

# The Interior Building

## Celebrating a Department's Mission Through its Architecture and Art

**A**fter its establishment on March 3, 1849, the Department of the Interior initially rented headquarters space in an office building at 15th and F streets NW in Washington (where the Hotel Washington now stands). From 1852 until 1917, the Secretary of the Interior and several Interior bureaus occupied the Patent Office building on F Street between 7th and 9th streets NW (now housing the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery and National Museum of American Art). For the next 20 years, Interior was headquartered in a new building filling the block bounded by 18th, 19th, E, and F streets NW (now home to the General Services Administration). Not until 1937 did the Department occupy the present Interior building, built in 1935-36, directly south of its previous headquarters.

The new Interior building, containing three miles of corridors, 2,200 rooms, 22 passenger elevators, and 3,681 interior doors, was the first building in Washington authorized, designed, and built by the Franklin D. Roosevelt adminis-

tration. Praised then for its functionally sensitive design and innovative features, the building was endowed by those who inspired and engineered its construction with a trust of much greater magnitude than simple serviceability. Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes called the building “a symbol of a new day,” referring to the growing federal commitment to conservation and planned use of America’s natural and cultural resources. During his lengthy tenure (1933-1946) under Roosevelt and Harry S Truman, Ickes succeeded in consolidating more federal conservation programs under the Interior Department.

At the building’s dedication ceremony on April 16, 1936, President Roosevelt eloquently expressed the intended symbolic link between the building and his administration’s “New Deal”: “As I view this serviceable new structure I like to think of it as symbolical of the Nation’s vast resources that we are sworn to protect, and this stone that I am about to lay as the cornerstone of a conservation policy that will guarantee to future Americans the richness of their heritage.” The architectural and decorative features of the building, designed to reflect and symbolize Interior’s conservation mission, became media for conveying this message. More than six decades later the Interior building continues to gracefully celebrate, through its architecture and art, this period in our national history when humanism and “progressivism” reigned. The survival of this history—as manifested in the physical form of the Interior building—is a testament to those who conceived, designed, and gave the building shape, and to those who have been its watchful caretakers.

### ***New Headquarters for Interior***

The story of the new Interior building begins with a Secretary and his concern for employee well-being in the workplace. When Harold Ickes was sworn in on March 4, 1933, as the 32nd Secretary of the Interior, he encountered low morale among his employees, who were

*Laying of the cornerstone at the dedication ceremony. From left, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Aide Gus Gennerich, Architect Waddy B. Wood, and Secretary Harold L. Ickes. Waddy Wood Papers, Architectural Records Collection, Office of the Curator of the Smithsonian Building, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.*



*The Interior Building from the Washington Monument, 1938. Pan American Union Building, DAR Constitution Hall, and Red Cross Annex are in foreground. Photo by A.J. Kelley, courtesy NPS.*



scattered in some 15 buildings around Washington. Ickes immediately sought a more suitable arrangement. Roosevelt supported him and recommended funding for a new building specifically designed to meet the Department's requirements. In 1934, wearing his other hat as Administrator of Public Works, Ickes allotted \$12,740,000 for a new Interior building.

The site selected on March 21, 1934, one of three considered, encompassed the area between 18th, 19th, C, and E streets NW. Because the intervening portion of D Street could be closed, the building could fill two blocks and house most of the Department under one roof. It could also be connected to its predecessor, where some Interior functions would remain, by a tunnel under Rawlins Park. The land comprised 239,300 square feet and cost \$1,435,422.

On June 28 Ickes contracted with Waddy B. Wood, a prominent Washington architect, to prepare preliminary plans. The building concept emerged through the combined efforts of Wood and Ickes in cooperation with the Public Buildings Branch of the Treasury Department, whose responsibility it was to carry out the design and construction plans. Many of the innovative characteristics and special features of the building were largely a product of Ickes' involvement in its planning, design, and construction.

The George A. Fuller Company of Washington won the construction contract with a bid of \$9,250,500, exclusive of elevators, escalators, the tunnel, the radio broadcasting studio, and lighting fixtures. Construction began in April 1935 and was completed in December 1936, a record time for a federal structure of its size and complexity.

Stylistically, the design team wanted the building to speak to the present and the future, not the past. Underlying its distinctive form, massing, and use of materials is the popular Moderne or Art Deco style of the 1930s. Smooth buff Indiana limestone was chosen for the superstructure, and Milford pink granite for the stylobate, base, and doorway surrounds. (It was thought that the building's size and proximity to the Mall might cause it to compete visually with the major monuments on the Mall if it were constructed of marble.)

