

Inner Harbor Journal

Science Center, booming at last, will expand

By Martin Millsbaugh

THE MARYLAND SCIENCE CENTER was the first of the Inner Harbor's multi-million dollar attractions to be planned — preceding even the master plan for the harbor itself — and it will apparently be the first to expand its offerings and its physical plant to respond to Baltimore's emergence as an international tourist destination.

Since its opening in the spring of 1976, just in time to greet the Tall Ships on their Bicentennial visit, the Science Center has witnessed several rapidly-changing phases in the life of the Inner Harbor. In the first few years after the doors opened, construction was still going on around the center's site, making it hard to find, and attendance started building slowly.

By the time the ethnic festivals at Rash Field were hitting their peak in 1979, the Science Center had been found by Baltimoreans, at least, and attendance figures more than doubled. Last year, another 50-percent jump in attendance was recorded, when the Convention Center and Harborplace started to pull a national audience. This year, with the Aquarium and Hyatt Regency Hotel added to the city's panoply of attractions, the Inner Harbor has achieved a real "critical mass" as a tourist attraction.

For the Science Center, this history has meant, in the early years, that the existence of a private, non-profit science museum was necessarily hand-to-mouth, and balancing the budget came slowly. Now, it appears the center is in the black for good, and the time has come to improve what's there and expand with new attractions.

New and exciting exhibits have been funded by gifts from Maryland corporations and family foundations; excursions, lectures, and tours have been stepped up; more than 300,000 school children have visited the center free of charge, coming from each one of the Maryland counties. The \$1,000,000 Davis Planetarium has been re-computerized, with new sight and sound capabilities.

But still the conviction has grown among the leadership of the center and its parent organization, the Maryland Academy of Sciences: a conviction that the building itself needs a new image. Designed with solid walls all around, the building was constructed to permit an unlimited range of exhibits inside, but, as a result, with no welcoming face to present to the world.

"The Science Center has been mistaken for a classified research center," goes one report: "the entrance is located so that it is invisible from Harborplace and the Pratt Street corridor; it is difficult to

tell whether the building is opened or closed."

The dramatic success of the newer attractions across the water has turned these impressions into a conviction: the Science Center needs to be given a new image, reaching out to the crowds of people thronging the water's edge.

The first thrust is planned to be a basic change in the orientation of the building itself, from Light Street to the promenade along the water, where the Inner Harbor crowds stroll between attractions. This will be done by creating a new entry structure, facing toward the water's edge, with a glass-enclosed lobby and restaurant wing overlooking the water and the grassy lawns to the west and north.

The other new thrust is taking shape around a proposed IMAX (pronounced eye-max) theatre: this is the large-screen special-effects movie house where spectators are made to actually experience the sensation of flying, or space travel, or undersea movement. (The nearest IMAX to Baltimore is at the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, where thousands line up every day to watch the film, "To Fly.")

The IMAX Theatre will fill a niche in the Inner Harbor's list of attractions, and give the Science Center a second major crowd attraction to match the Davis Planetarium, and increase visitor

