

A New and Grander Vision for the National Museum of Women in the Arts

By Sandra Parsons Vicchio, Cara Versace and Rebecca Fischer

When founders Wilhelmina and Wallace Holladay were searching for a home for the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) in the early 1980s, an elegant, Classical Revival building in the heart of Washington, D.C., captured their attention. The 1908 structure would require extensive modernization to suit the new museum's requirements, but its storied history and signature presence near The White House proved appealing. The building would not only serve as a home for the Museum's world-renowned art collection, but also would provide

the opportunity to restore and preserve an architectural gem in the capital.

Designed by renowned architect Waddy Butler Wood of Wood, Donn & Deming, the building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It originally served as a Masonic Temple, with spaces for Masonic rites on the upper floors, offices on the middle floors, and an auditorium on the ground floor. From 1941 to 1983, it was a public movie theater. NMWA then purchased the building and, after a comprehensive renovation, the Museum opened to international acclaim in 1987. In a remarkable transformation, a building initially used primarily by men began serving as the global center for showcasing art by women from all over the world.

Long-Term Stewardship: A Master Preservation Plan

Nearly 30 years after the Museum's grand opening, NMWA administrators began to develop a preservation plan to guide ongoing stewardship, and to support improvements in the visitor experience, the display and protection of the art collection, and the building's overall capacity to engage visitors. With new programs and services in mind, NMWA sought to develop a long-term vision for the building, while addressing needed updates to systems and equipment.

To study the building and create the Facilities Preservation Plan (FPP), NMWA selected the architectural firm of Sandra Vicchio & Associates, LLC

KEVIN ALLEN



Although closed during construction, NMWA continues to engage with the public through virtual programs and dramatic displays of graphic art along the building's exterior in downtown Washington, D.C. Pictured here: *MISS CHELOVE*, *Reseeded: A Forest Floor Flow* (installation view), 2022, printed mesh 60 x 48 ft. Commissioned by the National Museum of Women in the Arts with support provided by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities. © 2022 *MISS CHELOVE*.



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Design and construction of the NMWA renovation has primarily been led by women, including architects, engineers, conservationists, and contractors.

(SVA) as the prime and design architect. Mueller Associates joined the team as mechanical, electrical, and plumbing engineer (MEP). When the project moved into schematic design, Marshall Craft Associates (MCA) supported SVA as architect of record. Fittingly, the project team of architects, engineers, and contractors has been led primarily by women in key leadership roles, along with NMWA and its representatives.

For Mueller Associates, the FPP represented an opportunity to continue a relationship with NMWA that began more than 20 years earlier, when Mueller played an instrumental role in the 1980s modernization. Mueller's engineers designed a museum-quality HVAC system within the historical structure, and addressed several key challenges, such as the placement of the air-handling units, and creating a separate HVAC solution for the 200-seat auditorium and other public spaces. Together, the architects and engineers created zones within the building to balance environmental concerns with energy consumption.

To create the FPP completed in 2016, SVA, Mueller, and the team analyzed collection and non-collection

spaces, explored opportunities to reorganize office and support areas and enhance public spaces and overall accessibility, and found ways to improve the building envelope and systems. The goal was to improve the Museum's ability to store and exhibit art. The plan subsequently served as the basis for the design of renovations to support the building's use for the next 50 years. The design was finalized in 2021, and construction of these improvements is now underway. The completion and re-opening of the Museum is set for the fall of 2023.

Reimagining the NMWA's Home

Highlights of the design include restoration of the building's façade (including insulation and environmental control), new roofing, new passenger elevators, improved amenities, and reconfiguration of the interior spaces to support current and future operations.

