When Portia Sperr founded Please Touch Museum in 1976 she was thinking small. Very small. Say, under three feet. Philadelphia’s Please Touch Museum was designed for the preschool crowd familiar with the refrain “don’t touch that!” when visiting museums. This fall however, the little museum for little people will spread its wings in a new home that combines the best of Philadelphia’s past with its promising future.

“When the new Please Touch opens,” said Pierce Keating, CEO of Daniel J. Keating Company, “it will be a great moment for one of the city’s favorite museums in one of its most extraordinary landmark buildings.”

In late 2008 the new Please Touch Museum will be permanently ensconced in Fairmount Park's historic Memorial Hall. Originally the Fine Arts Building for the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, Memorial Hall has served as the original Philadelphia Museum of Art, headquarters for the Fairmount Commission, the Accident Investigation Unit for the Philadelphia Police department and even as a recording studio for The Philadelphia Orchestra. Philadelphia commuters on the Schuylkill Expressway see its 45-foot dome topped by a statue of Columbia rising above the trees. As the Please Touch Museum, Memorial Hall and the surrounding Parkside neighborhood will be infused with creative activity.

“We wanted to take full advantage of the majesty of the building,” said Nancy Kolb, President and CEO of the Please Touch Museum. “We want Philadelphians to be proud of this part of the city’s history and we want every member of the family to enjoy his or her visit here.”

The project is being constructed by a dream team of Philadelphia builders: Daniel J. Keating Company, Bittenbender Construction, and McCrae Construction, who have pooled their expertise in cultural projects and a shared commitment to preservation to make the job go smoothly. Northstar Advisors is the construction manager.

“We have been thrilled with the work being done at Memorial Hall by our contractors, architect and construction manager,” said Kolb. “Together they are building a legacy for generations of children in Philadelphia.”

Designed by Kise, Straw & Kolodner architects, the renovation / restoration of Memorial Hall features one new structure: a carousel house that will be home to the restored 1924 Dentzel Carousel.
“The Carousel was originally located in Woodside Park, not even a mile from Memorial Hall,” explained John McDevitt, Vice President of Operations for Please Touch Museum. “It was sold to the Smithsonian then sat in a Massachusetts warehouse for 44 years until the Pennsylvania Historical Commission bought it. This carousel is a sparkling jewel: it has 1400 light bulbs, 52 figures, two chariots and is handicapped accessibile.”

The restoration of the original building was the most challenging aspect of the construction, according to Keating. “It is a grand structure that had suffered from quick-fixes and patch jobs over the years. When we went in, we carefully peeled away the years of neglect and restored it to its original glory. We replaced the leaky roof, marble flooring, all of the windows, and decorative plaster on the walls. We made new insertions, like elevators and accessibility ramps for people with strollers and the disabled. We put in a cafe, coat room with lockers, and many family-capacity restrooms.”

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Keating also noted that the work on the grounds and the landscaping has been extensive.

“We’ve added 250 new trees to be exact,” said McDevitt. “There are gardens around the building, parking for 270 cars, and an outdoor eating area. It will be choice spot for weddings and galas.”

Philadelphia artist Leo Sewell is completing a replica of the forearm and torch of the Statue of Liberty, which will sit in the Great Hall as an homage to the 1876 Centennial, where the real forearm and torch were exhibited to raise funds for the construction of the statue. Beloved exhibits from the 21st Street location will be recreated in the new museum, including the SEPTA bus, Wanamaker’s monorail, and kid-size supermarket. New exhibits, like the set and costumes from the Captain Noah Show, will surprise and delight visitors.

“Each day that I visit the building,” said Kolb, “I see the amazing progress our contractors have made in bringing this..."
National Historic Landmark back to its original purpose as a museum. The restoration is truly a work of art. The Carousel House addition is stunning and the work that you can’t see, like the new heating and cooling and electrical systems, has all been done with superb care and skill."

"[This] will be a great moment for one of the City’s favorite museums in one of its most extraordinary landmark buildings.” – Pierce Keating, Daniel J. Keating Co.

Unlike the other buildings of the Centennial Exhibition, Memorial Hall was designed to become a permanent museum. The architect, Hermann J. Schwarzmann, a young engineer, used only granite, glass, and iron to ensure fire safety in the Beaux-Arts building. Although not the largest building at the Centennial, which occupied 450 acres in Fairmount Park, it was the most elegant, and had been built for the princely sum of $1.5 million in 1876. A model of the entire Centennial Exhibition, which was built in 1890, will be on display in a special room of the museum, where children will be encouraged to dress up in period clothing and experience Victorian Philadelphia.

“I am thrilled by the pride that our contractors have shown in this job,” mused Kolb. “They love that this building will be for children. I cannot wait to see the expressions on kids’ faces when they walk in here and realize that this incredible space is all for them.”

Rosemarie Fabien, PhD is a free-lance writer on design and construction topics. She has written extensively on the architecture of world’s fairs.

Established in 1911, Daniel J. Keating Company is a third generation general contractor and construction management firm. One of the most recognized names in the greater Philadelphia construction industry, some of our recent projects include the renovation of Philadelphia City Hall, Suburban Station Transit Center renovation, the Liberty Bell Center, and several major expansion projects at Philadelphia International Airport.

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