fish and about 5 million gallons of water. The spigots were expected to be turned on this month. Marcus said previously that it would take weeks, perhaps months, to fill all the tanks to capacity.

The first fish will be introduced into the tanks in late spring, Marcus has said.

Design firm thinks big

The galleries will be able to accommodate big crowds. Nearly 1,000 visitors may visit the Open Ocean gallery. The space at the Cold Water exhibit is marked for 1,601 visitors, suggesting it will be the planned ballroom space. But the actual capacities are difficult to determine because the facility has multiple levels.

Marcus has given a lucky few — local power brokers and national marine experts — a tour through the galleries. Some say they were awed by the wow power of the Georgia Aquarium. None would comment on the record, citing respect for Marcus and a confidentiality agreement that is so restrictive that some guests would not confirm that the agreement even exists.

"The aquarium is pure magic," one guest said. "People are going to see it and breathe it and live it and experience it. It takes your breath away."

The exhibits were designed by Peckham Guyton Albers & Viets, a firm based in St. Louis that has packed a lot of entertainment value into theme parks including Universal Studios, Busch Gardens and SeaWorld. The firm declined comment Friday.

Marcus has said the firm was chosen because it was willing to try new and exciting things. One example may be the tunnel through the Open Ocean exhibit. The tunnel bisects a deep hole and a shallow portion of what appears to be one really big tank. The tunnel's elliptical shape appears to be 8 feet high and 13 feet wide, and it seems to have a moving sidewalk next to a stationary pathway.

'They've nailed it,' it seems

The blueprints have repeated notes that the design firm is including the see-through passage in its plans, but is not responsible for its engineering.

The drawings for the Georgia Quest and Fresh Water galleries are the most detailed in the design package.

The Georgia gallery includes precise measurements for the boat and lighthouse, and even specifies the manila rope that will be part of a guard rail. The Fresh Water gallery has an eye-popping number of drawings of artificial rocks and vegetation that will be underwater. A face drawn on an artificial stone wall is so detailed that it evokes a mystical sensation. And there seems to be a crawl space for kids right next to the face.

David Tufts is one of many Atlanta residents awaiting the grand opening. By day Tufts is an executive with Coldwell Banker, the Condo Store, and he views the aquarium as a tremendous marketing tool for intown condos. In his free time, Tufts enjoys visiting cultural attractions. He listened to a description of the galleries and said he was more excited than ever at the prospects of downtown's newest attraction.

"The two big exhibits sound like blockbusters, the Open Ocean and Indo-Pacific reef," Tufts said. "And the interactive Georgia coast exhibit is such an appropriate display to show how the fishing industry works. It sounds like they've nailed it."

