It’s not just for fossils in here

LACMA educators are trying hard to show teens that museums can be cool.

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ACING a wall-sized screen of dancing 3-D polygons, a clutch of teenagers stands mesmerized, glad that their moms nagged them into coming to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. More modern stuff, like this interactive “Nano” exhibition, they say, and they’d come here more often.

Not 10 paces away, a trio of girls watches a hip-hop dance lesson, their teenage peers whooping and hollering to a throb- bing DJ beat. The three girls have never visited the museum before either, but more hip-hop stuff like this, they say, would keep them coming back.

So lies the challenge in luring Los Angeles teens to an art museum. Local kids are as diverse and discerning as the rest of this city, if not more so, with their demanding schedules and seemingly insatiable tastes. But that isn’t stopping LACMA’s education directors from launching a new effort to reach them.

Starting in June, the museum will offer a four-week, portfolio-building boot camp for high schoolers who hope to attend art colleges. Other new teen classes will experiment with edgier types of media, like found objects. Even the museum gift shops are being retooled, adding special sections for shoppers younger than 18.

But most of all, museum officials simply hope to add more teen members to the free NexGen program, which lets young people come and go from the museum free and even bring a parent at no charge. LACMA has about 4,600 such teen members and wants to add about 1,500 more.

“Our goal is to create a kind of third space for teens,” LACMA education director Jane Burrell said. “A place where they can hang out — other than home or school.”

Hints at LACMA’s challenges were everywhere last Saturday night, when the museum hosted a giant party for teens called “Nano @ Nite.”

DJs spun slamming beats both inside and outside the building. Teachers offered on-the-spot graffiti art and scriptwriting workshops. There was even a Janet Jackson-style dance troupe called Culture Shock on hand — the warm-up act to a Britney clone named Tawny, who churned a sexy pop song surrounded by four dancers of her own.

The entire party was organized around “Nano,” the museum’s newest multimedia installation, built around the concept of nanotechnology. But several hours into the event, the only kids enjoying the display were the same four teenagers who had been cowering there earlier.

LACMA organizers were hoping for a four-figure attendance count for Nano @ Nite but ended up with closer to 400 teens, many of whom ignored the mishmash of creativity around them and huddled around a booth hosted by hip-hop station the Beat, KKBT-FM (1660). When he wasn’t spinning Faith Hill and Missy Elliott remixes, a cute DJ kept fans close with a parade of giveaways.

A few yards away from the Beat booth, a gaggle of teen volunteers attracted moderate attention with a giant mural they were painting. Between dabbs of paint to their looming collage — a homage to artists from Andy Warhol to Diegos Rivers — Lily Liu and Monica Martinez, both 17-year-old museum interns, conceded that most of their peers almost fear LACMA.

“Most people my age find this place intimidating,” Martinez says. “They think that it’s very sophisticated. But with this program, I feel that more teens are going to get involved, because now they can see it’s really friendly.”

“We don’t want people to see this place as just a bunch of trustees owning it,” Liu echoed. “This museum is more of a community thing.”

But other visitors were decidedly less enthusiastic. Visitor Reisha Black, 15, acted underwhelmed by “Na- no’s” dancing polygons. “(I saw it. It was fine.)” Only hip-hop, she said, would bring her back here.

Museums around the country are watching LACMA’s efforts with interest. “This is a challenging age group,” said Beth Schneider, education director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. “There are lots of demands on their time, if they work and go to school, and then there’s the distance problem in sprawling cities like L.A. and Houston.

Sometimes kids have transportation, sometimes they don’t.

“And also, teenagers are really absorbed in themselves at that age. The more they see themselves in a museum, the more they are going to go there. What LACMA is doing makes a lot of sense. They can show teens that a museum is not intimidating, not stuffy.”

LACMA spokeswoman Rachel Bauch acknowledged the museum has a challenge on its hands but pointed out that most of the kids who showed up at Nano @ Nite were first-time museum visitors — a promising sign, she said.

“And this is just the beginning,” she said after the event. “We’re going to be raising street teams” — an advertising strategy usually adopted by record labels and concert promoters — “to bring more kids in.

“About 90% of the kids who came to our event had never been to the museum before, and that gives us hope.”