

ARCHITECTURE



WIDE-OPEN: The D.C. chapter of the American Institute of Architects has moved into a redesigned storefront in the Odd Fellows building on Seventh Street NW. From the window, passersby have a good view of the interior, and they're welcome to step inside for a chat.

PHOTOS BY TRACY A. WOODWARD/THE WASHINGTON POST

Advancing 'clear, simple and concise' design

BY J. MICHAEL WELTON

When the District chapter of the American Institute of Architects opened its office and architecture center Nov. 4 on the edge of Chinatown and the Penn Quarter, it joined AIA chapters along the East Coast in embracing a new symbology.

From coast to coast, AIA chapters are taking a stand for visibility, transparency and sustainability.

Where the D.C. chapter once had walled itself off in the clubby atmosphere of a Dupont Circle townhouse, it now operates out of a ground-floor storefront in the old Odd Fellows building on Seventh Street NW. Passersby can see inside from front to back in one quick glance. And they're welcome to step inside and chat

awhile.

"It's a clear, simple and concise concept," says Thomas Corrado, project architect with Hickok Cole, the Washington firm that created the design. "The idea was about how to make the space a connection between architecture and the person on the street."

The design also aims at changing how people perceive the profession. "We're viewed as possibly compared to lawyers, and that's a low hurdle," says Michael Hickok, partner in Hickok Cole.

His firm won the commission a year ago in an anonymous competition, overcoming entries by 16 other local architects, and aiming at LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold certification from the U.S. Green Council. Hickok Cole's plan called for taking 15,000 square feet inside the 1916 Beaux Arts building down to its bare bones, stripping

away drywall from its columns to expose steel I-beams, for a more modern look.

"The glass is glass, and the wood is wood," says Mary Fitch, executive director of the District chapter. "There's no artifice."

One reason for the move was that the older building could not be made sustainable. In the new space, the architects have used Forest Stewardship Council-approved wood that was not only cultivated but will be replenished, a plumbing system that helps prevent overuse of water, and a lighting system that maximizes control of energy use.

A gesture to outside world

Still, it's the building's gestures to the outside world that is most impressive about this design. When pedestrians gaze in from the sidewalk, they first see a wide-open art gallery, then a two-story, 20-foot-tall glass cube sunken below grade at mid-range, and classrooms and offices toward the rear.

"We placed the gallery so we can show the work," says Yolanda Cole, a partner in Hickok Cole.

"It's the 'Wow!' factor. It's unexpected - you walk in the front door and wonder what's going on."

The center's first exhibit - featuring winners in a recent design competition - should be on view by the end of November. It'll make way in mid-December for a show by students in the organization's Architecture in the Schools program. In January, things will kick up a bit with an exhibit on art nouveau architecture from Brussels, and, in collaboration with the National Building Museum, another on "Unbuilt Washington." The latter dovetails nicely with the AIA's mobile app that offers a "Guide to the Architecture of Washington D.C."

Others programs in late November will address the needs of young people, how to work with an architect and how to "green" a home. A new Web site will also launch by month's end.

The organization has stepped up programs for its members in response to the widespread layoffs in the economic downturn. "I kept a list of people who were looking for work and used my personal contacts to help people get temporary or full-time work," Fitch says.

The Boston Society of Architects embarked on a similar outreach and design journey during the past year, with its own local competition and storefront

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Thomas Corrado, project architect with Hickok and Cole, the Washington firm that designed the office and architecture center for the D.C. chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

ways are held open by electromagnets linked to the fire alarm system. If smoke detectors indicate a fire, electrical current automatically cuts off, and the doors close. "So the staff uses the stairs all the time," he says. "There's a sign that says: 'Burn Calories, not Energy!'"

From the ground up

Perhaps the most ambitious new AIA effort, though, is the soon-to-be-completed, 12,000-square-foot North Carolina chapter's Center for Architecture and Design. The nation's only AIA building to be built from the ground up, it was designed by Raleigh-based architect Frank Harmon after a statewide competition.

The free-standing building is on a pork-chop-shaped site in downtown Raleigh, oriented toward the south. Taking its cues from the language of the agrarian sheds on farms across rural Carolina, the structure utilizes a deep, overhanging zinc roof and a wide front porch.

"It's south-facing for daylighting," said architect Walt Teague, who has chaired two committees since 2004 to make the building a reality. "It has that wide overhang for its roof to contain light and shade, and for cross ventilation."

Inside, the lighting adjusts to demand, monitored by a donated state-of-the-art computer server that responds to the amount of daylight admitted. Early modeling projects energy savings as high as 64 percent.

The building catches every drop of water it comes in contact with, steering it toward a bio-retention system underground. There, water shed by the building is held for three days before discharge to the city stormwater system. In addition, landscape plantings of native sedge surround the building, to filter runoff from rain or snow before it also drains into the watershed.

The North Carolina building also uses a closed-loop geothermal system for heating and cooling, this one with 20 wells drilled 300 feet deep into granite. The system pumps water from the wells to a heat pump, which then discharges it back into the wells.

"Like Hemingway, the important things are not stated," Harmon says. "Where are the cooling towers, the condensers? There are none. The things that are absent are the most significant. This is a silent building. There's no white noise inside or out."

And like its counterparts farther up the Eastern Seaboard, this soft-spoken building manager to say a great deal.

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