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Denver Museum of Nature & Science unveils new wing, Mayan exhibit

[Ed Sealover](#)

Reporter- *Denver Business Journal*

[The Denver Museum of Nature & Science](#) officially opens the doors on its new \$56.5 million wing Friday, and officials believe it will offer not just more space to show off its 1.5 million artifacts but a chance to increase significantly visits to what is already one of the city's most popular ticketed attractions.

The 126,000-square-foot wing will contain both the [Morgridge Family Exhibition Center](#) — where the new exhibit “Maya: Hidden Worlds Revealed” makes its national debut Friday — and the Rocky Mountain Science Collections Center, which will provide consolidated housing for artifacts for the first time in the museum's 113-year history.

Spread over five floors, the area also features an expanded Discovery Zone for small children and a host of exploration studios for field trips, camps and professional-development groups.

The museum, which reported a paid attendance of [more than 1.2 million people](#) in 2012, has been able to attract a number of high-profile shows in recent years, including a Titanic exhibit and the popular cadaver-laden “Body Worlds” show.

But when those came through, curators had to be selective in which artifacts they put on display, as they were limited by the 13,000 square feet of space they had for traveling exhibitions in the museum's Phipps Gallery.

With the addition of 7,000 more square feet in the new Anschutz Gallery that is part of the Morgridge Center, however, [Ed Scholz](#), vice president of finance and business operations, believes the museum may have the largest amount of exhibition space of any science museum in the country.

And that can allow it to bring in more exhibits that set it apart from competitor museums and attract people not only from around the Denver area but from surrounding states as well, he said.

“The museum's going through a transformation,” Scholz said. “I don't think anybody really knows what the next decade holds. But we don't want to be caught off guard and be waiting to see what's next ... This is the newest and the best, based on research we've done for many years.”

With that increased space, the museum sometimes will be able to host two special exhibits at once — as it will when it puts on display shows on whales and the Great Silk Road later this year, Scholz noted.

And sometimes the 20,000 square feet will be combined for one monster show, like it is from Friday through Aug. 24 with the Mayan exhibit.

The Denver museum co-created the Mayan show with the [Science Museum of Minnesota](#), combining artifacts from the two facilities and other sources to create a comprehensive overview of life during the Central American civilization's classical period, from 250 to 900 A.D.

Displaying both actual archaeological finds — such as an incense burner carved with the face of K'awiil, the lightning god — and casts made of stone friezes from Mayan temples, it walks attendees through their astronomical accomplishments, their building feats, their popular ball game and even everyday life.

The show includes hands-on exhibits that teach attendees Mayan weaving or let them learn the culture's numeric symbols. And it's also kept at a higher level of humidity than most of the rest of the museum.

"The humidity level really has more to do with the preservation of artifacts, but it also orients visitors to the theme of the Maya," said [Michele Koons](#), a curator of archaeology.

From Denver, the exhibit will move onto museums in Boston and San Diego, which will generate even more revenue for its creator museums.

But while the new space may be the biggest tourist draw, museum officials are just as excited about several other features of the new wing.

The six-part Discovery Zone, aimed at kids from ages 3 to 5, opens June 7 in a 5,500-square-foot space. That is nearly twice the size of its current 3,000-square-foot area, and it also is far more organized to create specific experiences, such as a room where kids can climb on dinosaurs and another where they learn about the science in their own kitchens, said [Frances Kruger](#), senior exhibits developer.

The basement collections area consolidates artifacts that have been stored in 49 different locations throughout the museum, allowing research to be done much more easily and letting tours look into the windows of these areas to see hidden gems not displayed on the museum's floor, like Lewis and Clark's telescope, said [Stephen Nash](#), chairman of the department of anthropology.

And the first-floor exploration studios have room for display of touchable artifacts and access to the park outside the museum, so that kids on field trips can go from learning about how to build an Alka-Seltzer-powered rocket to shooting one off in a matter of minutes, said [Nancy Walsh](#), director of museum programs.

"What does 21st-Century museum anthropology look like?" Nash asked. "These facilities give us the ability to enhance our level of engagement with our own collection."

Ed Sealover covers government, health care, tourism, airlines and hospitality for the Denver Business Journal and writes for the "Capitol Business" blog. Phone: 303-803-9229.