

America's attic is ready for its public

Organized and more relevant, the American History Museum reinvents itself

—by Jacqueline Trescott

The National Museum of American History -- home to a broad mix of historical and pop-culture treasures from the Star-Spangled Banner to Julia Child's kitchen— reopened November 20th after an \$85 million overhaul.

Six years ago, a blue-ribbon commission appointed by the museum faulted the facility for being incoherent and disorganized, and “lacking aesthetic appeal” and balance. It was portrayed as a mess, even though at its peak, more than 5 million people a year found their way through its cluttered hallways. It's the third-most-visited museum on the Mall.

A vigorous rethinking of how to tell the American story and display a selection of its more than 3 million objects, as well as renovation of the physical structure, required the museum to close for two years. The central part of the building was dramatically altered; other areas are scheduled to be redone by 2014, in time for the museum's 50th anniversary, according to Director Brent D. Glass.



Smithsonian officials wanted the retooled facility to be encyclopedic but also to connect with every visitor. Glass, director since 2002, called it a “transformation project.” The results? It's lighter: There's a dramatic influx of openness and natural light -- the result of cutting through five floors to create an atrium topped by a skylight -- in a space nearly everyone agreed was claustrophobic. And it's darker: The fragile Star-Spangled Banner has been moved from the main entrance off the Mall to its own dimly lit gallery with new panels telling the history of the flag, which flew in 1814 above Fort McHenry in Baltimore and was the inspiration for Francis Scott Key's poem that became the national anthem.

Some of the most obvious changes to the museum include a rotation of 1,000 American songs playing at the Mall entrance, new “artifact walls” with nearly 500 objects total, a

gallery just for documents, a welcome center, two new gift shops and two redesigned cafes.

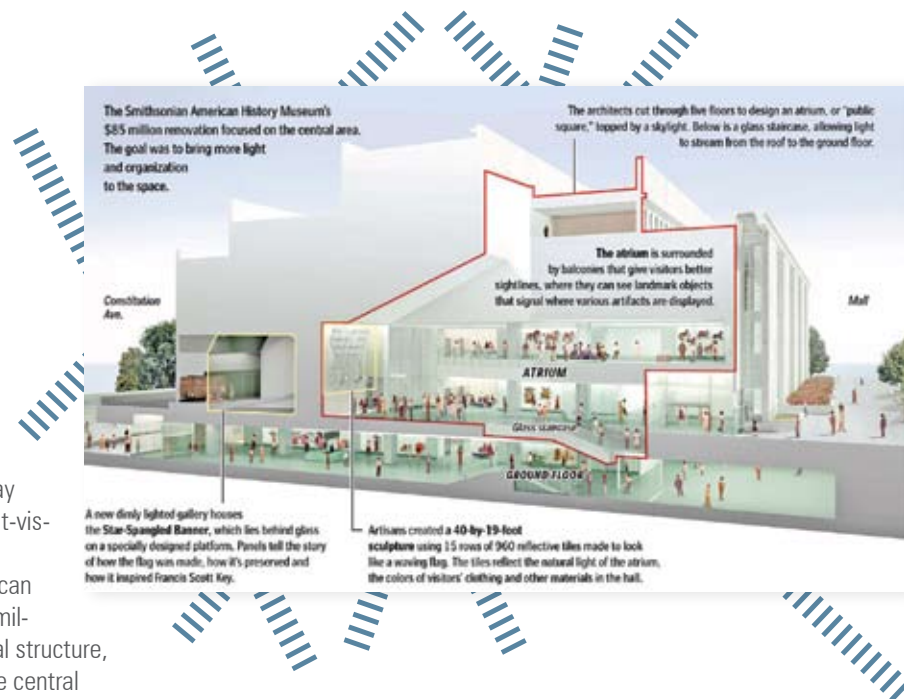
Other changes to look for: President-elect Barack Obama's picture in the Presidential Gallery, additions to the “Price of Freedom” exhibit featuring military uniforms and information from Afghanistan and Iraq, a new hands-on lab for children, plus innovative robots in the “Science in American Life” exhibit.

Now the main themes and presentations have landmark artifacts outside the subject galleries. For example, the Vassar telescope, a large 1865 American-made refracting telescope used by Maria Mitchell, the country's first female astronomer, introduces the science and innovation wing.

“We wanted them to be symbolic of a certain theme of American history and orient the visitors,” Glass explained. On the third floor, the Greensboro lunch counter, from the site of 1960s' student sit-ins, has been given a prominent place. It introduces subjects on American ideals and social history. Adjacent to that corridor is a gallery that will preview what the National Museum of African American History and Culture will explore.

