

## DWELL BLOG



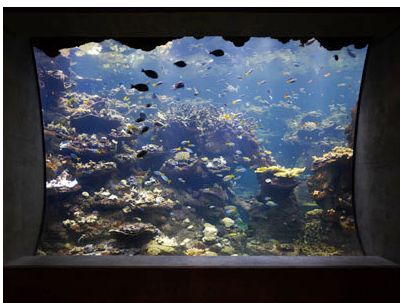
**[Miyoko Ohtake](#)**

## California Academy of Sciences Water Planet preview



When the new [California Academy of Sciences](#) opens on September 27, it will be a treat not just for the eyes but for all of the senses. It will “envelope you in experience,” says Tom Hennes, founder and principal designer of the New York-based design firm [Thinc](#) and creative director of CAS’ [Steinhart Aquarium and Water Planet exhibits](#).

On Thursday morning I headed over to San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, where the museum is located, for a sneak peak of the water exhibits. Even though wooden crates and carpenters crowd the spaces that will soon be overflowing with eager visitors, Hennes’ design, which is about experiencing the interrelations between water and life, came through strongly.



Flanked by the 100,000-gallon California Coast exhibit and the 212,000-gallon Philippine Coral Reef display (which will house 3,000 saltwater fish when complete), the Water Planet is the heart of the museum’s lower level. Its silvery, sculpted walls and dramatic blue and green lighting creates an immersive, watery setting. Thinc teamed up with [Urban A&O](#) to create a long oval area contained by complexly sculpted, silver, fiberglass walls. Smooth protrusions curve and flow in a wave-like pattern along the walls’ surfaces and around the integrated jewel windows that open up to the live animal displays.

Designed with CATIA-based software and parametric modeling, the purpose of the undulating walls, said Urban A&O founding principal Joe MacDonald, is to “suggest movement and give direction.” So-called “flair-outs” in the walls’ sinuous protrusions become rails to lean on and benches to sit on without disrupting the fluidity of the design. Dramatic blue and green lighting gives the atmosphere a deep-sea feel, furthering the underwater immersion.

I asked Bart Shepherd, the curator of the Steinhart Aquarium and Water Planet exhibits, why it was important to create an architecturally engaging exhibit space. His answer bespoke the goal of the Academy as a whole: creating a sustainable future. “The designers have created an imitate space where you can really get up close and personal with the animals in the exhibits,” Shepherd said. “And as a result, a visitor will be able to make a strong emotional connection between them and the organism behind the glass and hopefully they can take that away and change the way they live life to help increase and promote conservancy.”

Posted by: [Miyoko Ohtake](#) on Aug 22, 08 at 10:55 AM PDT