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Fact Sheet

National Museum of Natural History Renovation of Ocean Hall

The new Sant Ocean Hall is located in the museum's central hall, behind the rotunda and directly opposite the National Mall entrance. The 23,000-square-foot space—one of the three original halls of the building—represents the largest renovation in the museum's 100-year history.

Museum Building Background

The museum's original architects, Hornblower and Marshall of Washington, D.C., designed the building in the Beaux Arts style, characterized by a large, square building adorned with classic details such as columns. The Beaux Arts style also features voluminous, open, well-lit spaces that emphasize the vertical dimensions of a room in order to draw the eye up.



- Construction of the museum began in June 1904 and was completed in 1910.
- The building consisted of three main halls—central, east (now dinosaurs and fossils) and west (now the Mammal Hall)—joined by a central rotunda. Hallways radiating out of the rotunda created “loops” through the museum and assured that visitors would always be able to return to the rotunda from any part of the museum.
- A tiled dome containing an oculus, a circular opening at its top, capped the octagonal rotunda, which has columns on the first, second and third floors.
- The building also had two open courts to provide ventilation in the years before air conditioning. Corridors running along the outside perimeters of the courts connected the central hall to the east and west halls.

The Central Hall

The Sant Ocean Hall is located in the museum's central hall, a space originally allotted to ethnology (the study of human cultures around the world). This remained the main focus of the hall for the next 65 years, although many cosmetic and structural alterations, including the addition and removal of walls, were made over the years to support exhibits.

For the past 30 years, the central hall was divided into three smaller exhibit spaces; two were dedicated to Asian-Pacific and native North American cultures. The third was used for temporary exhibitions and part of it used as a staff conference room.

Central Hall Renovation

The renovation was made possible through a federal appropriation of \$21 million and was designed by Quinn-Evans Architects of Washington, D.C., a firm with extensive experience in historic preservation. The firm worked with Smithsonian staff to coordinate the renovation of the space with the specific needs of the Ocean Hall exhibit. This involved planning for heating and air conditioning systems and sprinklers, as well as wiring for the many technological aspects of the exhibit.

The goal was to restore the space to its early 20th-century appearance while simultaneously bringing it up to date for 21st-century exhibition and safety standards. This process involved nearly 500 people, including architects, engineers and construction workers and fire protection, security and acoustic experts. The project contractor was Associated Builders of Hyattsville, Md.

The renovation opened up the eight second-story overlooks into the hall and dismantled a mezzanine that was added in the 1960s. Carpet was removed and the floor was restored to its original terrazzo. The original paint colors were used on the walls; the laylight and skylight were restored. Most importantly, the main entrance was reopened when the 1960s' escalators were removed and new larger ones were installed deeper inside the hall. This created a clear view across the museum—from its entrance on the National Mall through to its north side on Constitution Avenue, returning the space to its original grandeur.

The plaster ornamentation along the upper portions of the perimeter walls is in keeping with the Beaux Arts architectural style of the building. The museum's exterior walls are seven feet thick and made of red brick cladded with white granite quarried from Bethel, Vt.

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