

Chong Behind New Academy of Sciences

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Sharply dressed in a black suit, architect Gordon Chong leans his arms on the wood railing of the walkway leading to the California Academy of Sciences' stunning four-story Rainforests of the World exhibit, pausing to admire the massive 90-foot diameter glass dome.

"This is the most exciting project I have ever worked on," he grins, causing his eyes to crinkle behind his black-framed glasses. He then points up to the roof and begins to rattle off facts about the skylights, which allow sunlight to reach the living rainforest and coral reef exhibits, and the 2.5-acre living roof of native California plants, which reduces storm water runoff by up to 3.6 million gallons of water per year and provides superior insulation.

Chong's enthusiasm for the new Academy's home is evident during a stroll across the museum, which will have its long-awaited grand opening on Sept. 27.

Along with renowned Italian architect Renzo Piano, Chong and his firm, Chong Partners Architecture (now Stantec Architecture), were part of the collaborating team that designed the new sustainable building, which includes a canopy embedded with 60,000 solar cells that generate 5 to 10 percent of the Academy's power.

The Academy's decision to rebuild came after the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake damaged the original building. They recruited Piano for the \$480 million project and sought a local partner who understood the intricacies of building in Golden Gate Park. Chong, who served as the national president of the American Institute of Architects, best fit that criteria.

"Gordon is elegant, resourceful, thoughtful and driven," said Alison Rempel Brown, the California Academy of Sciences' chief finance and operations officer. "He was able to bridge the requirements of design aesthetics and operational needs into a building that is beautiful and cutting edge. This project has met and exceeded all of our dreams."

The museum contains old favorites — the African Hall and the Morrison Planetarium — and new crowd pleasers including a Philippine coral reef exhibit, with over 2,000 colorful fish. Attendees will also have a chance to see public art installations by architect Maya Lin and eat at the Academy Café, operated in part by Charles Phan, chef and owner of the Slanted Door.

Born and raised in Hawai'i, Chong's love for architecture came from his father, who was an artist. "Growing up, my father would bring me to various buildings and discuss its composition and structure," recalls Chong. "He was the one who encouraged me to be an architect."

Since the founding of his own firm in 1976, he has focused on architecture, urban design and interior design, specializing in health care, university/academic, cultural and urban projects. His clients include Kaiser Permanente, the University of California, Stanford University, the City and County of San Francisco and United Airlines. Last year, Stantec Architecture, a Canadian firm, purchased his company. Chong's next project will be to design the Yee Fow Museum in Sacramento.

Chong, who looks to architects I.M. Pei and Ando Tado for inspiration, said the best part of being an architect is "the thrill of starting from blank, now knowing what you can design, and then being able to build something out of nothing. With the Academy of Sciences, I hope the new building will stimulate an interest in science and last for generations to come."