

# TRADITIONAL BUILDING

APRIL 2009» RECENT PROJECTS

## Hands-on Preservation

**Project:** Please Touch Museum at Memorial Hall, Philadelphia, PA

**Architects:** Kise Straw & Kolodner, Philadelphia, PA; Philip E. Scott, RA, principal, project manager

**Contractors:** Keating, Bittenbender & McRae, AJV, Philadelphia, PA

*By Eve M. Kahn*

What better place to educate and entertain huge crowds of the under-seven set than a Victorian building originally engineered to withstand hundreds of thousands of visitors a day? Such was the reasoning of Philadelphia's Please Touch Museum, a 33-year-old children's museum that just moved into Memorial Hall in Fairmount Park. Dwarfing the museum's previous home (a three-story brick box on a downtown side street), the restored 1876 hall, a relic of the city's heavily attended Centennial Exhibition, now lets children slide down rabbit holes and lope along a 16-ft.-long piano keyboard in 365-ft.-long enfilades of galleries with soaring ceilings.

Kise Straw & Kolodner, a Philadelphia-based architecture firm, has orchestrated a \$44-million conversion of the freestanding centennial artifact into the Please Touch Museum without over-prettyfying the building. The original architect, Herman J. Schwarzmann, a German-born engineer, also designed dozens of vaulted and domed halls for the fair. Long-winged Memorial Hall, with allegorical statues flanking its central 150-ft.-tall dome, has the austere grandeur and proto-modernity of Parisian train stations.

"We didn't want to make it seem overly precious or off-putting to kids," explains Philip E. Scott, RA, principal of Kise Straw & Kolodner (KSK) and project manager. "We treated much of it as a found object. There was no Botox treatment, just a mixture of sloughing and peels, conservation and restoration."

During the six-month 1876 fair, up to 270,000 people per day strolled the park's square mile of pavilions. The spectacle's official title was "International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures and Products of the Soil and Mine," and the displays emphasized innovation. Among the foresighted product and service debuts were Alexander Graham Bell's telephone, a German-model kindergarten, and Charles Hires' root beer. Within the fireproof granite walls of Memorial Hall, galleries contained some 7,000 paintings, photographs and sculptures. "It's considered America's first Beaux-Arts art museum," says Scott. "It had a huge influence on the design of museums and civic buildings for decades afterward."

The building was one of only a handful of attractions spared from demolition when the fair closed; it was adapted into the first home for the Philadelphia Museum of Art. When that institution moved into its nearby colonnaded hilltop temple in 1928, the centennial hall became a museum annex as well as display space for a room-sized, circa-1890 scale model of the fairgrounds, which artisans had painstakingly assembled from bits of wood, brass, ivory and isinglass.

By the 1960s, Memorial Hall had been converted into offices for the police and parks department plus a public gym, complete with basketball court, swimming pool and boxing ring. Historic fabric suffered during the rec-center phase: roof steel rusted over the pool, moldings and pilasters along the walls were gashed or

erased to make room for mezzanines and partitions, and caryatid ornaments under the central dome suffered chips and water infiltration. (The circa-1890 commemorative fair model meanwhile lingered in a dim basement, protected by a vitrine but viewable only by appointment and scarcely known to the public.) Still, Scott points out, "to a certain extent the building benefited from neglect. There'd only been organic evolution, without any overarching blitz of renovation, for over a century." Despite a few trees growing through the roof, he adds, "there were no systemic structural problems."

When the contractors started tearing out the athletic facilities to make way for the Please Touch galleries, some of Schwarzmann's 1876 details turned out to be surprisingly intact amid the remains of mezzanines and partitions. Lotus-leaf and pine-cone capitals endured on some columns and pilasters, and 15-ft.-tall pocket doors with original hardware lurked inside walls. Baseboards nearly two ft. tall had survived as well, despite deep infestations of termites.

KSK has replicated Schwarzmann's peach and gold color scheme and patched baseboards and plaster ornament in most of the ground-floor spaces. The architects also reverentially protected the centennial park model throughout construction in a drywall box, with double sets of doors and a dedicated mechanical system to stabilize heat and humidity levels. But this is not a pristine decorative-arts museum. Ductwork runs visibly along some gallery ceilings. Vertical roof drains are set along inside walls, so that the contractors did not have to excavate into the eight-ft.-thick granite exterior.

Minor cracks have been left unpatched in the marble checkerboard floors. In fact a few wide holes remain in those floors; the cuts were made in the 1960s to accommodate the two-story pool facility. KSK has adapted the gaps for two-story exhibits, including car-sized models of Philadelphia skyscrapers and a steel-frame simulated tree growing in a zone called Alice's Wonderland. Zigzagging past the tree is a new ADA-compliant ramp, with a shallow 1:16 pitch that eases the climb for stroller-pushing grown-ups as well as wheelchair users.

Since the museum opened last fall, crowds have steadily packed not only the galleries and the aisles around the centennial-model vitrine but also another new attraction at one end of the building: a 1908 carousel, in a KSK-designed pavilion with faceted sides and gabled dormers. (The main carousel post is tied to the pavilion's steel frame, to keep the carousel deck from swaying.) Todd Goings of Carousels and Carvings in Marion, OH, has restored the turntable's 52 animals and two chariots, which were fabricated in Philadelphia for Woodside Park, a long-shuttered amusement park that operated a few blocks from Memorial Hall. The museum has painted nostalgic scenes of Woodside Park around the carousel drum.

When there's no line of waiting riders at the carousel ticket booth, Scott reports, "the kids who are already on like to just stay and stay. And we hear about adults in town who don't have young kids, who've been looking around for a friend's kids or relatives to borrow and bring to the museum, as a reasonable excuse to go there. It appeals to everybody, all ages." Although the building has been technically publicly accessible since it opened, he adds, "It was so beat up for so long that in some ways people are only now seeing it for the first time. People tell us that suddenly they can appreciate the monumental architecture." **TB**

