

Many stories: no bones about it

VICTORIA LAURIE

The new West Australian Museum has been a decade or more in the making, and sisters Claire Furness, 8, and Lucy Furness, 6, were not born when it began to take shape on a drawing board.

Now they are among the first young visitors to the \$400m city block-sized building in Perth's Northbridge cultural precinct that opens officially on Saturday.

The sisters made a straight line for the giant wombat skeleton and wooden horses created by master merry-go-round builder Percy Wright, whose 1920s creations graced locations in Western Australia and Britain.

The WA Museum, also called Boola Bardip meaning "many stories", is dedicated to bringing together all aspects of postcolonial life on the western third of the continent with its 65,000-year Indigenous cultural heritage.

It was an ambition articulated by many of the 54,000 individuals who responded to the museum's invitation to contribute stories and ideas.

Museum chief executive Alec Coles, who arrived from Britain in 2008 to take on the job of creating the new museum, says he is proud of the input of so many West Australians in shaping the content. "We've always adopted the principle that we're not going



COLIN MURTY

Claire Furness with a *Diprotodon optatum* skeleton

to speak for people, they speak for themselves," he says. "It's important that the first thing you encounter at the entrance is storytelling by Nyoongar elders in the Ngalang Koort Boodja Wirn gallery, or Our Heart, Country and Spirit."

Design teams — Thylacine from Canberra and Sydney-based Freeman Ryan Design — helped execute the work alongside 30 local curators.

The Furness girls' mother, Bree, said she valued the Indigenous themes in all eight permanent galleries, including an

Aboriginal artist's fire-themed animation that daughter Lucy watched while lying on a swag.

"It felt like you were inside a campfire. It's the kind of experience that's a long way from my childhood memories of creatures in jars of liquid," she said.

An 18-month fit-out has seen collections stored for decades brought into the public realm, from delicate silk flowers imitating WA's unique orchids to a giant meteorite that landed on the Nullarbor Plain in the 1940s.