

AKC Essay Competition - Coversheet

- Complete all sections of this form and ensure it is the first page of the document you submit (either copy and paste this page into the front of your work, or begin your work on subsequent pages of this form).
- **DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ON YOUR WORK.**
- Pages should be clearly numbered.

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Degree Programme (where applicable)	Neuroscience Bsc (Hons)
Department (where applicable)	School of the Biosciences
AKC Year (1, 2 or 3):	3

Essay question number:	1
Essay Title:	If there was a tenth lecture for this AKC series, which building would you choose and why?
Deadline:	23:59, Sunday 26 April 2020
Date Submitted:	Thursday 23 April 2020
Word Count (max 1500 words):	1451

DECLARATION BY STUDENT

By submitting this essay, I declare the following:

This assignment is entirely my own work. Quotations from secondary literature are indicated by the use of inverted commas around ALL such quotations AND by reference in the text or notes to the author concerned.

ALL primary and secondary literature used in this piece of work is indicated in the bibliography placed at the end, and dependence upon ANY source used is indicated at the appropriate point in the text.

I confirm that no sources have been used other than those stated.

I understand what is meant by plagiarism, including self-plagiarism.

I understand that plagiarism is a serious academic offence that will result in disciplinary action being taken and may result in my withdrawal from the AKC programme.

I understand that essays which do not include references and a bibliography will not be read.

My word count is accurately stated above and I understand that essays which are more than 10% over the word limit may not be considered by the AKC Steering Committee.

Natural History Museum: A Cathedral of Nature

The Natural History Museum (NHM) is an iconic building on Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London. It is one of the most beloved museums in the city, attracting over five million visitors each year¹. It houses a vast collection of 80 million specimens, ranging across different specialisms of natural history such as mineralogy, palaeontology, herbology, zoology and entomology². Alongside being open to the public, the NHM is a site of research and discovery, tackling questions of the past, present and future. This essay will examine in closer detail why the NHM should be studied in the AKC series as an example of a building, which like its contents, is evolving over time.

The origins of the NHM go back to 1753, the year of death of Sir Hans Sloane, a physician who on his travels to the Americas collected cultural artefacts and natural history specimens. After his death, Sloane's will gave permission for the British Parliament to buy his collection of 71,000 items for £20,000. The government then went on to build the British Museum to display the collection to the public. The current NHM collection was displayed in the British museum until a separate board of trustees were appointed who commissioned a separate building to be built to house the natural collection. The new building was proposed to be built in South Kensington, a site which had been promoted by Prince Albert as the cultural centre for London and the location of the Great Exhibition of 1851³. The idea to build a museum to house specimens of the dead

¹ Iva.org.uk. 2020. *ALVA | Association Of Leading Visitor Attractions*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.alva.org.uk/index.cfm>> [Accessed 5 April 2020].

² Nhm.ac.uk. 2020. *Collections | Natural History Museum*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/our-science/collections.html>> [Accessed 5 April 2020].

³ Yanni, C., 1996. Divine Display or Secular Science: Defining Nature at the Natural History Museum in London. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 55(3), pp.276-299.

on a site that reflected the 'enlightenment' and the development of technology at first sounds contradictory. However, it was in a suitable location by being somewhere the public would seek to travel to for other landmarks such as the Royal Albert Hall. Also, as time progressed the NHM would also house future technology and become a 'great exhibition' of its own. This can be seen through the museum's architecture.

Alfred Waterhouse was the architect who designed the NHM to be in the German Romanesque style and to be an iconic London landmark as the 'Temple of Nature' that it remains to this day. It was decided that the NHM would be made from terracotta due to it being inexpensive and resistant to the city's pollution. It also meant that ornaments inspired by natural history could be carved from floor to ceiling. Extinct species ornaments were represented on the east side of the building, whereas the current living species were on the west side, reflecting how the specimens were displayed inside. This was done at a time when Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was only just being accepted. The museum is now presented as an important link between the past and present, and how lineages have evolved. Furthermore, the gallery ceilings are covered with diverse decorative panels of botanical species from all over the world. This decoration is a subtle way to remind the public of where they are in time and evolution. In the 1850s, there was a boom in people collecting natural specimens. At the time museums were a luxury only a wealthy few could afford. However, Owen insisted the NHM should be free and accessible to all. This is important as it engages the public and continues to inspire future generations to take an interest in the natural world and allows the public to be involved in building the collection. For example, the museum's herbarium is not only a resource to study the specimens found on famous voyages such as James Cook's, but is a growing collection with the researchers relying on amateur botanists to collect specimens from the British Isles to research how biodiversity in the UK is changing⁴.

