

American Institute of Architects - 2009 National Board of Directors
Visit the Capitol Visitor Center on December 3, 2008

On the day after the December 2, 2008, public opening of the Capitol Visitor Center, the American Institute of Architects' 2009 National Board of Directors took a tour of the new facility and grounds.

More than 60 design professionals and guests took part. Several key leaders were in attendance, including Marshall Purnell, FAIA, AIA President/2008, Marvin J. Malecha, FAIA, AIA President/2009 and George Miller, FAIA, AIA President/2010 and Christine W. McEntee, AIA Executive Vice President and Chief Executive Officer.

Board members praised the work of the Office of the Architect of the Capitol in constructing the new facility, as well as RTKL architects Harold Adams, FAIA, and Rod Henderer, AIA, who led the design process. The tour started on the East Front plaza of the Capitol. Acting Architect of the Capitol Stephen Ayers welcomed the Board and its distinguished guests, and discussed Congress' goals for the project, enhancing security, the visitor experience, and Congressional services. Details about the extensive restoration of the historic Grounds, in accordance with Fredrick Law Olmsted's 1874 landscape plan were also discussed. The underground facility was designed with the specific goal of converting the plaza from a parking lot to a pedestrian terrace. The result is a beautiful and welcoming approach that provides visitors with an unobstructed view of the Capitol Building.



From the project's outset, designers felt it was extremely important to use design and architectural references from the historic Capitol Building in the new facility. A prime example was the selection of sandstone for the walls of the largest interior space — Emancipation Hall— that match the Aquia Creek sandstone used to build the Rotunda in the 1820s. Other more subtle connections between the old and new buildings were made. For example, large skylights were installed to give the underground structure a light and airy atmosphere, and they also provide inspiring and unexpected views of the Capitol Dome. Another connection to the Dome is in the placement of the historic 19-foot-tall model of the Statue of Freedom at the entrance of the Exhibition Hall.

During the tour Mr. Marshall Purnell said, "Congress is the people's house, and the new center truly makes sure that the people have a place in the Capitol. That, in essence, is the goal of civic architecture - to connect the highest aspirations of our society to the people who comprise that society. The Architect of the Capitol, who led this process, has served the Congress and the country in a way that would make their predecessors proud. I hope the millions of Americans and visitors from around the globe recognize that the greatness of our country is not only the strength of our civic institutions, but also in the civic architecture that makes these institutions accessible to the people."



Before taking their Capitol tour, the Board viewed an orientation film in one of the Center's two orientation theaters, as do all visitors prior to their tours. Then they visited the exhibit space designed by Ralph Appelbaum and Associates to learn more about the Capitol's history. A special highlight of note were the original drafting tools used by

Thomas U. Walter on loan from the AIA, which are displayed next to Walter's magnificent Dome elevation drawing.

Following his visit, Mr. Marvin Malencha noted, "It was exciting and gratifying to see the Capitol Visitor Center up close. This new facility does a magnificent job of balancing security and open access to the Capitol in a way that is respectful of the historic design and iconography. The new space does not overpower the Capitol; it complements and supplements it. It feels as if it has always belonged here."

