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NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUMS OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY SELECT WEISS/MANFREDI TO LEAD MASTER PLAN FOR LA BREA TAR PITS



WEISS/MANFREDI conceptual approach features a bridge across the Lake Pit at La Brea Tar Pits. Rendering courtesy of WEISS/MANFREDI

Los Angeles, December 11, 2019 - Dr. Lori Bettison-Varga, President and Director of the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County (NHMLAC), today announced the Museums' selection of the architecture firm WEISS/MANFREDI to lead a master planning team in re-imagining the uniquely important and world-renowned La Brea Tar Pits. The team will work with NHMLAC on a multi-year process of public engagement, master planning, design and construction at the Tar Pits' 13-acre campus, which encompasses the world's only active paleontological research site in a major urban area, its asphalt seeps, surrounding parkland, and the George C. Page Museum building. More information and images of the conceptual design by WEISS/MANFREDI can be found at tarpits.org/reimagining-la-brea-tar-pits.

WEISS/MANFREDI's multidisciplinary team includes Los Angeles-based experiential designer Karin Fong of Imaginary Forces; horticulturalist and nationally recognized expert in water conservation and California ecology, Robert Perry of Perry and Associates Collaborative; Los Angeles native and La Brea-educated paleobotanist Carole Gee; naturalist and artist Mark Dion; and designer Michael Bierut of Pentagram. The team will be augmented by Los Angeles-based consultants, including architect and historic preservation advocate Brenda Levin of Levin & Associates. A range of additional Los Angeles-based consultants will also be engaged in the master planning and subsequent project implementation phases.

“We are excited to move forward with Marion, Michael, and their remarkable team, as we work toward a more integrated experience of the museum and the landscape in Hancock Park while increasing community access, preserving the site’s iconic features and developing a more sustainable infrastructure for the next 50 years,” said Dr. Lori Bettison-Varga. “It was a difficult decision, as all three teams put forth compelling and creative conceptual approaches. But in the end, there was consensus in the feedback we received from the competition jury and selection committee, NHMLAC staff and board, and the Los Angeles community that WEISS/MANFREDI’s conceptual approach captured the imaginations of a broad cross section of audiences. We look forward to starting our master planning work with them in the new year.”

Marion Weiss and Michael Manfredi, principals at WEISS/MANFREDI, said, “There is truly no place in the world as magical as La Brea Tar Pits. We and our team are deeply honored and grateful for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reveal the multiple identities of the Tar Pits, the Museum, and Hancock Park. Our ‘Loops and Lenses’ concept creates new connections between the museum and the Park, between science and culture, and envisions the entire site as an unfolding place of discovery. We are thrilled to begin work with Dr. Bettison-Varga and NHMLAC to rejuvenate the Tar Pits and the Museum and carry them into the future and into the public imagination.”

The Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County are a public / private partnership with the County of Los Angeles, which owns the 23 acres of Hancock Park, including the 13-acre parcel managed by NHMLAC. Los Angeles County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl said, “I’m happy to see the County move forward on this distinctive 21st century re-imagining of one of our most notable cultural and scientific landmarks. We considered proposals from around the world, received input from thousands of members of the public, and chose this exciting concept which will dramatically enhance the public experience while improving the sustainability of the Museum and Tar Pits.”

NHMLAC chose WEISS/MANFREDI’s team through an international search process, in which the Museums chose three finalists based on the overall quality and character of their response to a Request for Information, their conceptual approach to the project, and their previous experience and team strength, along with interviews and references. Copenhagen-based Dorte Mandrup and Diller Scofidio + Renfro of New York were the other two finalists announced at an “incubator” event held in June 2019, in which NHMLAC convened more than seventy leading figures from the fields of science, the arts, design, entertainment, education, technology, communications, philanthropy, and government for a day of open-ended discussion to kick-start the process toward developing conceptual approaches. In August, the three finalist firms and their teams publicly shared their visions for the site’s future. Through displays prepared by the three teams on view in the Page Museum and materials available on TarPits.org, NHMLAC invited public feedback on the proposals and received more than 2,100 survey responses that reflected Angelenos’ appreciation for the beloved site and cultural resource.

To assist with their selection, NHMLAC assembled a jury of leading figures from the fields of architecture, landscape architecture, design, science, natural history, and the arts. Jurors included Milton Curry, Dean of USC School of Architecture; Christopher Hawthorne, Chief Design Officer, City of Los Angeles; Kirk Johnson, Director of the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution; Kristin Sakoda, Executive Director, Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture; and Barbara Wilks, Founding Principal and Architect, W Architecture and Landscape Architecture, LLC. The selection process was developed with the advice and coordination of Reed Kroloff of jones | kroloff.

