

# Drying out, drawing plans, *and* doing it right: *Rebuilding and Repairing Old Capitol*



Summer in Iowa City just wasn't the same. When crowds lined up lawn chairs at the intersection of Clinton Street and Iowa Avenue to take in musical performances during June's Arts Fest and July's Jazz Fest, something seemed amiss. A glance to the west confirmed that it was—the gleaming dome of the Old Capitol was still gone, and in its place was a black box that resembled a funeral bier. “Why aren't they doing anything?” people asked one another.

For Ann Smothers, the director of the Old Capitol Museum, it's an understandable, though frustrating perception. Smothers, other Old Capitol staff members, and staff members from around the University have been working long days behind the scenes, ever since a fire on the morning of Nov. 20, 2001, destroyed the dome and cupola of the Old Capitol. The fire never reached the rest of the building that has been a seat of government and education and a symbol of pride for the University, Iowa City, and the state. But soot and smoke from the fire, as well as water from the fire hoses that doused the fire, caused extensive damage to ceilings, floors, and furniture.



*Left:* The Old Capitol fire interrupted a restoration project. Work has resumed, and soon the west portico will be refurbished, the exterior masonry restored, and the windows repaired. *Above:* Experienced hands repaired furniture damaged in last November's Old Capitol fire. Norman Schantz, of Schantz Furniture in South Amana, has crafted many of the building's reproduction pieces over the years.

“At first, I was just anxious to rebuild,” says Smothers, who has been associated with Old Capitol since 1986. “But at the University we’re concerned with good stewardship, and that means we needed to know what we could do now to preserve and protect the building for the future.”

That kind of forward thinking is not new. One of the truly remarkable things about the fire was that the interior of the building was untouched by flame, largely because of good stewardship during a 1920s-era restoration, when a concrete cap was added between the dome and the roof.

“There are things that were done in the 1920s and 1970s restorations that can’t be improved upon,” Smothers says. “The money they spent on that fireproofing shows such a commitment by the state.”

But of course, as times have changed so have technology and building codes, and so have the needs of the University and of the nearly 30,000 people who now visit Old Capitol annually. These changes required improvements that weren’t anticipated or even possible during past restorations, including building accessibility, lighting, fire-suppression systems, restrooms, heating and cooling systems, security, and exhibit design.

“We’re taking a 160-year-old structure and bringing it up to meet current codes, rules, and regulations,” Smothers says. “It’s taken a great deal of planning, and we had to be exact.”

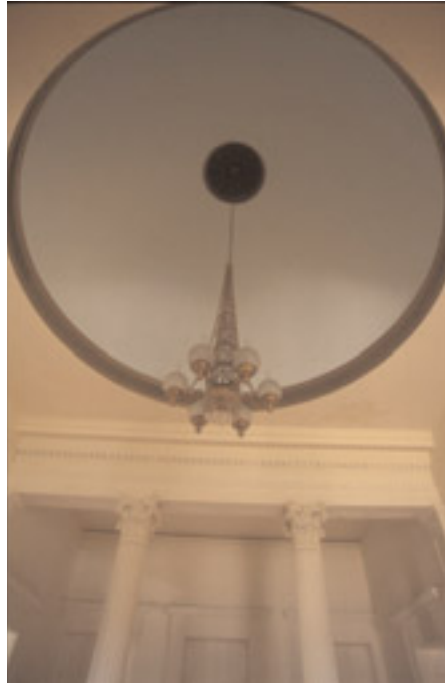
Being exact has been possible for several reasons, not the least of which is that the Old Capitol is a well-documented structure. Smothers also credits the University’s resources and experts with making sure that the Old Capitol had been well cared for in the past, and with knowing how to best restore it for future use.

