



The ROM's 'Crystal' will destroy an esteemed reno (below)

Courtesy of Lorenz Haumann/ROM

Trading the past for flash

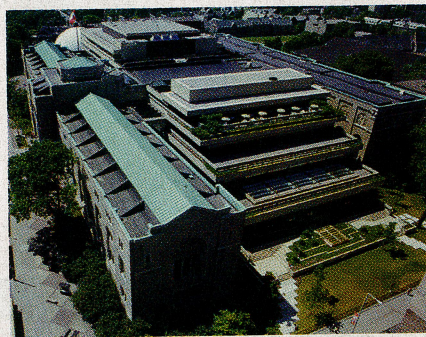
Two Toronto museums go for dramatic makeovers

BY JOHN GEDDES

Gene Kinoshita is not the type to make a fuss. He is, at 67, a distinguished Toronto architect, and careful when he talks about his craft. But he allows some stern professional skepticism to creep into his voice—along with a hint of something more painfully personal—when asked about the new plan to expand the Royal Ontario Museum. The design by Berlin-based American architect Daniel Libeskind would see angular glass jutting high above the ROM's venerable stone and brick. "It's a great image, fine," says Kinoshita with an impatient air. "But my concern is for the ROM itself, how it works for the staff and the public. It's not an entertainment centre; it's a museum."

He suspects the expansion is being driven by the impulse to make a splash—not to mention more room for cash-spinning restaurants and shops—rather than how best to display collections of old stuff. Few would blame him if he expressed much stronger objections. After all, to make way for Libeskind's "Crystal," a major Kinoshita addition to the Toronto museum must be obliterated. So far, though, the little matter of knocking down this award-winning piece of recent architecture has gone all but unmentioned. Only the ROM's 1912 and 1932 wings have been deemed worth preserving.

The notion that Kinoshita's addition was disposable would have seemed absurd when it was officially opened by Queen Elizabeth in 1984. It cost \$55 million and



Courtesy of ROM

won the Governor General's Award for Architecture, praised as an "unobtrusive" solution to the tricky challenge of doubling the ROM's floor space while respectfully knitting together the museum's historic sections. Its most visible element is a bank of five receding terraces that rise from a little grassy park along busy Bloor Street. The lowest level has a glass wall that shows off the famous Ming tomb complex inside. But the terraces were never meant to be showy. Kinoshita is more eager to discuss his interior scheme, laid out to let visitors find their way easily among exhibits.

Unobtrusive infills and the subtleties of gallery flow don't count for much in the current wave of museum building. Any new design is measured against the titanium-clad Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain, designed by Canadian-born, Santa Monica, Calif.-based Frank Gehry, which opened to ecstatic acclaim in 1997. Toronto is on the brink of a Bilbao-inspired construction boom. Last month, the Ontario government pledged \$91.2 million toward projects worth \$440 million at six cultural institutions. (The rest of the money will have

to be raised from other levels of government and private donors.) The ROM got \$30 million for its proposed \$150-million Crystal. The next biggest chunk of funding was \$25 million for a planned \$120-million expansion of the Art Gallery of Ontario—with Gehry tipped to be the architect.

While Gehry is bound to propose something exciting, just what he's been sketching remains a secret. The AGO's recent history, though, is a sort of cautionary tale. The gallery's latest expansion was completed in 1993 to roundly negative reviews. A new face along Dundas Street, with a voguish pyramid over the entrance, was called "pachydermously ponderous" by a British critic. The real tragedy was that this aimless postmodern facade covered up something much more appealing: the austere white expansions of the 1970s, designed by John C. Parkin, a pioneer of Canadian modern architecture.

In the mid-1960s, Kinoshita, then a young hotshot, worked at Parkin's trailblazing Toronto firm. The old master lived until 1988, long enough to see the proposal to build over his AGO work hatched, but not completed—which is perhaps just as well. Kinoshita remembers his mentor's dismay over the plan. "He was most upset," he says. "His architecture is very clean, Bauhaus style. But postmodernism had come along, and all Bauhaus work was being rejected." And now it is Kinoshita's turn to feel that rejection.

There was no outcry about burying Parkin's AGO additions. There's no reason to expect a clamour to save the ROM's terraces. Today's taste for big, brash museums will not be denied. The treasures inside them will survive to claim our attention. The same cannot be said, sadly, for what's sacrificed to make way for new packaging. **m**

THE BEASTMASTER

Peter May builds dinosaurs for a living, and museums just can't get enough

BY IAN CRUICKSHANK

It's the smell that hits you first—a peculiar mix of epoxies and resins with a whiff of welding torch. And there is something else—something fishy. "That's probably the whale ribs over there in the tub," says Peter May, whose dark goatee and baggy red sweater make him look like a jazz musician. He motions toward an enclosed tank. Inside, dozens of Flintstone-sized ribs, from a 40-ton right whale, are soaking in water to leach the oil from the bones.

