

Dream of a PEEC Experience: An Imaginary Tour of the new Los Alamos Nature Center

By Sue Watts

NOTE: in dreams, money and technology are not a problem.

ALSO NOTE: All thoughts and images are my own. This does not reflect the reality of plans by either the interpretive or the exhibit committee.

I walk into the PEEC from the bus stop. To my left, I see the trailhead that will lead into the canyon. A food forest created by the local permaculture group helps shade the path. Beyond that, I can see the kid-managed vegetable garden soaking up the sun. That's bordered by a natural playground where other kids are happily following their own interests in the mud kitchen and on the balance stumps. To the right of the parking lot, the Design with Nature area occupies a hilly, piney space where artists of all ages have created temporary designs from natural objects. A mobile of found objects drifts in the wind. Beyond that, I can see several child-built forts in various stages of construction.

Moving along the entry path towards the door, I begin to hear sounds of local animals, triggered by my approach. Bronze native animals suitable for climbing and photo ops crouch and perch amidst a native plant area. To the other side, a hunk of soft Bandelier tuff towers above a patch of native stones. Someone tries to chisel a petroglyph on one side, while a



Sue Watts and Becky Shankland at the site of the new Nature Center

small child makes a pile of pumice, obsidian, and tuff rocks. Another child finds a dacite “arrowhead” hidden in the puddle of rocks.

At the orientation plaza, a person is using her shadow to tell time on a human sundial embedded in the cement, while a companion consults the trail map and guide to find a hike that will suit his hiking abilities and interests. Ahead, a walk leads around the building towards a rim walk sporting an interpretive, proportional geologic timeline. Later, I will wander along there and spend some time sitting on a bench, watching the clouds build towards an afternoon monsoonal shower.

But now, I enter the building. The descending trill of a canyon wren announces my presence. A cheerful docent greets me from beneath a changing display of pictures submitted by local folk. I know I can touch each picture for more information. To my right, the executive director waves from the administration offices. Just beyond that, on the right, the gift shop full of nature goodies, field guides, and sunscreen promises a pleasurable ending to my visit.

The docent asks if I would like to see a short movie introducing the area. She leads me to the multi-purpose room, which also functions as a planetarium. The Saturday night presentations about the stars have become a popular monthly event, complete with music from gentle local bands. On solstices and equinoxes, tiny openings cast a shadow on the floor to mark the sun’s position on special days—good thing we’re blessed with sunny skies. For now, I select the film that reminds me of the magic of the landscape surrounding us. I wait for the ending, when the screen retracts and the curtains pull back to reveal the breathtaking panorama of the Jemez Mountains, stretching above the deep canyons below.

Inspired by the movie, I come out to confront my choices. I can check out the “What’s Blooming Now” panel near the herbarium. I can head toward the observation room, trying once again to see if I can keep the virtual birds from startling into flight as I approach. Inside, I can listen to see if a spotted towhee is singing in the certified backyard habitat demonstration garden. If he is, I can use the scope to see if his eye really is red or not. However, I decide I’ll move through the exhibit hall with its permanent exhibit showing newcomers the corrugated topography of our canyons,

mesas, and mountains along with their associated life zones. I'm heading for the biological field station to see the latest results from the butterfly count. I pass the herps display, looking to see if the snake is hiding, watching Elf the turtle soaking up the rays of a sunlamp, and daring Betty the Bullfrog to leap for my hand. I move past the Nature Trading Post, checking to see if anyone has brought in something I'd like to have. I look at the latest contributions to the artist nook and find someone's haiku that I must copy down. I leave a copy of a photo I took of the sunset on the Sangres. At the field station, I check out the tally of butterflies at the field station, then pull up the data from the last few years to see how this year's batch compares with those who came before. I step past the group of folk sitting around the citizen science café and am happy to overhear their plans for a bio-blitz for later in the summer. The sound of happy children pulls me into the children's discovery area, where kids are crawling through a three-dimensional mock-up of our landscape. Some kids are giving a puppet show using the local animal puppets. Others are playing with the smaller plastic replicas. A mother snuggles with her child and reads a story. A father watches his child put together puzzles. Two little girls sit and watch the aquarium of local river fish. Posters remind parents of the importance of unstructured play and good questions to ask to further learning.

Returning to the docent station, I sign up for the latest Nature University talk on summer wildflowers. The docent tells me the raspberries along Water Canyon are ripening. I've got to get out there and see for myself. I remember I haven't punched the Water Canyon trail on my "Passport to the Pajarito" ticket. I upload a personalized trail guide to my smart phone. I return to the gift shop to buy some sunscreen and a copy of a local flower guide to give to a neighbor who has just moved into the area. As I leave, the quotation over the door reminds me that...

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but
in having new eyes."
- Marcel Proust