

Foundation has now helped rescue the ‘other half’ of the old Raffles Museum and Library from oblivion.

One evening, just as the fundraising for the museum was coming to a close, the university president urgently sought out Ng and Tan. As it was already past 6 pm and the call sounded urgent, they feared that something might have gone awry. Instead, they were met by an apologetic university president who told them that the promised site was no longer available (it was given to NUS-Yale) but that he could now offer them the site of the soon-to-be vacated Estate Office. This was music to the ears of Ng and Tan as they had concluded that this was in fact an even better site, given its greater accessibility and proximity to the University Cultural Centre, NUS Museum, and the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music. Ironically, the Kent Ridge Crescent location was the exact site the late Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Reginald Quahe had offered to house the collection back in 1977.

Work on the building began on 11 January 2013, and was completed in the first quarter of 2015. The 8,500 sq m, seven-storey ‘green’ building was designed by renowned home-grown architect Mok Wei Wei.<sup>26</sup> Winner of the President’s Design Award in 2007, he had worked on high-profile public projects such as the refurbishing of the National Museum as well as the Victoria Concert Hall and Theatre.

## Psst ... Want to Buy a Dinosaur?

One of the most important specimens from the old Raffles Museum that everyone wanted back in Singapore was the Indian Fin Whale skeleton that used to hang imposingly at the National Museum. It had been given to the Muzium Negara in Kuala Lumpur by the Science Centre in 1974 and had somehow found its way to the Labuan Marine Museum (on Labuan Island, off the coast of northern Sarawak). Getting it back would be extremely difficult. The museum would just have to make do with its ‘treasures’ and hopefully acquire something spectacular along the way.

In April 2011, fate beckoned again. Leo Tan recalls:

... a phone call comes in from Germany: ‘You want a dinosaur or not? I’ve got three.’ We didn’t know these guys, but they heard about us, through the grapevine, because very few museums were being built. Ironically, he heard about our new museum plans from a German post-doctoral student who was in Peter’s laboratory at NUS at the time. We had no idea why a crab researcher was linked



to a dinosaur digger and we were surprised. It was all a coincidence ... synchronicity. But this got the conversation started.<sup>28</sup>

The caller represented Dinosauria International LLC, a Wyoming-based fossil company that had been excavating in Wyoming's Dana Quarry site. They had three dinosaurs for sale and they were actually 80 per cent complete. Tan was amazed; he knew that there had been very few finds of this scale and of this level of completeness over the last century. The asking price: \$12 million. The offer would be good for just two months. Tan thought:

*10.4 Apollonia, one of the museum's three dinosaurs, in the warehouse at the Sunbury Armory, Pennsylvania, in 2010*

At first, I was just thinking if we could even afford one, but he said, 'Think about it. If you can raise the money, buy all three. They are very good.' They were found together, whether they are a family or not, we don't know, but it would be good to have them as a group. He gave us only two months. This was in April 2011. At the end of the two months, we only had three-quarters of a million and we didn't want to ask for an extension of time because it would have committed us. We kept quiet. Lo and behold, he offered us an additional two months.<sup>29</sup>

The university sent a team to the dig site to check the veracity of Dinosauria's claim and see the dinosaurs in situ. Tan later visited the workplace and storehouse, paying his own way. All Dinosauria's claims proved true, and this led Tan to ask Dinosauria why they were so anxious to sell the dinosaurs to the museum since they could easily make a quicker and more profitable sale to a private collector through the auction houses. Their reply pleased him:

They said, 'The only reason we want to sell to you is because you are the only new museum that is public and open to scientists coming to study these specimens.' Both the principals of Dinosauria are palaeontologists; and as scientists, they valued research access. That was how we started the journey. In the second two-month period; we tried every other means, and eventually we struck a deal, and we got what we needed.<sup>30</sup>

The three dinosaurs—diplodocid sauropods—were found together. Two of them—nicknamed Apollonia and Prince—were adults and measured 24m and 27m from head to tail, while the baby dinosaur, Twinky, measured 12m from head to tail.<sup>31</sup>

This was to be the beginning of their 'dinosaur campaign'. Having only recently raised \$46 million for the museum, how were Tan and Ng going to raise a few more million for the dinosaurs? The Development Office was upbeat about their prospects (no one had ever tried to raise money for dinosaurs before!) but for the first few months, they did not make much headway.