The odd odours and marinating whale ribs aren't the only curious things in the old shoe warehouse on the edge of Beamsville, Ont., 50 km east of Hamilton. May's company, Research Casting International Ltd., is the pre-eminent builder of dinosaurs for museums around the world. This year, as well as reconstructing the odd whale, the company will earn more than \$2 million making fibreglass casts of fossilized dinosaur and prehistoric mammal bones and then building life-sized models of the beasts for more than a dozen museums around the world. Off in one corner, a technician—one of 20 employed by the company—is putting the final touches on a mastodon skeleton that will go to the Indiana State Museum. Next to it is an ambulocetus, a 40-million-year-old, four-legged ancestor of the modern whale, which is bound for the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa.

The reconstruction techniques developed by May, 46, and his team allow them to replicate a dinosaur down to the tiniest bone. About 10 per cent of May's business involves constructing dinosaurs from original fossils. But due to the scarcity of the real thing, and the cost of making new finds, May's main focus is on recreations. Curators from around the world can't seem to get enough. The Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History in Oklahoma City is among the institutions that have come calling. Curators there asked May to build their centrepiece exhibit for the institute's

official opening in 2000. The 27-m-long apatosaurus took 1½ years to construct; two years later it continues to attract thousands of visitors a month. "We looked at a few other people," said Noble curator Nick Czaplewski. "But we knew of Peter's work. He did a fantastic job."

May's threadbare office is decorated with posters of old dinosaur movies—*The Lost World*, *One Million Years B.C.* and others. Poking out of a box on top of a filing cabinet is the cast skull of a sabre-toothed tiger—one nasty looking incisor curling over the edge. May's laptop sits on a desk in the centre of the room. As a screen saver, he uses a picture of his two daughters, Amelia, 19, and Jacqueline, 11, dressed in their hockey uniforms. (His son Alex, 17, also plays hockey.) "I think we have a real chance this year to win the provincials with Amelia's team," says May, stroking his goatee. He has promised his wife, Terry, that he will lose the chin hair if Amelia wins.

As May considers the fate of his beard, Sue, the world's most expensive tyrannosaur, stares down at him. At 12.5 m in length and standing 4.5 m high, Sue is the largest T. Rex skeleton ever discovered. She was found in 1990 in South Dakota. In a public auction, the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago paid \$12.5 million for the fossilized bones. McDonald's Corp. and Walt Disney Co. raised the bulk of the money; the Field Museum paid May \$750,000 to make seven copies of Sue, including one for Disney, two for McDonald's and another—the one still in residence in Beamsville—for a private collector.

May's crew took moulds from the original bones and cast them in plastic. Then they spread the pieces out on the warehouse floor and, like a giant jigsaw puzzle, slowly assembled the models along backbones of steel rods. Staring up into Sue's ferocious jaws—they could crunch 230 kg of meat in a single bite—May smiles wryly and says, "We do get involved in some pretty interesting projects."

As they come in, his reputation widens. "It's safe to say May is the best in this business," says Hans-Dieter Sues, vice-president for collections and research at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. "There are two or three other companies, but most museums consider Research Casting the first place to stop." Since 1990, May's firm has built over 250 prehistoric beasts. "I think people love dinosaurs so much because they are like mythical creatures, almost like dragons," says May. "It's hard to believe these enormous, ferocious creatures once wandered our world."

Born in Oldham, a village near Manchester, England, May stumbled into the world of dinosaur reconstruction by accident. His family emigrated to Hamilton in 1964. He later attended the University of Guelph, where he specialized in sculpting and earned a B.A. in fine arts. But after he graduated in 1977, one of his professors arranged an interview at the ROM, which had an opening for a junior technician in its vertebrate paleontology department. Within a few weeks, May was out in the Alberta badlands, excavating dinosaur fossils. He turned out to be a natural. "You have to know about paleontology and how the bones fit together," he says. "But you also have to be a sculptor, a welder and know how to mould and cast."

After seven years at the ROM, May was offered the chance to help establish the now renowned Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology near Drumheller, Alta., which opened to worldwide acclaim in 1985. As senior technician, he was in charge of moulding and casting bones for almost all of the original displays. He returned to the ROM in 1986, and a year later started Research Casting in his spare time. "I met a lot of people from museums around the world when I was working at the Tyrrell, and they began asking me if I could build them dinosaurs," May says. "They just didn't have the facilities or the trained staff to do the work in-house."