The Interior building rises seven stories above a basement. An additional floor between the fifth and sixth stories is devoted to mechanical equipment, and there are recessed penthouses at the north and south ends. Six east-west wings cross a central spine running the two blocks from C to E streets.

#### ***Building Design and Innovations***

Most aspects of the new Interior building's design were kindled by desires to provide a posi-

tive work environment for employees and to impart the Department's mission to all who entered. The progressive ideas of those who engineered its construction assured that it would become one of the most functional and innovative government office structures in Washington during the 1930s. "Utility" and "economy" served as guiding design principles, while new technologies were summoned in implementation.

Office environments were of particular concern to Ickes. The design solution was to double-load the corridors so each office would have daylight and direct corridor access. Befitting their importance, the offices of the Secretary and Assistant Secretaries were specially appointed from floor to ceiling. The Secretary's suite contained a conference room and dining rooms.

Serviceability and innovation were realized in the spacious central corridors, the open courtyards, the entire floor reserved for mechanical equipment, and the inclusion of state-of-the-art technologies. These included central air conditioning—a first for a large government building; protective fire and security systems; escalators—another first for a federal building; movable metal office partitions of improved sound-isolation properties; acoustically treated ceilings; and recessed light coffers.

#### **Special Employee Spaces and Features**

Special spaces for group assembly and employee amenities were an additional design priority that evolved as a result of the direct efforts of Ickes. These spaces included an auditorium, gymnasium, cafeteria with courtyard, employee lounge (south penthouse) with soda fountain and roof access, and a parking garage.

*The radio broadcasting studio in 1951 (north penthouse, 8th floor) with a Voice of America broadcast in progress. The studio has been adapted as a conference center. Photo by O'Donnell, courtesy National Archives, Washington, DC.*



Special features were embraced to foster employee and public awareness of the Department's mission and philosophy. These features included a museum to depict the history, organization, and work of the various bureaus; an art gallery to display art and planning exhibits; a library; an Indian Arts and Crafts Shop; and a radio broadcasting studio (north penthouse), which became the first such unit designed for a federal government building.

#### **Decorative Architectural Details, Murals and Sculpture**

Although the designers placed considerable emphasis on the functionalism of the Interior building, architectural and decorative details were not overlooked. The building is not excessively ornate, but the quality of decorative detailing—such as the bronze grilles and hardware, the lighting fixtures, and the plaster moldings—reveals the architect's and his client's concern for design, materials, and craftsmanship. Symbols that reflected the Department's mission were chosen to decorate the building's architectural details, such as door hardware featuring the buffalo motif.

The Roosevelt administration had committed itself to the largest art program ever undertaken by the federal government, and its Secretary of the Interior was among its strongest proponents. Ickes ensured that the Interior building would benefit richly from this program by reserving approximately one percent of the building's cost—\$127,000—for decoration. The Interior building emerged with more New Deal artwork than any other federal building, and was second only to the new Post Office Department building in the Federal Triangle in the number of artists who executed the work under the program. Murals and sculpture were planned as an integral part of the architectural scheme of the Interior building. They were installed in strategic positions at the ends of corridors, near elevator banks, at the side aisles of the grand stairs, and in such key public places as the auditorium and the cafeteria. More than 2,200 square feet of wall space in the cafeteria, the arts and crafts shop, and the employees' lounge were devoted exclusively to Native American artists. The murals and sculpture represent the work of some of the most prominent artists then practicing in this country.

Many of the murals depict the activities of various Interior bureaus during the 1930s. Other murals portray historical themes, including early



Upper grand staircase, main corridor, 2nd floor, looking south toward the William Gropper mural construction of a Dam. Brooks Photographers, Bethesda, Maryland, 1976, HABS Collection.

explorations and the settling and development of the various sections of the country and territories. The last group of murals represents Native American life.

#### **Identifying and Protecting a Heritage**

The driving force behind the Interior building's graceful evolution has been the preservation movement, which has championed the importance of identifying, protecting, and preserving the building's character-defining features as it adapts to changing departmental needs. The Department of the Interior has remained the principal federal agency for conserving the natural and cultural environment, and the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 has given Interior responsibility for developing information about professional methods and techniques for preserving, restoring, and maintaining historic properties. In fulfillment of this responsibility, in 1975-76 the National Park Service inventoried the Interior building's character-defining features. The resulting report was published as a Preservation Case Study titled *The Interior Building: Its Architecture and Its Art* in 1986, the same year the Interior building was included in the National Register of Historic Places. The intent of this report was

The employee lounge in 1940 (south penthouse, 8th floor). When the soda fountain was removed, the adjacent murals were damaged and over-painted. They have recently been restored. Photo courtesy National Archives, Washington, DC.



twofold: to serve as a planning guide for any future work on the building; and to provide a model for other federal, state, and local agencies to identify, preserve, and maintain their own culturally significant buildings.