In July, developer Ng Swee Hua called to enquire on the progress of the dinosaur fundraising. He had met Tan a year before, when Tan was addressing the finalists for the Singapore Environmental Achievement Award (Ng Swee Hua's Siloso Beach Resort won one of the awards). Shortly after that, Ng Swee Hua invited Tan and Ng to tour his resort and they chatted briefly about the museum fundraising. When Ng was told that little headway was being made, he pledged \$500,000 to 'get the ball rolling.' This was the impetus Tan and Ng needed: they now had the necessary 'seed money' to persuade more potential sponsors to come on board.

They next approached the legal representative of the anonymous donor who gave \$10 million for the museum and asked if the donor would consider giving another \$1 million for the dinosaurs. The response was positive, but he had a request. Because some members of the public vociferously objected to the purchase of the dinosaurs on grounds that it had nothing to do with Singapore's natural history, the donor wanted an assurance that the purchase had 'government support'.



10.5 The Dinosauria International (DI) team with members of the Singapore museum (LKCNCM) group at Dana Quarry, Ten Sleep, Wyoming in June 2011. From left: Dr Henry Galiano (Director, DI), Dr Sebastian Klaus (post-doctoral fellow at NUS and museum volunteer), Professor Rudolf Meier (Deputy Head, LKCNCM), Dr Tan Swee Hee (Project Manager, LKCNCM), Mr Raimund Albersdörfer (Director, DI), Ms Belinda Teo (Project Manager, LKCNCM) and Mr Derek Teo (museum volunteer).



10.6 The Fossilagic workshop at Orem, Utah. Professor Leo Tan examining the fossil skull of Apollonia in November 2011.



10.7 Dinosaurs subsequently boxed up and shipped off to Singapore



It was indeed an odd situation since dinosaurs were technically never part of Singapore's natural heritage. However, they lived over 65 million years ago, when there was no Singapore or Southeast Asia as we know it today; all the world's land masses were configured differently. In that sense then, perhaps dinosaurs are everyone's heritage!

The donors' request proved rather tricky for Ng, who decided to try his luck with Yaacob Ibrahim, the then Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA). Yaacob had been a supporter of the ZRC and the museum, and agreed to write a letter of support for the project. Another \$1 million was added to the kitty.

The next big donation came from Dr Della Lee, the wife of Dr Lee Seng Gee, the eldest son of Lee Kong Chian and brother of Dr Lee Seng Tee. She was intrigued by the size and antiquity of these fossils, and after several conversations, was persuaded of the importance and value of having these dinosaurs in Singapore for everyone to see and enjoy. At Dr Della Lee's request, the managers from Dinosauria International came all the way down from the US to personally explain why the dinosaurs were valuable.

The deal was sealed. However, even with her donation, the museum was still a few million dollars short of the undisclosed agreed figure for the purchase. What else could be done to raise the remaining sum?

Once again, Tan and Ng decided to approach Dr Lee Seng Tee for advice. As with so many things that have happened over the last few years, it was a most fortuitous meeting. As Ng recalled:

Dr Lee had back-to-back meetings with different people on the day of our meeting, and he had scheduled a discussion with Mr Philip Ng, CEO of the Far East Organisation on other matters. Our schedules overlapped. Dr Lee told Philip that he was a strong supporter of the museum and that we scientists still needed money for our dinosaurs. Turning to Leo and me, Philip asked, 'What do you guys need?' We explained that we needed a bit more money to ensure we can purchase the dinosaurs, and we also needed money to help set up a wonderful exhibit and enhance its value to education. Without a second thought he replied '\$5 million should take care of all of this.' Leo and I were dumbfounded by his generosity!<sup>32</sup>

By the end of what they called the 'dinosaur campaign', Tan, Ng, and their team had raised more than \$9 million to purchase, deliver, and set up the dinosaurs and the associated displays in the gallery.<sup>33</sup> With this key acquisition—and not only one but three dinosaurs!—the final ingredient was now in place to guarantee the natural history museum's success.