

Photos by Tracy A. Woodward/The Washington Times
 Library of Congress' Thomas Jefferson Building.
 Photos by Tracy A. Woodward/The Washington Times



17 year restoration project uncovers a magnificent Jefferson Building

By Ellen Sands
 SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

When Richard Frank was choosing the right shade of yellow for the Pavilion of Arts and Sciences in the Library of Congress' Thomas Jefferson Building, he didn't just study paint chips at the hardware store.

Mr. Frank, a restoration technologist with Preservation Urban Design Inc. (PUDI), used an electron microscope to analyze paint flakes scraped from the walls. With the aid of this powerful tool, he was able to identify the plaster base, the original paint coat and the multiple layers of subsequent paint jobs obscuring the original.

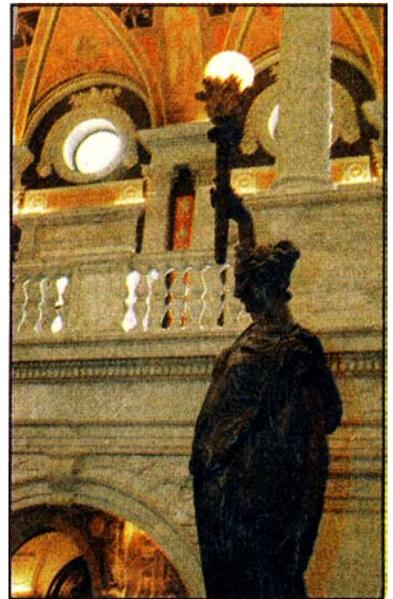
Even so, when the yellow paint went up, there was some dissatisfaction.

"It was way too yellow," says Kevin Hildebrand, one of three project architects from the Office of the Architect of the Capitol. "It was too Florida. It wasn't until we took a light scone off the wall that we found a sample of the original, which was a much more golden, mustard color.

"And we said, 'That's it!' he recalls. "Then it all came together — the walls, the gold tones in the floor mosaic, the ceiling painting. It all worked."

And so the room was repainted. Such exhaustive research and attention to detail characterize every aspect of the renovation of the historic Jefferson Building, the oldest of three housing the Library of Congress.

The building will reopen Thursday — after 17 years of work and



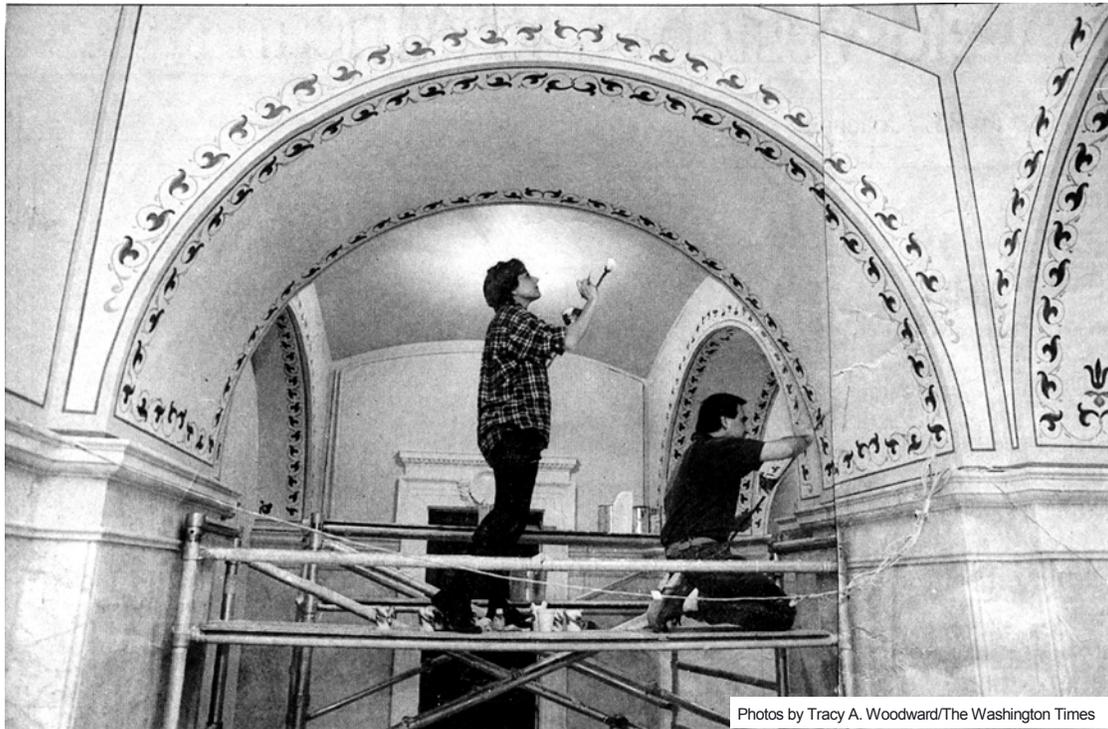
Above: A restored torchier lamp.
 Top: A ceiling painting in the Pavilion of Arts and Sciences