"There's no site in Los Angeles, and really no site in the world, quite like La Brea Tar Pits," said jury member Christopher Hawthorne, Chief Design Officer for the City of Los Angeles. "It's a place of deep emotional connection and nostalgia for Angelenos, a community gathering place and a green space in the middle of the dense Miracle Mile, and a world-class location for research, discovery, and exhibition. I've been impressed by the patient and inclusive process that NHMLAC put together to choose a master-planning team. And in that process WEISS/MANFREDI and its collaborators stood out with a concept for the site that is both full of fresh thinking and thoughtfully responsive to those layered existing conditions."

The La Brea Tar Pits Campus

The world's only active paleontological research facility in a major urban area, La Brea Tar Pits is situated within the eastern portion of Hancock Park in Los Angeles's Miracle Mile district. Since research began in 1913, the Tar Pits have yielded millions of samples, including saber-toothed cats, dire wolf and mastodon skeletons, innumerable plants, small rodents, and insects. Scientists continue to make new discoveries daily in the Tar Pits open-air excavations. Collections from the Tar Pits constitute an unparalleled resource for understanding environmental change in Los Angeles and the planet over the past 50,000 years of Earth's history.

The George C. Page Museum, designed by Los Angeles architects Frank Thornton and Willis Fagan, opened in 1977. Burrowed into the earth to preserve as much of the landscape as possible, it has sloping, grass-covered exterior walls, which are a beloved feature of Hancock Park, and is surmounted by a 10-foot-high, 4-sided fiberglass frieze of Ice Age landscapes, plants, and mammals, created by the sculptor Manuel Paz. The 57,000-square-foot-museum has more than 2 million specimens in its collection. Because of the building's shape and underground siting, however, the museum is difficult to modify and expand, to the detriment of its programs in exhibition, education, research, and storage.

In addition to the Tar Pits and the museum, the campus comprises several active digs, an Observation Pit building from the 1950s (refurbished in 2014), a concession building, simulated Pleistocene landscapes, and contemporary gardens.

Over the past few years, NHMLAC has made an ongoing series of improvements and enhancements to the Tar Pits, the museum and its portion of the park. The recent installation of the Second Home Serpentine Pavilion by selgascano celebrated architectural design and provided a temporary site for free public events.

About the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County

The Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County (NHMLAC) include the Natural History Museum in Exposition Park (NHM), La Brea Tar Pits, and the William S. Hart Museum. They operate under the collective vision to inspire wonder, discovery, and responsibility for our natural and cultural worlds. The museums hold one of the world's most extensive and valuable collections of natural and cultural history—more than 35 million objects. Using these collections for groundbreaking scientific and historic research, the museums also incorporate them into nature and culture exploration in L.A. neighborhoods, and a slate of community science programs—creating a natural history museum experience that explores the past, but increasingly addresses the present and the future. Learn more [here](#).

About La Brea Tar Pits

The asphalt seeps at La Brea Tar Pits are the only consistently active and urban Ice Age excavation site in the world. This makes the site a unique window into active science—where fossils are discovered, prepared, researched, and displayed in one place. Outside, visitors can watch excavators unearth fossils of the wildlife trapped in the seeps. Inside the Museum, scientists and volunteers clean, repair, and identify those very fossils. The best specimens are displayed and available for research: from extraordinary saber-toothed cats, giant sloths, dire wolves, mammoths, and mastodons—to microfossils of small animals and plants. These collections constitute an unparalleled resource for understanding environmental change in Los Angeles, and the planet, during the last 50,000 years of Earth's history.

WEISS/MANFREDI Architecture/Landscape/Urbanism

WEISS/MANFREDI Architecture/Landscape/Urbanism is at the forefront of architectural design practices that are redefining the relationships between landscape, architecture, infrastructure, and art. Named one of North America's "Emerging Voices" by New York's Architectural League, WEISS/MANFREDI won the 2018 Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Institution's National Design Award as well as the New York AIA Gold Medal, and the Academy Award in Architecture from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Most recently, WEISS/MANFREDI was honored with the Mercedes T. Bass Landscape Architects in Residence Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. The firm's cross-disciplinary projects include the Seattle Art Museum's Olympic Sculpture Park, recognized as one of Time Magazine's Ten Best Architectural Marvels, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden Visitor Center, Penn's Center for Nanotechnology, the Women's Memorial at Arlington Cemetery, the Museum of the Earth, and the recently opened Hunter's Point South Waterfront Park. They are currently working on the US Embassy in New Delhi, India. For more information visit weissmanfredi.com.