

Watch this space: the most stunning display of the universe ever built, the Rose Center for Earth and Space replicates thousands of galaxies beyond the Milky Way

Out of this world

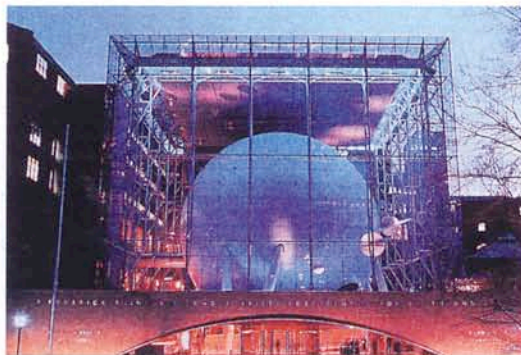
New York's breathtakingly updated planetarium has put the American Museum of Natural History on the map. Evan Ferguson finds it holds universal appeal

Get out of the cab a little early. Walk, for a bit, through Manhattan's Upper West Side – Woody Allen country, all rich brownstones and trees and dog runs, bathed in shabby gentility. Then step from the snows of Central Park some bright morning this spring, turn a slippery corner to your left, and behold one of the new wonders of the world.

The Rose Center for Earth and Space, opened just a few weeks ago, has already been hailed by *The New Yorker* as 'perhaps the purest piece of monumental architecture built in the United States since the Washington Monument', and compared, rightly, to IM Pei's Louvre pyramid.

James Stewart Polshek's vision, realised in a mere six years, at a cost of \$200 million, is a beautiful, astonishing creation, a feast of superlatives. Technically, it's a planetarium, an upgrading for the run-down Hayden Planetarium that sat on the same site for decades, but that's a bit like saying St Paul's Cathedral is technically a church.

A sphere, the cleverest sphere in the world, sits, apparently hanging in air, inside a glass cube so thin, so beautiful, so transparent – it's made of an entirely colourless glass known as Pilkington water white – that it seems, in bright sunshine, not to be there at all. Inside, the American Museum of Natural History has created the most stunning, hi-tech, effective displays of our universe ever to exist. Ralph Applebaum, the exhibition designer, has said he wanted to create a 'sense of aesthetic awe'. At a time when the language is so inverted that a



Tommy Hilfiger sneaker or a perfume is described as 'awesome', Polshek and Applebaum have succeeded magnificently, and a quaint, half-forgotten museum is now set to become one of New York's biggest attractions.

The planetarium sphere itself is impressive enough – the most advanced Zeiss supercomputer projector in the world fires a filigree of light at a darkened skin inside the dome, recreating the thousands of stars in our galaxy and beyond. The most advanced astronomical information to date has been used to create virtual-reality representations of beyond the Milky Way, far off into the other thousands of galaxies that form the Virgo Supercluster.

It's worth a trip to New York in itself.

Outside, though, the sense of awe, if anything, increases. Walking down the 'rings' between sphere and glass, calibrated to represent time since the Big Bang – every step you take is 75 million years – and coming to the last step, where the relative longevity of mankind is represented by a strip the width of a human hair, it's hard not to find it almost funny, in a way, in the sense of Douglas Adams's clever hyperbole, or even *The Onion's* famous spoof of the sense of awe we should rightly have felt on that day in 1969 ('Holy Shit! Man walks on Fucking Moon!'). The exhibition manages to remind you just how very small, and how very beautiful, human life is.

For this building, Whatever's Out There Bless America.