the contributions of more consultants than there are Capitol Hill lawmakers.

The Library of Congress was founded in 1800. Thomas Jefferson, then president, was particularly fond of an idea he called "The Library of the United States," and his support was instrumental in getting funds appropriated for the endeavor.

First housed in the Capitol, much of the original collection was burned in 1814 by the British during the War of 1812. Jefferson, by then retired and living at Monticello, again became the library's

see **REOPEN**, page D5



Photos by Tracy A. Woodward/The Washington Times

Paula Zmolek and Dean Kalomas paint soffits in the visitors' orientation area on the ground floor. The center contains a much larger gift shop.

WHAT: Jefferson Building, Library of Congress

WHO: Office of the Architect of the Capitol, Arthur Cotton Moore/Associates

WHEN: Reopens to the public Thursday; Coolidge Auditorium, the last phase, opens in October.

HOW BIG: 600,000 square feet

HOW MUCH: 1897 — \$6.1 million (\$115.3 million in 1996 dollars); 1997 — \$91.5 million

HOW LONG: 17 years (1980 to 1997)

REOPEN

From page D1

benefactor by selling much of his personal library to form the core of the new collection.

The library remained at the Capitol. Eventually, however, it outgrew its space. In 1886, Congress approved construction of a separate facility, which is known as the Jefferson Building.

The building is a tribute to the spirit of optimism and democracy prevalent in the country at the end of the 19th century. Congress wanted to build the greatest library in the world.

And it did, incorporating such innovations as fireproofing, electricity and rapid book retrieval.

The library "was exemplary not only in design, but in technology," says Ford Petras, curator for art, architecture and engineering at the Library of Congress. "It was to show Europe we could do whatever they could."

In a national competition, the firm of Smithmeyer & Pelz was selected by Congress to design the new library in 1873. (Another project by the firm was the Old Executive Office Building). In keeping with the idea of the

■ Once the Jefferson was vacant, it was possible to begin unearthing what had obscured, altered or overlooked in the old building. Dropped ceilings hid old ceiling paintings.

United States as a model for the world, an Italian Renaissance facade symbolizes the rebirth of learning and knowledge.

The image was one of Western European architecture at its finest, "flavored by an American gusto," Mr. Petras says. Construction began in 1888, and — unlike most projects today — the building was completed both on time and under budget.

The Jefferson Building opened in 1897 to great accolades; some, boasts Librarian of Congress James Billington, called it the most beautiful public building in America.

It also was quickly overcrowded. The John Adams Building, done

in art-deco style, was completed in 1939. The James Madison Building, reviled by staffers and architects alike, opened in 1980.

Ironically, completion of the unremarkable Madison Building enabled the renovation of the splendid Jefferson Building. About 1,500 employees (and their cubicles) moved from Jefferson to Madison, and the consultants rolled up their sleeves.

Arthur Cotton Moore/Associates of the District was hired as consulting architect, to work with the Office of the Architect of the Capitol.

Once the Jefferson was vacant, it was possible to begin unearthing

continued next page

what had been obscured, altered or overlooked in the old building. Dropped ceilings hid old ceiling paintings. Office workers had set up shop in the mezzanine of the Grand Great Hall. Even fundamental fire and safety codes had been Overlooked.

"There were only two fire extinguishers in the whole building," Arthur Cotton Moore says.

The project had three parts: restoration, renovation and new design. In the restoration phase, original artwork was cleaned after years of neglect; wooden doors and furniture were sent for repair and refinishing; light fixtures were refurbished (or, if they were missing, replaced with replicas); windows and stained-glass panels were re-stored; and mosaic and marble floors were patched and repaired.

