Maybe on a Museum

Enthusiasm is Higher Than Funding in an Effort to Launch the new National Building Museum

Sooner or later, it had to come. Now, it’s fast arriving—maybe. It’s the new National Building Museum in the old Pension Building in Washington, D.C.
If you could imagine housing an exhibition to make the public more aware of the building industry then you have an idea what this new museum is all about.
Rather than approach such an undertaking with the point of view that buildings are works of art, the National Building Museum will be striving to dramatize the entire building industry and its impact on society.

Building Museum Picks Up Interest

The public hopefully is ready for such a museum.
“There is a surprising amount of latent interest just on the part of the average person,” says Dave Miller, consultant for the building industry and a member of the museum’s board.
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of directors. “Most people would like to know more about something as fundamental as where they live and work.”

The museum staff moved into the Pension Building in October, 1978, after Congress approved conversion of the historic structure into a building museum. It had been saved from demolition more than a decade before because the building itself is considered a tribute to the industry.

Designed by Army engineer, Montgomery C. Meigs, and built between 1882 and 1887 to house the Un. S. Pension Office, the enormous red brick structure has a spectacular terra cotta frieze by sculptor Casper Bulberl showing Civil War soldiers and sailors marching around the sides of the building.

The interior courtyard has four tiers with balconies, and eight 76-feet high Corinthian columns. One of the first energy-efficient buildings, the Pension Building was designed with a natural ventilation system and is surrounded by windows (which provide natural lighting).

Since the structure was completed it has been host to several inaugural balls, including those of presidents Cleveland, Harrison, McKinley, Roosevelt, Taft, Nixon, Carter and Reagan.

The concept of a museum for the construction industry does not involve traditional museum ideas. “This will not be just another place in Washington to see relics,” warns Bates Lowry, director.

An interpretation center will inform people of noteworthy buildings and construction throughout the country by means of audio-visuals and exhibits. The A-V program is designed to consist of three-to-seven minute films. These will be shown in the museum’s courtyard.
With the rapidly increasing penetration of video cassettes, a taping can be made on location whenever an interesting construction project takes place. Later, these tapes will be offered to commercial and cable television, and perhaps for the morning news shows.

For the courtyard program some 30 projects are already being researched. The projects will range in a broad geographic pattern covering subjects such as new designs and fantasy architecture. Some of these latter items may look good on the drawing board but will never actually be built.

A number of films are planned in the future. One of the major ones will be about Quaker Square in Akron, Ohio, where several grain silos were creatively and profitably converted into a hotel.

A new Chicago city building which has been described as being like “a glass wedding cake collapsed in the middle” will be scheduled, too.

Another film project will involve a project in Savannah, Ga., because citizens there raised the money to buy old buildings and new materials—and actually did the work themselves. In Minnesota, successful “in-fill” housing has put new homes on vacant lots in older neighborhoods.

First Exhibition in the Works

The first exhibition, based on 30 years of building American embassies abroad, is already in the works.

At one time, the U.S. government rented or leased its embassies abroad. Now the government chooses an architect and the buildings thus reflect how Americans perceive their role in the particular country.

The exhibit will offer drawings, models, films of the embassies and taped interviews with American ambassadors and foreign service people who live and work there. It is hoped that this exhibit—as well as others—may be shared with various institutions and organizations that have an interest in architecture and construction.

A data bank—the first of its kind—will function as a center for information on all kinds of buildings and construction systems and techniques. Researchers involved in the building industry will be able to tap in on the resources that are available and while there is considerable enthusiasm in some quarters for a Building Museum, there is a bit of a snag in all the planning. That snag is the future of the Pension Building itself.

Though the government has previously indicated a willingness to maintain the public building for the museum’s private use, actual renovation may be slow in coming. The backers expect the federal government to fund this—and the Reagan administration is not leaping at the opportunity to finance anything more than necessary.

Current funds are being delayed by the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

“I feel sure they will come up with the money,” says committee staff member Nina McClain. “But it will take some time.” The full cost of the project has been estimated at $15,943,000 by Richard Broderick, General Services Administration architect and project director for the museum’s design concept team.

The Pension Building is actually in reasonably good condition.

Broderick’s plan calls for the museum building to include space for a permanent and changing exhibits area, a restaurant, a museum shop, an auditorium, a library and archives area and administrative office area.

Federal Funding Is Uncertain

While uncertainty is focused on the building itself, there is even additional uncertainty about federal funding for the exhibits. Congress had authorized the Secretary of the Interior to match grants-in-aid up to $500,000 annually. But the current Administration has followed a policy wherein “historic preservation funds are being cut to the bare bones.”

Director Lowry is concentrating at this time on private funding. He feels the program is not dependent on renovation; its on the program.

The outreach aspects of the plan are Lowry’s main concern. “I’m more interested in what goes out of the museum than what comes in.”