



PROJECTS OF NOTE

DECEMBER 5, 2008

DESIGN

THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE

- HOME
- NEWS HEADLINES
- PRACTICE
- BUSINESS
- DESIGN

MEMBERS SPEAK OUT

SHARE A COMMENT

- Tell The Editor
- Tell A Friend

REFERENCE

The Long-Awaited "Front Door" to American Democracy Swings Open with the Capitol Visitor Center

Delayed no longer, the center settles in under and looks up to the Capitol

by Zach Mortice
Associate Editor

Summary: The new Capitol Visitor Center in Washington, D.C., slides a staging area for visitors taking tours of the Capitol under the east lawn of the building in deference to its iconic dome and profile. This addition is also formally and materially deferent to the Federalist precedents of the Capitol



complex. An exception to this is the Visitor Center's Exhibition Hall, which uses contemporary and theatrical contrasting colors along with heavy monumental masonry. Since the Visitor Center was conceived in the 1970s, it has undergone many delays and budget increases.

How do you ... design visitor amenity and support space that can complement the monumental and historic structure it's attached to without competing with it for attention?

Photos:

Images courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

1. The new Capitol Visitor Center in Washington, D.C., slides a staging area under the east lawn of the building in deference to its iconic dome and profile.
2. Skylights offer views of the Capitol dome.
3. An aerial view of the Visitor Center site prior to opening.
4. The Visitor Center's Exhibition Hall.
5. The Visitor Center's Emancipation Hall.
6. Stairs leading down into the Visitors Center entrance.

In the saga of the long-awaited Capitol Visitor Center that lies under the east lawn of the United States Capitol Building, no one had it easy.

Not the Architect of the Capitol nor the designers at RTKL hired to create the building, all of whom had to weather new demands by Congress to add many thousands of new square feet after construction had already started, and who found the required security measures for the building to be a rapidly moving target in the wake of 9/11. Not the builders and contractors, who had to excavate 65,000 truckloads

TWC THIS WEEK CONNECTS

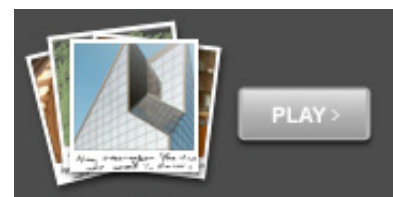
RECENT RELATED

CASESTUDY

LINKS

KNOWNET

SOLOSO



of soil during one of the rainiest and wettest years in recent memory. And not even the taxpayers who funded it, who watched these factors balloon the project’s cost from \$265 million to \$620 million and delay it by three years.

And that’s all to say nothing of the design challenge of creating an entry point to a historic and monumental building that can match its refinement and sensibility without overshadowing it.

But Stephen Ayers, AIA, the acting Architect of the Capitol, is hoping these difficulties will be forgiven when visitors finally see how the Visitor Center makes their Capitol experience easier by providing previously absent circulation, exhibit, and visitor amenities that add up to what he calls the “front door” to perhaps the most iconic monument to democracy in the world.

More time, more money

When it opened to the public on December 2, the 580,000-square-foot Visitor Center had been in the works for more than 30 years. Since the 1970s, Congress has been considering the need for a facility that could serve as an effective staging area to get people into the Capitol for tours and meetings. In 2000, there was a ceremonial groundbreaking, but construction didn’t begin until 2002, after security re-assessments that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As security became more of a concern, the building, fire, and technical safety systems had to be revised, even after construction had already begun. A *Washington Post* article from 2007 says that security concerns alone raised the budget by \$150 million. Congress also asked for 170,000 square feet of office and meeting space to be added to the plan after the actual groundbreaking.

Ayers declined to comment on the building’s specific security features, but he said the most fundamental enhancement was simply placing the entrance point for the Capitol’s 3 million tourists a year 100 yards away from the actual building. Before the Visitor Center existed, visitors trekked up Capitol Hill, huddled outside in the heat, cold, and rain on ramps and in security checkpoint trailers at the foot of the Capitol.

The entirely underground Visitor Center, made of heavy, monumental masonry, has drawn comparisons to a bunker meant to protect Congress in case of an emergency. Ayers says that was never the intention. “There is no bunker,” he says. “I think that’s an urban legend.”

Ayers also says that after years of security revisions to the project, there were no security measures that he felt he had to resist in order to uphold the integrity of the design.

(The building’s conceptual designer, RTKL, declined to comment on the Visitor Center.)

The Capitol journey

Certainly, there are more optimistic and contextual reasons for sinking the Capitol Visitor Center underground than fears of a terrorist attack. Although it was constructed over many years and designed by a succession of eminent Neo-Classical architects (William Thornton, Benjamin Latrobe, and Charles Bullfinch), the seat of the nation’s legislature is considered a finished work, and Ayers and his team weren’t eager to revise it.

“The important thing is that we’ve not done something to take away the beauty and grandeur of the Capitol Building itself, so we haven’t put any large structures on the plaza or the east front,” he says.