Today, NMWA occupies approximately 96,000 square feet and holds a collection of more than 5,500 paintings, sculptures, works on paper, videos,

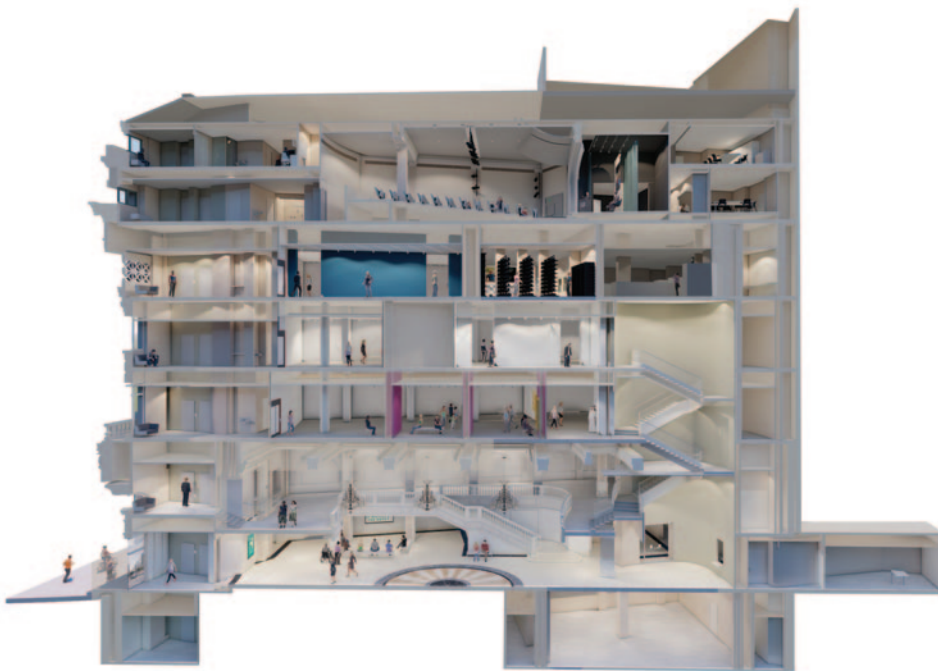
and decorative art. Dedicated to celebrating women's achievements in the visual, performing, and literary arts, the Museum hosts numerous exhibitions each year, as well as public and private special events.

"In addition to increased gallery spaces, we're adding a new Learning Commons, featuring an education and public programs studio for workshops and an improved research library," says Susan Fisher Sterling, NMWA's Alice West Director. She adds that the renovation will create "an updated, state-of-the-art performance hall and more efficiently designed museum collection storage and conservation areas." She further notes that "the building will be transformed from an accessibility standpoint, giving all visitors easy and clear access to gallery and program spaces." The popular Museum Shop will also be updated through the vision of retail designer Eileen Ritter.

The engineering design includes new and upgraded mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems, as much of the HVAC equipment was at or near the end of its useful life. MEP systems incorporate a new stand-alone chilled water plant to support the use of chilled water for cooling and dehumidification; a dedicated, stand-alone heating water boiler plant; and a direct digital control (DDC) energy management and automatic temperature control system to serve all new HVAC equipment. New fire protection, IT, and audiovisual systems are also being installed.

Two crucial design details will enhance the gallery spaces in particular. The architectural and mechanical engineering team collaborated closely to eliminate the use of large HVAC grilles along the gallery walls, which had previously disrupted the display of art. By designing narrow, linear architectural openings for return air intakes along the bottoms of walls, the team could preserve large, clean expanses of wall space to present the art.

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Reconfigured spaces throughout the building will enable the Museum to expand its educational and outreach programs, and better protect and display collections.

Supply air at the top of the gallery walls is aimed away from the art. Air distribution in a cavity between the exterior and interior walls also enabled the team to maximize the gallery ceiling height, which was essential

to NMWA. Another improvement involved installing a system above the gallery ceilings, allowing curators to hang heavy works of art, along with connections for digital art to create more display flexibility.

Throughout the design process, the team coordinated with the Museum's own board, the Historic Preservation Review Board, and the owner's project team, including experts in museum environments and preventive conservation.

According to Fisher Sterling, "The project is striking a beautiful balance between preserving the building's historical charm and improving its interior spaces, façade, and infrastructure." 🏛️

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The expanded galleries will now feature unobtrusive linear gaps along the bottoms of walls for air return, preserving expanses of display space.

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