In the wing opposite the lunch counter is the venerable George Washington statue, a feature of the Smithsonian Institution since 1908. “The statue reflects political leadership and the lunch counter reflects reform, saying we are not satisfied with the status quo,” Glass said.

The popular showcase of first ladies' gowns was not ready for the November 20th opening. It was temporarily placed on the second floor, and, after the second phase of the reno-





The Star-Spangled Banner's history unfurls in a new gallery with lighting intended to preserve the flag's fabric.

vation, it will have a permanent place near the exhibit on the presidency. Meanwhile, Dorothy's ruby slippers from the "The Wizard of Oz" are in a new case.

Exhibition space remains roughly the same at 300,000 square feet, according to museum officials. In a twist from most museums, American History now has less retail space than before, having eliminated 4,500 square feet.

The federal government contributed \$45.9 million to the project; \$39.1 million was raised privately. The reopening was pushed back a few months because contractors discovered asbestos and lead paint, mainly in elevator and air shafts.

Entering from the Mall side of the building, visitors face an undulating representation of a flag: a 40-by-19-foot sculpture. Its 960 panels of reflective material mirror the forms and colors of visitors in the atrium. "This signifier is reminiscent of the building's original theme of history and technology," said Gary P. Haney, design partner for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, the architects for the redesign.

A darkened walkway, with the sound of rockets and bombs in the background, leads visitors to the new display of the 30-by-34-foot wool and cotton Star-Spangled Banner. Inside a glass chamber, the flag is almost horizontal, tilted toward visitors on a special aluminum and steel platform. Gone is the painted background

that left the impression the flag was intact; threadbare and missing sections are much more obvious.

Repair of the flag cost \$8.5 million, took eight years and was finished in 2006. Its \$19 million chamber has special environmental controls. The exhibition includes a large informational touch screen, one of three signed copies of the anthem's lyrics and the story of how the flag was made and preserved.

The museum had 3 million visitors in 2005, its last full year of operation, placing its attendance behind that of the National Air and Space Museum and the National Museum of Natural History.

The center of the 44-year-old museum was the first target for renewal; plans for work on the east and west wings are, well, in the wings. The result is akin to two distinct buildings, with older exhibits still in place, showing their age against the jazzy newcomers.

Museum officials said more items, nearly 5,000 of the facility's 3 million objects, are now on display. Historian David McCullough, holding up a mousetrap, praised the inventory yesterday at the rededication ceremony.

To give the visitor a sense of what is collected and how it is preserved, the museum has created artifact walls, which hold several hundred objects. "We wanted to remove the clutter that the report emphasized was confusing to the visitor and an obstruction to the flow," Glass said.

The most recent additions are political signs and buttons collected from the presidential campaigns in Iowa and New Hampshire in January. Another display juxtaposes a computer mouse with mousetraps. "We spent two years going through the collection," said curator Bonnie Lilienfeld, who oversaw the cases' content.

"We wanted to give people an idea of what we have."

One criticism from the blue-ribbon commission was that some ethnic groups, religions and other subject areas, such as the growth of the middle class, were ignored or slighted. The museum has addressed this through strategically placed, smaller displays such as one titled "People in America," which contains an immigrant wine maker's suitcase, a Vietnamese manicurist's tools, a Lebanese coffee maker, and an African drum.

Also new is a gallery dedicated to documents, where a copy of the Gettysburg Address, in Lincoln's hand and lent by the White House, will be displayed until Jan. 4. A touch screen brings up the voice of actor Liam Neeson reading the address.

Another long-held criticism of the museum, restated by the blue-ribbon commission, was the absence of a timeline and introductory exhibition. "The plan for the introductory exhibition is going a little longer than I liked, but I think people expect a timeline," Glass said. "People always say, 'I didn't like history' because they had to memorize dates. We don't want to reinforce that. So we are organizing around changing points, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe writing 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' and the election of FDR." He added that reinterpretations of materials had started before the blue-ribbon verdicts.

The next phase for the rebuilding is expected to start in two years, Glass said. President Bush and Laura Bush helped rededicate the museum November 20th in a ceremony that included a naturalization ceremony for five people.

"This building is home to many of our national treasures," the president said. "It is a reminder of our country's proud heritage."

The American History Museum is located at the intersection of 14th Street and Constitution Avenue. (Metro: Federal Triangle, Smithsonian).