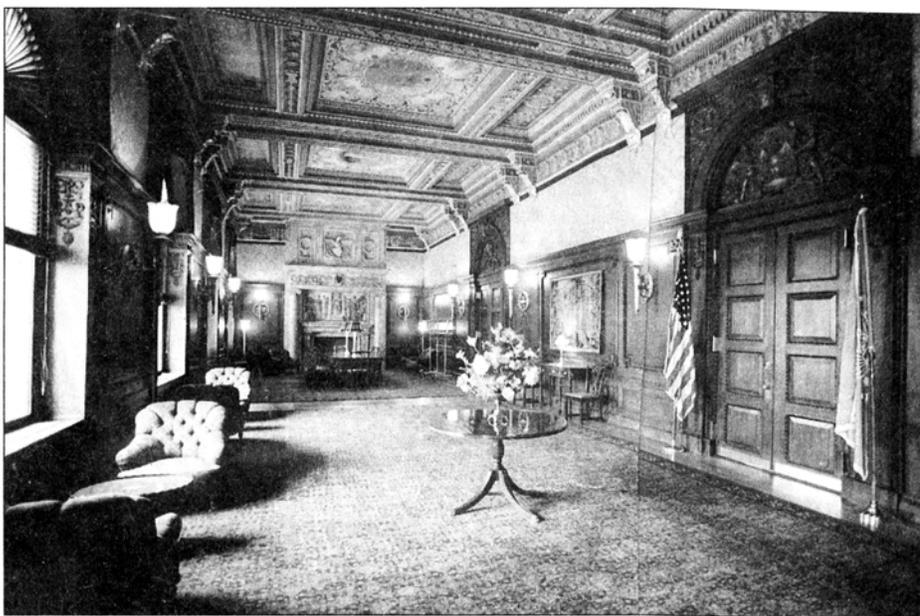
Renovation meant bringing the building up to current standards of safety and accessibility. Sprinkler heads are concealed within ceiling rosettes, and water pipes follow the arches of the Main Reading Room's vaulted ceiling. Several fire extinguishers are housed in custom-designed brass cases.

Old electrical and mechanical systems were removed, and an entirely new heating and air-conditioning system was installed.

Previously, no humidity control existed, which contributed to the deterioration of much of the decorative artwork and ceiling murals. The building was made handicapped-accessible as much as possible without ruining the integrity of the original architecture.

A new visitors center houses an orientation theater, coat rooms and restrooms and a much larger gift shop. There is talk of manufacturing and selling reproduction pieces of lamps, paintings and other items in the library's collection.

If the Smithmeyer & Pelz floor plan is viewed as a square, each corner is a pavilion, or large public room. The four pavilions are linked by galleries called curtains. In the center of the square, surrounded by the pavilions and curtains and



The House and Senate Reading Room in the Library of Congress' renovation Jefferson Building

marking the spiritual heart of the building, is the two-story Main Reading Room.

The galleries designed by Mr. Moore house the new Asian, European and African and Middle East reading rooms. Within each gallery is a "colonnade" — a free-standing two-story unit containing reading areas, workstations, shelving and offices for library staff. The design, Mr. Moore says, borrows from European libraries and the Baroque style.

The structure of the colonnades is hollow, with a thick sandwich between the levels to accommodate whatever circuitry the next century's communication systems demand.

The project was done in two phases, in part so that the building could remain open during construction. About half of the building was closed for renovation while staff, researchers and visitors moved to the other half. When that work was completed, the roles were reversed.

While the tactic enabled the library to remain open, it meant subcontractors had to do their jobs not once, but twice. Electricians, plumbers, telecommunications experts, mechanical-systems designers and artisans all had to coordinate their trade in two phases.



A reading table stands in part of the restored library, which opens to the public Thursday.

The much-anticipated result are stunning, however.

When it first opened a century ago, the Jefferson Building was unique in that it represented a collaborative effort between architecture and art. Never before had team of prominent artists coordinated their talents during the construction of a public building such symbolic importance.

After years of accumulated neglect, today's face lift of the building required an equal amount (collaboration to restore the architecture and artwork.

Mr. Hildebrand says literally hundreds of tradesmen, artisans and artists were involved in the 17-year project.

"If there's one thing I real' want to stress," he says, "it's that this was really a team effort."