

# West County News stomps through dino museum

By Elise Mumert

It was one of the first truly warm days of the year when I finally entered the doors of the Phillip J. Currie Dinosaur Museum last weekend.

Now I realize that the museum has been giving out tours to media and school kids right, left and centre, but I couldn't help but feel a tiny bit puffed up. The museum won't be officially open to the public until the fall, but there I was! Very Important Person coming through!

I hopped in with a tour of school kids, half of whom were on an exchange trip from Montreal. I was lucky enough to come to the museum on the day staff was doing the trial run of the educational tours that it will often conduct once the establishment is open.

When I joined them a museum employee was giving the kids a private tour of the fossil lab, with its spaceship tools. Huge piles of Roy Bickell's private fossil collection were heaped on wooden pallets waiting to be sorted, the last traces of one of the Peace Country's great men. (Apparently people can volunteer in this lab and learn how to prepare dinosaur bones. This seems like an incredible amount of pressure. I can barely manage to keep my iPad in one piece; I am not going to touch a three million-year old extinct skeleton.)

The first thing I noticed was that the Phillip J. Currie Museum is huge, designed by Toronto-based Teeple Architects. Don't be fooled by the way the building hunkers down by the highway. Every corner I turned became a different gallery, another grey corridor leading me somewhere new. It is

oh-so-much bigger on the inside.

The museum begins at ground level, where visitors will be able to interact with reproductions of the river bone beds nearby. Then you spiral down to a different level depicting the previous era, and then even further down to wander through the eras before that. (Don't ask me to name the time periods – I didn't jot them down as I could never spell nor pronounce them. You'll have to discover them for yourself in the fall).

The tour ended in the bowels of the museum, facing a wall of what is now just empty glass, but which will house a cold-water aquarium filled with fish native to our chilly province.

The effect was a bit like being in the bowels of a gigantic sea monster, in company with other poor mammals that had been swallowed whole along with yourself.

Of course, this was all imaginary. The displays are empty and the walls barren – for now. Marketing and Communications Manager Candice Popik assured me that the contents of the cases will be arriving imminently, and by August the display installations will be complete, full of an otherworldly and enchanted populace.

As we followed behind the gaggle of school children up a winding staircase to return from the depths, Popik trailed her fingers along the cement wall and tells me there will be a timeline mural there eventually. Every inch of this place will be packed with education.

Not that it's all lessons and no re-



(Photos by Elise Mumert)

Everywhere you look in the dino museum is glass, beetle pine timber, sunlight and high ceilings.

cess at the museum. That day children were running around with dinosaur hats that they had made themselves in a craft class (kids programs will be taking place all summer). Construction guys were working away, men in suits were shuffling paper in the gorgeous red boardroom (with attached kitchenette), and summer interns went about their day. I also got to meet the precise and genteel local muralist Tim Heimdal who took a break from painting his designs on the walls of the 70-seat theatre to speak with me. The gift shop area will

sell merchandise from local artists and businesses. The restaurant area will seat 70 people, and the outside patio another 70. The museum still hasn't found a business to take over the restaurant – but hope springs eternal and construction marches onwards, trusting that someone will step forward over the summer. One way or the other, the hungry museum masses will be fed.

The playground is scheduled to be landscaped this week, says Popik. She also directs my attention to a sign which marks the spot that

a future helipad will rest, where helicopters will land after taking visitors for 15-minute tours of the Pipestone bone beds.

The entire building is available for booking, from the boardroom to the two classrooms to the mini-theatre. Galas, conferences, meetings, courses – you name it, it can happen at the dino museum.

Even though the gift shop shelves were empty and the displays bare when I wandered through it, the clean winding lines of the place and the spring sun streaming in gave the building a classic feel that belies its newness.

It's been a long time coming, but something tells me the museum is definitely going to be worth the wait.

Just last week Mary Case, the former Chief Registrar of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, was at the museum to lead a Board Retreat to get the museum board of directors ready for the fall

2015 launch. They learned about effective leadership, staff coaching, meeting design and facilitation, and strategy development. Directing a world-class museum that is famous before it's even opened its doors must come with challenges.

Popik tells me that the museum is planning an open house and BBQ for September 2 and 3, to coincide with the epic Tour of Alberta bicycle race coming through Wembley. As well, the 2015 Amber Ball is set for September 26, and museum planners are hoping to hold the grand opening at the same time, barring any complications.

I sure hope to be there.



middle: A graphic rendering of future dino displays. bottom left: Palaeo Research Lab and Collections Manager Robin Sissons shows kids around the fossil lab. bottom right: Muralist Tim Heimdal hard at work in the mini-theatre.