In addition, The Board of Regents, State of Iowa, selected the architectural firm of Einhorn Yaffe Prescott (EYP) Architecture and Engineering, a Boston firm that specializes in historical restoration, to work with the Cedar Rapids firm, OPN Architects, Inc. EYP’s past projects include restoration of the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials in Washington, D.C., the Cloisters Museum of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, and the Ellis Island Hospital Buildings in New Jersey.

“Their expertise makes this more cost-effective for the University,” Smothers says. “Thanks to them there is no floundering around, no wasting time.”

Time in repairing the interior is not being wasted either. While it may look from the outside as though little has changed, work inside and off-site has been nearly constant.

“There are 680 artifacts—furniture, lamps, ink wells, pitchers, books—and each one had to be assessed, cleaned, repaired if



necessary, itemized, and packed for storage,” Smothers says. “For the first five weeks, we worked 16-hour days. All the carpets had to be cleaned, all the wall sconces were removed and cleaned and will require new wiring. Every day Tadd [Wiseman, the Old Capitol custodian] and I moved each of the four shutters on the 45 windows and all the doors, to keep them from warping.”

Water washed away the water soluble glue used on many pieces. The high humidity also raised the leather on the desktops in the House Chamber and warped the Supreme Court desk.

Assessing interior damage continues on an ongoing basis. As Old Capitol dries, cracks often appear in woodwork, walls, and columns. Fans have droned in the building since the day after the fire.

“It can take up to a year to dry out a building like this,” says Smothers, who points to the drainage holes drilled in the massive interior columns and walls. Floors that were badly warped are leveling out as they dry, however, and the reverse spiral staircase was recently load-tested for safety with 9,000 pounds of sandbags and deemed structurally sound.

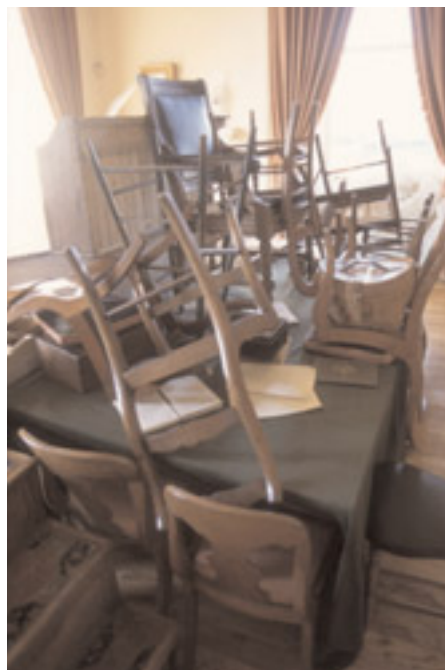
The task of returning Old Capitol to its former glory is a lengthy one that has been divided into three phases. The first and most visible phase, projected to be complete by February 2003, includes reconstruction of the dome, cupola, and bell tower. These items are being constructed off-site, by firms in Davenport and Dubuque. In addition, a new standing-seam metal roof will replace the current asphalt shingles.

“It’s historically and architecturally correct,” Smothers says of the roof, “and it’s good stewardship. It will help with fire protection, resist hail damage, and will last four times as long as shingles.”

The second phase of the restoration project includes the repair and upgrading of the interior. The final phase will resume the exterior restoration that was halted by the fire, including repointing masonry, replacing storm windows, and restoring the west portico and wood trim.

“These repairs and changes to the building will help us with our mission, which is to preserve and to educate,” Smothers says. “I felt such grief for quite a while after this happened, but I couldn’t wallow in it. It’s been a fascinating learning process—how often do people get to do work that is so rewarding?”

For more information on the Old Capitol fire and repairs, visit [www.uiowa.edu/~oldcap/fire/fire\\_index.html](http://www.uiowa.edu/~oldcap/fire/fire_index.html).



*Top:* Because the exterior walls are limestone, the interior walls brick, and the floors concrete, it could take as long as a year for Old Capitol to dry. *Left:* More than 50 pieces of furniture, which at first seemed to have escaped largely unscathed, required repair.