

## Science in culture

## Alien visitors

The Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame in Seattle opens up a whole new world.

Greg Bear

Perhaps the most fun I've had in Seattle's arts and sciences scene began more than two years ago, with a mysterious e-mail message asking if I would like to advise on a science-fiction exhibition. As a professional science-fiction writer, my response was immediate: of course.

It turned out that Paul G. Allen, investor, philanthropist, co-founder of Microsoft and life-long science-fiction reader, was thinking of creating the world's first comprehensive museum of science fiction.

In the project's exploratory phase, fellow science-fiction author Neal Stephenson and I attended meetings with future curators and museum staff. We set out to determine how such a museum should be designed, and whether it could fit into the space available — sharing a portion of the Experience Music Project building, also developed by Allen. Allen was dead set against just having four stone walls and glass cases gathering dust. Instead he wanted the museum to reflect science fiction's greatest asset: its sense of fun in the face of complicated and even cosmic questions.

That summer, my wife, Astrid, and I escorted a group from the Experience Music Project around the World Science Fiction Convention in San Jose, California, dropping them into the thick of science-fiction fandom — the culture that has nurtured so many science-fiction writers over the decades, including Ray Bradbury and Arthur C. Clarke.

Later we helped a team hired by Allen's Vulcan production company, already convinced of science fiction's impact on scientific and popular culture, to condense the history of science fiction into a handful of succinct themes. Reflecting science fiction's textual origins, the museum designers set out to show that it all begins with the written word: a story, a novel or a screenplay. They also wanted to show the connection between science fiction and science — the symbiotic relationship between imagination and discovery. The challenge became how to prove these two contentions historically and demonstrate them to the public. Over several months, the team put together a comprehensive design featuring interactive exhibits mixed with display cases filled with key artefacts, such as books, magazines, artwork and film props.

The Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame, a marvel of passion, technology and design,

opened its doors last month. It represents a proud and dynamic reversal of years of cultural neglect of the story of science fiction — of its history, aesthetic philosophy and symbiotic relationship with science.

The exhibits are organized into five thematic galleries: Homeworld, Them!, Fantastic Voyages, Brave New Worlds and the Science Fiction Hall of Fame. Each gallery reflects a tributary that feeds into the main river of science fiction: these are,

Among the centrepiece exhibits are Captain Kirk's command chair from the original *Star Trek*, a line-up of famous film robots, as well as interactive wall displays showing cities of the future and a wide variety of speculative spacecraft. The Hall of Fame, a curved wall of polycarbonate bricks engraved with glowing portraits, enshrines many of the finest names in science fiction.

One of the most pointed demonstrations of science fiction's impact on technology is the choice



Making an entrance: Seattle's latest tourist attraction invites you to experience the best in science fiction.

respectively, history, aliens and robots, getting from here to there in unusual ways, the changes that will occur in society, and the literary and artistic personalities that created these visions.

Much of the collection is provided by Allen himself, but many display items have been loaned by studios, film-makers, writers and fans. Among my favourites are Poul Anderson's idea notebook, the original manuscript of E. E. Smith's *The Skylark of Space* (the first major novel of interstellar adventure), and many pieces of original art by Chesley Bonestell, including his classic covers from *Collier's* magazine and the lovely *Saturn As Seen From Titan*. Film buffs will meet the original E.T., on loan from Steven Spielberg and Universal Pictures, and the Alien Queen from James Cameron's *Alien* — all terrifying six metres of her.

of Donna Shirley as the museum's director. Shirley was inspired by Robert Heinlein, Bradbury and Clarke to venture into a career in aerospace engineering, and led the team that built the Mars Sojourner microrover, which landed on Mars in 1997. She has loaned a half-scale copy of the rover and a chunk of martian meteorite to the museum.

Science fiction is a product of the poetic, dreaming mind of the sciences. Its considerable influence in books, films and television is ample proof of the need for a well-funded and disciplined study of the field, open to the general public. The Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame is an exquisite beginning.

Greg Bear lives in Lynnwood, Washington, USA. His most recent science-fiction novel is *Dead Lines*.

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