Owen intended the central hall (Hintze Hall) to be dedicated to important species from the different groups on display. The museum finally opened to the public in 1881 with nothing in the centre of the Hall⁵. However, by the 1890s a skeleton of a sperm whale was displayed as well as smaller exhibits⁶. As millions of visitors have visited the museum over the generations, Hintze Hall has adapted with them to symbolise current affairs and research. In 2014 plans were made to replace the beloved 'Dippy the *Diplodocus*', who had been the centrepiece of the hall since 1979, with a blue whale skeleton. 'Hope' the blue whale was a symbol of humanity's power to shape a sustainable future⁷. Hope has been in the museum's collection since 1934 and is a symbol of how humanity can reverse a natural disaster. At the time of Hope's death in 1891, there were around 250,000 blue whales in the World's oceans. However due to commercial whaling the species almost became extinct with only 400 reported to be in the ocean by 1966. Since the ban on whaling, the population of blue whales has risen to around 20,000. It is important to give the public 'hope' that through research and education, creatures such as the blue whale can still be around in the future. Therefore, the NHM is an ideal model of a building designed to reflect its purpose: To both highlight the beauty of the natural world, and to inspire future generations whilst making them aware of current issues jeopardising the natural world as we know it.

The iconic terracotta building has adapted as time has gone on, especially with the addition of the Darwin Centre which was designed using a more modern approach. The Darwin Centre was commissioned in 2001 to Swedish architects C. F. Møller Architects. Despite the building having a very different design to Alfred Waterhouse's grade II listed building, it still maintains the idea that the building's design should reflect its purpose. Inside the Darwin Centre there is the 65m tall Cocoon which houses 20 million plant and insect

⁴ Nhm.ac.uk. 2020. *Collections | Natural History Museum*. [online] Available at: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/our-science/collections/botany-collections/general-herbarium.html>> [Accessed 19 April 2020].

⁵ Nhm.ac.uk. 2020. *Discover | Natural History Museum*. [online] Available at: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/indexing-earths-wonders.html>>[Accessed 5 April 2020].

⁶ Nhm.ac.uk. 2020. *Discover | Natural History Museum*. [online] Available at: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/museum-history-hintze-hall.html>>[Accessed 5 April 2020].

⁷ Nhm.ac.uk. 2020. *Discover | Natural History Museum*. [online] Available at: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2017/july/museum-unveils-hope-the-blue-whale-skeleton.html>> [Accessed 11 April 2020].

species and has enough laboratory space for up to 200 researchers⁸. It was opened in 2009, where it provides additional space for the specimens and allows the public to interact with science experts so they can help answer questions regarding the environment. Moreover, the cocoon is a symbol of new life, highlighting the museum's adaptation to a new generation of naturalists. Thus, the significance of this extension to the museum is to serve as a space to educate the public about current issues facing the natural world, such as climate change and conservation⁹. It is home to a space with technology that was not invented when the museum was first built and designed, showing how the museum is adapting as science evolves.

The museum has plans to protect the natural environment in the future as well as the present, with the current plan to develop the Urban Nature Project (UNP). Currently, urbanisation is a huge threat to the natural environment. With the reducing numbers of green spaces in London, there are less habitats for British wildlife and as a result biodiversity is at risk. Consequently, the UNP plans to double the size of the museum's current Wildlife Garden to provide space for British wildlife to flourish¹⁰. Additionally, it will be a space for education and inspiration where the museum staff can teach the public about importance of biodiversity and the impact of humanity on the natural world such as climate change. This is in hope that visitors can take their museum experience back to their home city or town and protect their own urban environment. The UNP provides additional space and resources for scientific research about increasing biodiversity in urban areas. The UNP is an example of the museum's efforts to use its current collection containing now extinct plants and animals and adapting the building, not only to house natural history of the past but also nature at present.

The world is a very hostile environment for nature at present; with climate change accelerating to become a reality, the human race must do what they can to preserve the natural world and do what we can to restore what has been destroyed. A symbol of this effort is the NHM, which through its original and contemporary architecture along with the UNP serves as a space to educate and inspire the public, making them aware of the threats to the natural world and what we can do as a society to preserve nature. Therefore, it is important to also inspire the students on the AKC programme and make them aware of the significance the museum not only has on London but also on the rest of the world. Therefore, the NHM should be the tenth lecture of the AKC series, to demonstrate how this cathedral of nature is an example of a building that, like its collection, is evolving over time.

⁸ Waite, Richard, and Richard Waite. 2020. "Darwin Centre, London, By C F Møller Architects". *Architects Journal*. [online] Available at: <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/darwin-centre-london-by-c-f-mller-architects/1994156.article>.<<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/darwin-centre-london-by-c-f-mller-architects/1994156.article>> [Accessed 6 April 2020]

⁹ Nhm.ac.uk. *About us | Natural History Museum*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/about-us/urban-nature-project.html>> [Accessed 11 April 2020]

¹⁰ Nhm.ac.uk. Press Office | *Natural History Museum*. [online] Available at: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/press-office/press-releases/the-natural-history-museum-s-urban-nature-project-secures-nation.html>> [Accessed 11 April 2020]