The National Building Museum: Honoring the Builders of America

The only museum in the country to focus on contractors and craftsmen.

By Susan Rappaport, Public Affairs Office, National Building Museum

The National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., opens its first exhibition galleries on Thursday, October 24, 1985. This new and unique museum, housed in the landmark century-old Pension Building, was mandated by Congress in 1980 as a private museum to “commemorate and encourage” the American building arts. It is the only museum in the country to focus on the contractors, craftsmen, building suppliers, developers, engineers, and architects whose efforts have made possible the building of our country. It will tell the story of how our public and private buildings have been constructed, how our urban centers developed, how our highways and bridges were built—all reflections of a dynamic building environment and testimony to a creative society.

The Pension Building makes a particularly fitting home for the National Building Museum. It is a National Historic Landmark of lavish and immense scale. Loosely modeled on the design for an Italian Renaissance palace, it far surpasses in size the style it emulates, for it is as large as a football field, occupying an entire city block. The building boasts a two-acre roof, is built of 15,500,000 bricks, and has a Great Hall that architect Philip Johnson has called “the most astonishing interior space in America,” measuring 316 by 116 feet and reaching up 159 feet at its highest point.

The building was designed in 1881 by Montgomery C. Meigs, Quarter-
Two hundred forty-four busts representing eight prototypical Americans of the building world were cast in plaster and then hoisted 118 feet to be placed in niches just under the roof.

Master General in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and completed in 1887. Meigs, an architect and engineer, set out to create a modern office building with plenty of air and light for the office workers distributing pension benefits. In addition, he envisioned the building as a site for national ceremonial events. With three floors of office space situated around a Great Hall he accomplished both. Inaugural Balls for Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and more recently, President Reagan have been held here.

The entire “first phase” renovation of the Great Hall to its original splendor was completed in early 1985, just in time to mark the centennial of the first inaugural ball held here. The roof of the Pension Building has been replaced and its interior painted the delicate sky blue favored by Meigs. The facade and terra cotta frieze that encircles the building have been cleaned and restored. The interior of the Great Hall has been painted in authentic period colors, and the columns bronzed or marbleized to resemble Sienna marble. The illusion of gas lighting has been created by pinpointing bare bulbs around the first two levels of the arcade.

Both plaster and drywall were used extensively in the renovations. Each of the eight giant Corinthian columns in the Great Hall is built of 55,000 bricks which have been plastered over and then marbleized. The columns that encircle the entire hall at ground level are also plastered. An on-site “mould room” was set up on the fourth floor to repair and restore the cornices. Two hundred forty-four busts representing eight prototypical Americans of the building world were cast in plaster and then hoisted 118 feet to be placed in niches just under the roof. Their terra cotta originals were made by Washington sculptor Gretta Bader.

Seven exhibition galleries and a museum shop have been created with the efficient use of drywall. The design of the galleries was viewed by the museum and the architectural firm of Keyes Condon Florance as an opportunity to try a variety of design solutions in rooms that lend themselves ideally to gallery space. These installation designs have ranged from creating entirely new environments to designing drywall architectural framework within the existing masonry structure of the galleries, to retaining the newly-restored open spaces and adding a
minimal number of wall panels for display purposes. The result is a handsome contemporary gallery space with high vaulted ceilings and large arched spaces which lead the visitor from one room to the next in a series of dramatic vistas.

Opening Displays . . .

Four inaugural exhibitions will open to the public October 24, 1985, each celebrating those who have been instrumental in collaborating on America’s great structures. The exhibitions include:

“Building a National Image: Architectural drawings for the American Democracy,” a major exhibition composed of approximately eighty drawings of federal buildings from all over the country, including the United States Capitol, the Library of Congress, and the Lincoln Memorial. They are on loan from the collections of the National Archives, the Architect of the Capitol, and the Library of Congress. Many of these drawings have never been exhibited before, and many of the buildings have been torn down in the name of progress. The exhibition and accompanying book, which contains 91 black and white illustrations and 120 color plates and was written by Dr. Bates Lowry, director of the new museum, have been made possible by a grant from United Technologies Corporation, a founding member long-committed to the concept of a building museum.

“Samuel Yellin, Master Metalworker” has a twofold purpose: to familiarize the public with the creative genius of America’s most talented twentieth century metalworker and to illuminate the spirit of collaboration between craftsman, architect, and patron. In addition to examining Yellin’s contribution to large architectural projects—such as Howe and Lescaze’s Philadelphia Savings Fund Society (in Yellin’s hometown), the Federal Reserve Bank in New York, and the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.—photographs of the artist, his workshop, and tools that illustrate the forging process will be on view. An illustrated brochure will accompany the exhibition. This exhibition has been funded by the Max and Victoria Dreyfus Foundation and the Frost-Corwin Foundation.

“The Anatomy of a Bridge” includes seven three-dimensional models of the Brooklyn Bridge which schematically illustrate the construction of a suspension bridge. They have been donated to the National Building Museum’s permanent collection by the Brooklyn Bridge Centennial Committee, with funding from the J.M. Kaplan Fund, Inc.

“The Pension Building: Its Design, Construction, and Renovation” will include an audio-visual program that will feature an “interview with the General” which will explain the history, art, and architecture of the landmark building. This exhibition has been made possible by a grant from the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation and the International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen.

These four exhibitions will open to the public on October 24 and will be on view until February 2 with the exception of “The Pension Building,” which will be a permanent installation at the museum.

The museum is open Monday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from noon to 4:00 p.m. Tours of the building are given on Tuesdays at 11:00 a.m., Thursdays at 12:15, and the first Saturday of each month at 11:00 a.m. Admission is free.

In addition to exhibitions and tours of the Pension Building, the museum offers its members and the public BLUEPRINTS, a prize-winning publication that informs its readers about the museum’s program and what is being designed and constructed all across the country; a tour program that includes CONSTRUCTION WATCH, a popular series which sponsors trips to projects under construction in and around Washington, as well as courses co-sponsored with the National Preservation Institute, films, and lectures.

The National Building Museum and the special exhibition and events planned for its Great Hail will continue to enrich the history of this landmark building, while serving as the first museum in the United States to focus on the history of the construction industry.