By 1991, he had landed three major



Edward Pond for Maclean's

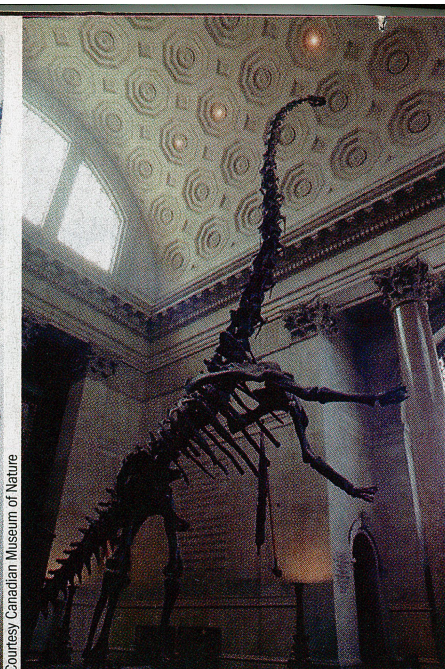
Canada and the World

contracts with institutions in Japan, England and the United States. “Suddenly, I had orders for a million dollars’ worth of dinosaurs,” he says. “So I left my job at the ROM and cranked up Research Casting full-time.” One of those contracts was with the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which wanted May to build a barosaurus, a giant herbivore.

May and his crew drove down to New York City to pick up the fossilized bones. They were far too heavy for a free-standing mount—the hip bone alone, May remembers, “weighed 180 kg and took four of us to move it.” May took latex moulds and then cast the new bones in fibreglass and polyurethane foam. The five-storey-high model was too tall to assemble inside May’s warehouse, and had to be constructed using a crane in the parking lot. The beast was reassembled in the rotunda of the museum, where it continues to be a huge hit. It is the tallest free-standing dinosaur ever constructed, weighing one ton and standing 15 m high and 24 m long.

May’s next high-profile assignment came in 1991, when he read that Steven Spielberg was about to make a movie about dinosaurs based on Michael Crichton’s novel *Jurassic Park*. “I sent his company a letter saying, ‘Here is what we do. If you need a skeleton, give us a call’—and they did,” May says. A month later, May flew to Hollywood, and ended up helping mount a scene in which a marauding T. Rex destroys a museum-style display—complete with T. Rex skeleton. With Spielberg’s cooperation, May also put together an exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History that included dinosaurs, props and clips from the movie. It opened on June 11, 1993, the same day as the film, and attracted more than 400,000 people within three months.

May’s company has branched out into other areas. Throughout 1998 and 1999, working under contract to the American Museum of Natural History, members of his crew travelled to Pompeii to make casts of a column in the city that was engulfed by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius almost 2,000 years ago. For the same museum, May’s company also made moulds of geological formations in Hawaii and on the coastline of Scotland. The Scottish assignment was particularly gruelling: May and his crew rappelled down the side of a cliff and, suspended 30 m above the ground,



Installing a daspletosaur at the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa (upper left); barosaurus skeleton at the American Museum of Natural History in New York (upper right); checking out a May installation at Disney’s Animal Kingdom in Orlando, Fla.

applied rubber casts to sections that reveal 20 million years of geological history.

May recently expanded his horizons again, this time with the modern world’s last great giant, the whale. Working for the ROM, he travelled to Prince Edward Island last December to haul away a 24-ton sperm whale. “According to the necropsy,” says May, “it was just a teenager with raging hormones that went barrelling up the beach and got caught on a sandbar.” The bones were brought back to Beamsville to be cast, and the model will eventually be mounted at the ROM. As well, in November the ROM sent May to the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence to salvage a right whale, of which there are only 300 left in the world. With a heavy storm brewing, May had mere hours to work. “We arrived at 3 p.m. and by 6 p.m.

the storm hit,” he recalls. “Luckily we got the skeleton off in time. Otherwise, it would have been washed out to sea.”

New opportunities are waiting. When the first phase of the Three Gorges Dam project on the Yangtze River is completed in 2003, many artifacts will be lost as the dam begins to fill. A Chinese archaeology institute invited May to visit the area in January and examine a poem etched into the rock above the river about 300 years ago. The institute asked him to make a mould of it before it is submerged. “But I think we can actually cut away the rock and save the original,” says May. “That’s why I love what we do so much. Every day we do something new, try some kind of new challenge.” And museums from around the world just keep calling.

With Michael Snider in Toronto