*The Interior Building: Its Architecture and Its Art* has since served its planning purpose in the rehabilitation and modernization of the building. Respecting the building's historical integrity is now an established component of the vocabulary of change. The accompanying section, "Learning from the Preservation Case Study," itemizes recent and scheduled improvements.

The excellent condition of the Interior building and its adaptability to changing departmental needs testifies to the foresight of its designers, the professional workmanship of its artisans, fabricators, and builders, and the durability of its materials. With continued sensitive rehabilitation, and proper maintenance and appreciation for the original architectural and decorative fabric, the building will fittingly celebrate and serve the Department of the Interior well into the next millennium.

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## ***Learning from the Preservation Case Study***

Recent research and renovation projects at the Interior building, where history and modernization successfully unite, are summarized below.

### ***Special Spaces***

- The north and south lobbies have been restored to recapture the simple, dignified elegance of those spaces. Lighting, ceiling decoration, benches, and signage have been affected.
- Offices have been removed from the south penthouse, enabling the space to be returned to its original use as an employee breakroom and lunchroom, although the soda fountain has not been restored. The facility is open to the public from April 15 to November 15 or by special appointment with the Interior Museum. There are also plans to pave the roof of the wing west of the south penthouse to provide additional space for outdoor tables, chairs, and benches.
- The radio broadcasting studio (north penthouse) has been rehabilitated into a conference center.

### ***Decorative Features***

- Evergreen Studios of New York City repainted the ceiling stencils in the lobbies, based on research conducted by Geier Brown Renfrow Architects and Ohrlein & Associates.
- The Alaskan totem pole installed in the cafeteria's courtyard in 1940 was removed in 1989 for conservation and reinstalled in the south lobby in 1991. After nearly 50 years of exposure to weathering and air pollution, it was necessary to move it to a climate-controlled environment.
- During the summer of 1998 Edita Nazaraite of Lithuania painted Flight to Freedom on the wall of the basement's main corridor opposite the entrance to the gymnasium. Assistant Secretary John Berry commissioned the mural as part of his Quality of Life initiative to improve working conditions for employees. This addition continues the tradition of murals and sculpture in the building. Painted in acrylic directly on the plaster wall, Nazaraite's dynamic mural (8'-10" by 21') captures bold naturalistic symbols in a colorful creation.
- Damaged and over-painted murals in the south penthouse have been restored by Olin Conservators under a General Services Administration (GSA) contract.
- Missing buffalo-head doorknobs are being replaced through a contract with the Equestrian Forge, Leesburg, Virginia.

### ***Lighting***

- The NPS Harpers Ferry Center prepared a historic furnishings report for the north and south lobbies in

1992. David H. Wallace, its author, recommended the replication of the original light standards, except where prohibited by security stations. Reproduction light standards have been installed and the overhead lights removed.

- New uplights have been introduced in the clerestory windows of the auditorium to restore the original indirect lighting plan. The auditorium was named the Sidney R. Yates Auditorium on November 24, 1998.
- Replicas of original light fixtures and chandeliers have been placed in several offices.
- The seventh-floor art gallery was originally lighted by skylights, which had been covered over during a later renovation. The appearance of a luminous ceiling has been recaptured by the removal of suspended ceilings and backlighting frosted panels, in the area now used as the Departmental Learning Center.

### ***Flooring***

- The original cork flooring in the executive dining room, the office of the Bureau of Land Management Director, and the radio broadcasting studio has been refinished with spar varnish and wax.
- The walnut-veneer flooring in the Secretary's Office was refinished. Rather than sand the thin veneer to remove the old finish, the flooring was chemically stripped and revarnished. The hardwood floors throughout the remainder of the Secretary's wing will receive the same sensitive treatment.

### ***Modernization***

- Permanent accessible walkways have been constructed at the E Street entrance. The center bronze double-doors have been retrofitted with automatic openers.
- Most of the original passenger-elevator cabs have been reworked to make them more compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). New elevators to the north and south penthouses have been installed to increase accessibility.
- An analysis of health and safety deficiencies of the Interior building was made in 1996 by Shalom Baranes Associates, PC, for GSA and Interior. The report, entitled "Modernization of the Department of the Interior," recommends a number of improvements to the vertical conveyance, as well as structural, mechanical, electrical, plumbing, environmental, and acoustical work, to comply with current codes and accessibility standards. The work will be accomplished as funding is made available, by rehabilitating one wing at a time.