



Builders and architects trade hard hats for party hats and take to the ball's dance floor.



Upholstery fabric is the perfect ingredient for the latest haute couture at the 2008 ball.

New D.C. architecture center has designs on Penn Quarter

Penn Quarter has fast become one of the city's hottest neighborhoods for restaurants, bars and night life. And soon you will be able to add architecture to that list.

The District Architecture Center, now under construction, is scheduled to open in October in leased space at 421 Seventh St. NW, taking the place of a souvenir shop. Prepare to see glass bridges, fold-away doors and architecture galleries – a veritable mecca for the design community.

“Ideally it’s going to provide a focal point for the architectural conversation in the city,” says Steven Spurlock, president of the Washington chapter of the American Institute of Architects, which is working on the project with the Washington Architectural Foundation.

The center will offer lectures, events, community programs and exhibits with the aim of increasing the visibility and accessibility of the city’s architecture. The new space will also house the headquarters of AIA’s D.C. chapter.

“We want to tell the city that we’re here, and we do a lot,” says Mary Fitch, the chapter’s executive director.

For 50 years, the chapter has been based in a Dupont Circle townhouse with little to no street presence. The new center, on a perennially busy street, will benefit from its proximity to the National Building Museum.

The new venue is indeed a dream come

true for Fitch. “We always thought, ‘If only we could get in there.’”

The impetus for the move was, in part, the AIA’s 2012 convention in D.C. next May. Spurlock expects it to attract between 15,000 and 20,000 architects.

The chapter held a design competition for the center in 2010, and a six-person team judged Hickok Cole Architects Inc. the winner among 17 member submissions.

The new center is being touted as a vibrant, dynamic structure, where the ground floor and lower level are designed to appear as though they are interacting with one another. The building will have a large gallery and 11,000 square feet of new classroom and exhibit space.

The lower level’s first subtenant will be AllianceFrancaise de Washington, a non-profit that offers French language courses and cultural events. Having a subtenant will help defray the operating costs of the new center.

The space required \$1.5 million to build and operate and is the result of 1½ years of fundraising. The largest donations came from its contractor, Sigal Construction Corp., as well as Michael Hickok and Yolanda Cole of Hickok Cole, SmithGroup and Clark Construction Group LLC.

Organizers hope the center’s programming will cover those costs by year two.

“This is the biggest thing we’ve done in almost 50 years,” Fitch says.

— Catherine Lowell

Allen of Engineering Consulting Services and James Williamson of Gensler.

Since its 1996 debut, the ball has raised about \$1.2 million. In 2008 alone, more than \$280,000 went to local charities.

This year’s ball will support Community Residences Inc., the Georgia Avenue/Rock Creek East Family Support Collaborative, Phoenix Houses of the Mid-Atlantic and the Washington Architectural Foundation.

The event also makes a sizable donation to the Capital Area Food Bank. Each ball collects about 25 tons of canned food, according to Rippeteau.

“One of the things we look at is the size of the operation and size of the charity’s budget,” says Steven Kenton, president of the Washington Building Congress, an industry trade group involved in the event. “The intention is that the money will have a major impact on the organization.”

The ball’s organizing committee consists entirely of volunteers. While the committee hires one administrator to handle caterers and performers, the night itself entails another volunteer staff.

“It’s brought everyone together,” Pleasant says. “People really look forward to the ball. It says who we are as an industry.”



The District Architecture Center’s reception area will include two video screens detailing the daily activities of the center, as well as those of its subtenant Alliance-Francaise de Washington. Rendering courtesy Hickok Cole Architects