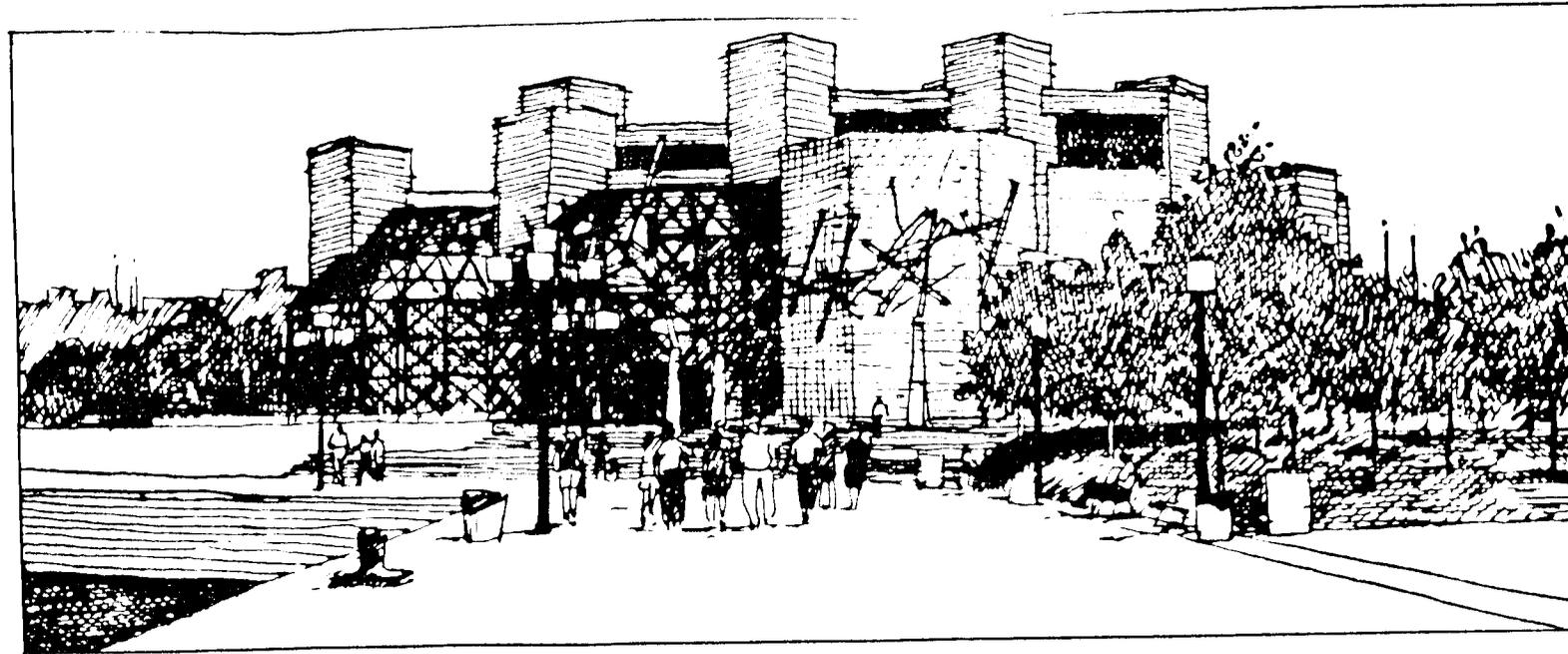
traffic enough to help pay for construction of the expansion, containing not only the large-screen auditorium, but other scientific exhibits and participatory displays.

The new arrangement of space will also make it possible for the center to make better and more efficient use of the existing building. The lobby and gift shop will no longer have to take up valuable exhibit area in the center of the structure; an expanded shop can be made accessible from both outside and within, and a prosaic but essential component missing in the original design — an adequate coatroom — can be provided.

The Science Center's constituency will shortly be sizing up the potential ways of coming up with the necessary funds. The center is owned by the Academy of Sciences, a non-profit private organization supported financially by the state and city governments, and by contributions from science-oriented industry, private donors, and the general public.

Howard I. Scaggs, chairman of the board of trustees of the academy (in everyday life president of American National Building and Loan Association), heads the organization that will carry the brunt of the expansion movement and its financial backing. Mr. Scaggs brings imposing credentials to the task, having, among other things, led the campaign for state funding of the hugely-successful Baltimore Convention Center.

Up to the point where Mr. Scaggs joined the board in 1980, the story of the



A NEW ENTRANCE: The expanded Science Center will have its 'front door' facing the harbor

Science Center resembled the history of many an old Baltimore institution:

The first record of a science center having been located in Baltimore was in 1797, a predecessor of the Peale Museum, then located at 45 South Charles Street. Accounts in the Baltimore Daily Advertiser described the exhibits as including minerals, fossils and stuffed birds, and added, "a handsome Rattle Snake is living at the Museum."

The Rattle Snake has given way to science arcades, energy sight-and-sound displays and computer games, while a six-man planetarium staff produces special effects from hundreds of film projectors with original sound track. The Science Center authorities feel the time is appropriate to step forward again, to meet the opportunities being created in the city's exciting new era.

Martin L. Millspaugh is president of the Charles Center-Inner Harbor Management Corporation.