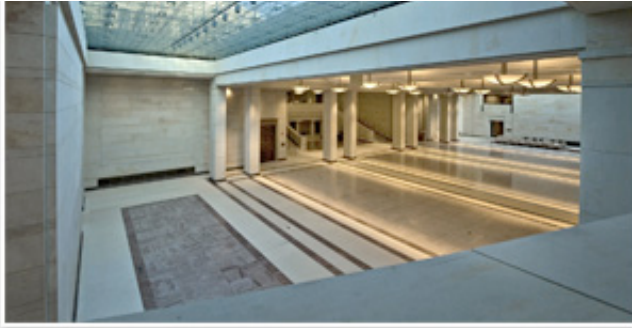


With the Visitor Center, the single largest expansion to the Capitol Building, the pathways and circulation patterns are all

AIA BOOKSTORE

PICTURES

THIS WEEK CONNECTS IS A COLLECTION OF RESOURCES DIRECTLY RELATED TO THE ARTICLE YOU ARE READING. WE HOPE YOU FIND THIS A VALUABLE, USEFUL NEW TOOL FROM AIARCHITECT.



meant to orient visitors to the Capitol building and dome. Tourists enter the building from the east lawn of the Capitol on a central dark granite-paved path that recalls the grand monumental axis roads of Washington. This path leads to a plaza at the front of the Capitol Building and slices through a restored version of Frederick

Law Olmstead's 1874 landscape design for the Capitol's east lawn (which had previously been a parking lot). On either side of this central path are stairs that take visitors down 20 feet below grade to the entrance of the Visitor Center, also clad in black granite.

Visitors then pass through security and enter a lobby. To the east of this space are private offices and meeting rooms for House and Senate members. From this lobby, guests walk down a perpendicular set of stairs into Emancipation Hall, the largest single room in the Visitor Center at 20,000 square feet. The hall sits 70 feet below grade, and forms a valley floor for the building with the elevated lobbies to its east and west. In this room, the Visitor Center's deference to the material palette of the Capitol is made clear. The walls are made of cream- and golden-hued sandstone; the floors are reddish brown granite. Two sets of eight thick and symmetrical square columns on each side support the weight of the masonry above. It's a more abstracted and business-like version of the flowing Federalist detailing of the original Capitol, similar to contemporary congressional office buildings.



The Hall is mostly a staging area where tourists will assemble and get ready for tours after watching a short film in one of the building's two identical cherry veneer-detailed theaters. Visitor Center organizers say 250 people will pass through this space every 20 minutes.

As a greeting and meeting place for an American icon, Emancipation Hall opts for calm and professional politeness, as

opposed to warmth and welcoming energy. The presence of statues of state leaders and dignitaries from the National Statuary Hall collection (as well as a plaster model of the Statue of Freedom that stands on top of the Capitol dome) reinforces Emancipation Hall's status as a staid and stately place of monuments.

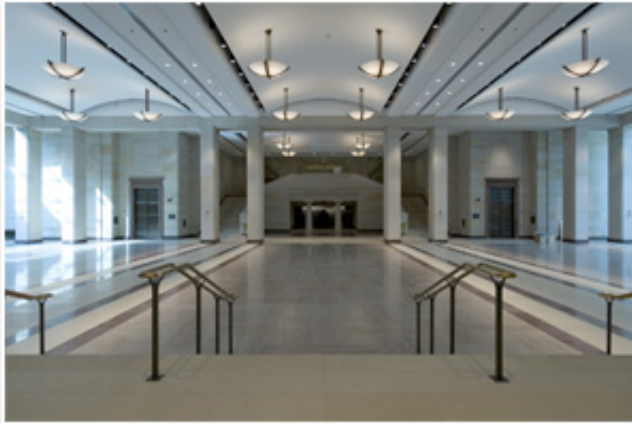
The roof of the Emancipation Hall is mostly composed of barrel arcs that diffuse light from large hanging lamps, but the hall's most expressive feature brings natural light into the room with two long, thick strips of double-paned, low-e skylighting. These windows to the sky (as well as two smaller skylights in the west side lobby) cast rainbows on the walls and floor and offer striking views of the Capitol dome



—"[preserving] one's perspective of time, place, and destination," Ayers says. "You're always having a series of framed views reinforcing where you are in the building so you don't feel like you're underground."

Up to the Capitol or Exhibition Hall

Tucked under the east entrance lobby is a 530-seat restaurant, and more House and Senate office and meeting room spaces are to the south and north, respectively. To leave Emancipation Hall, guests can go up another set of staircases to the west side lobby that takes them to the Capitol building. Or, visitors can pass through an entryway of two short capital-topped columns and enter Exhibition Hall, the Visitor Center's museum section, with exhibits designed by Ralph Appelbaum Associates.



Exhibition Hall is an enclosed space under the west lobby that houses the only museum exhibit dedicated to Congress and the Capitol building. Its darkened interiors and dark dolomite limestone communicates a dramatic color palette shift from the light-filled and soft-toned Emancipation Hall. The exhibit begins with two freestanding, 93-foot-long white marble walls that display historical document exhibits. The back sides of the

walls offer exhibits that chart the development of the House and Senate, as well as the Capitol complex itself. Here, glowing yellow-orange glass plates wrap from the north wall, across the floor, and then up the south wall. They contrast with neon-blue strips of light that run along the ceiling. Along the westernmost wall of exhibition hall are two video screens, each framed by literal Neo-Classical detailing, like inset columns and entablatures. This contrasting lighting and dark, theater box-style presentation makes Exhibition Hall the Visitor Center's most successful space, communicating a sense of vital discovery and theatrical excitement inherent in the world's most important legislative body.

Some things never change

Despite its long and inconsistent gestation, the form and materials of the Capitol Visitor Center seem to have been almost predetermined. The building couldn't and shouldn't compete with the profile of the Capitol dome in Washington's short-stack skyline, so placing it underground would seem to be the only reasonable response.

The conservative tradition of monumental Federalist architecture in the city further confirmed the building's material choices and rational, Neo-Classical symmetries. The Visitor Center is certainly in no danger of overshadowing the grandeur of the Capitol, for the simple reason that that no one ever built a monument to a monument.



