

Press release

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The Smithsonian Institution Courtyard opens to the public

The Robert and Arlene Kogod Courtyard at the Smithsonian Institution opens to the public this weekend. The enclosure of the buildings grand central courtyard transforms the visitor experience of the galleries and provides one of the largest event spaces in Washington. The fluid-form of the fully glazed roof canopy bathes the courtyard in natural light and its form complements the structure of the former United States Patent Building, once described by the poet Walt Whitman as the noblest of Washington buildings.

The enclosure encompasses a vast landscaped courtyard. The original was conceived to be an oasis from the city and this has been replicated and enhanced by the new scheme. With landscaping designed in consultation with Landscape Architect Kathryn Gustafson, the courtyard feels like an outside space in its ambiance and volume, with mature trees, planting and a low-level water feature, but has the benefits of an interior space climate controlled and comfortable all year round.

During the day it will be used as an outside meeting space, while at night it will be dramatically lit to create an events space for the city, with a range of sound and light installations that can change the aspect of the building to suit different occasions.

Visually, the roof is raised above the walls of the existing building, clearly articulating the new from the old. The central dome is the largest volume within the enclosure. It marks the heart of the courtyard and also the confluence of two historical axes within Washington.

Structurally, the roof is composed of three interconnected vaults that flow into one another through softly curved valleys. The double-glazed panels are set within a diagrid of fins, clad in acoustic material, which together form a rigid shell requiring support from only eight columns. Its surface area is 37,500 square feet, and it comprises a total of 864 panes of glass, each of which is bespoke, to perfectly fit the existing building.

The enclosure of the courtyard is the centrepiece of the buildings long-term renovation programme, which also includes the redesign of the galleries with contemporary interactive displays, the addition of a conservation laboratory, an auditorium and greatly increased exhibition space.

Lord Foster said: "It has been a privilege to work on a project with such cultural importance and historical sensitivity to Washington. The design for the Robert and Arlene Kogod courtyard is driven by a deep respect for the Old Patent Office Building, reinforcing the character of the existing building without competing with it. Floating above the courtyard, the canopy catches the light, creating a new heart at the centre of this landmark in the nations capital."

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