

Architects

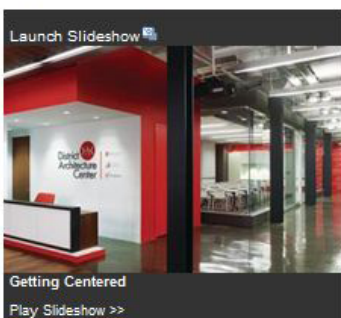
TYPOLOGY

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Getting Centered

Three new AIA chapters have built spaces to engage professionals and the public they serve.

By Murry Bernard

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Many of the AIA chapters across the United States maintain office space. But in some of the bigger cities, chapters have expanded to create a new type of facility: the center for architecture. Three of these new AIA chapter spaces opened recently in Boston, Washington, D.C., and Raleigh, N.C., to demonstrate that architecture can be an interactive experience.

To demonstrate an experience of architecture that extends beyond the built environment, these centers' programs accommodate much more than just administrative functions. They provide conference and meeting rooms for member meetings and classes and exhibits that are open to the public. The design for each of these new centers for architecture was chosen through a competition—a process that echoes themes of transparency, openness, and sustainability. Their flexible layouts accommodate

several programs each week, often juggling multiple events at once. And there's hardly a trace of the AIA's distinctive official red. Each center reflects its locality and, more specifically, its chapter's initiatives and goals.

Established in 1867, the Boston Society of Architects (BSA) is one of the oldest and largest of AIA chapters. But it grew too big for its former headquarters in the Financial District, which was also not publicly accessible. The new BSA Space in the Atlantic Wharf complex offers 16,000 square feet of storefront overlooking Fort Point Channel and allows the chapter to capitalize on the area's foot traffic. The design, by Höweler + Yoon Architecture, invites visitors to enter and climb an electric-green central stair that is visible beyond the windows of the building's historic facade, effectively serving as a billboard where exterior signage was not permitted. Constructed of steel plates with infilled glass risers, the stair connects a 1,500-square-foot gallery at street level to a 6,000-square-foot gallery on the second floor.

The BSA's second-floor exhibition area commands views of the channel, but that's not the only reason the architects maintained openness along the glazed perimeter. "We immediately noted that the main space was not at street level, but one floor up—so the ceiling needed to function as the main facade, visible from the street," explains partner Eric Höweler, AIA. The ceiling plane, a visual continuation of the green stair, is as functional as it is eye-catching. It conceals ductwork and light fixtures while providing a flexible system of channels for hanging exhibitions.

Conference rooms punctuate the openness of the exhibition space, dividing without partitioning; administrative spaces are delineated from the area by only a glass wall. "By interspersing the programs, we could create more mixture between the different users, visitors, and audiences of the BSA," Höweler says. "I'd like to go to a cocktail party and run into someone from a learning seminar and mingle with a staff person at the same time."

Transparency is also the major theme of the design for the Washington, D.C., chapter's District Architecture Center. Like the BSA Space, it occupies a two-story storefront in a historic building within a lively area—the Odd Fellows Temple Building in the Penn Quarter neighborhood. The chapter previously occupied a charming but confining row house in Dupont Circle, and "one of the programmatic goals for the chapter was to facilitate a lot more public outreach," explains Yolanda Cole, AIA, principal of Hickok Cole Architects, the designers behind the new space. Whereas the BSA Space devotes the majority of its plan to exhibitions, most of the District Architecture Center's 11,000 square feet is dedicated to meeting and conference space. The result is "a flexible facility for holding classes and other chapter events, and a platform for getting the public interested in architecture and the idea of hiring architects," says executive director Mary Fitch, Hon. AIA.

When visitors step into the District Architecture Center, they are enveloped in a small gallery lined with wood—a welcoming threshold off the street that frames views deep into the space. "A person walking by on the sidewalk can literally see all the way through the building from front to back—about 150 feet—into the boardroom and administrative offices," explains principal Michael Hickok. The warmth of the gallery gives way to a double-volume space with raw concrete floors and floating glass cubes containing conference rooms. When the center hosts larger events, staff fold glass partitions to create one large meeting space that accommodates over 200 people. A glass bridge connects the cubes, allowing light to penetrate to the floor beneath, which is lined with classrooms currently subleased to Alliance Française. These spaces will accommodate the chapter's future growth.

Growth was also the inspiration behind the AIA North Carolina chapter's decision to seek a new space in downtown Raleigh. It obtained a lot near the State Capitol on which to build the new AIA NC Center for Architecture and Design. Designed by Frank Harmon Architect, the center represents a first. "An AIA component has never built its own headquarters from the ground up," says principal Frank Harmon, FAIA. It's an especially impressive accomplishment in the wake of a recession: As with the other two centers, completion of the project was made possible through the donation of professional services and building materials by many companies.

The new three-story, 12,000-square-foot center's footprint is minimal, owing in part to its triangular site. Harmon oriented the 30-foot-wide by 135-foot-long structure along the street edge to preserve green space and create an urban park. Even the parking area, lined with porous grass pavers, doubles as an outdoor event space. The sense of community continues inside the interior, organized with an open plan that promotes natural lighting and cross-ventilation. Harmon placed the gallery along the street-front to engage passersby and situated the two main meeting spaces on the ground floor. Administrative offices occupy the upper floor.

Harmon chose local materials for the building's cladding, but reinterpreted them in a fresh and modern way. Zinc panels that hint at the farmhouse vernacular wrap the long wall along the street and fold to form the roof plane. Beneath, the building's volume is clad with cedar panels, and locally quarried stone rounds out the material palette. The AIA NC Center for Architecture and Design meets LEED Platinum standards as well as criteria set forth by the AIA Committee on the Environment. Sustainable features include geothermal heating and cooling, rainwater collection, and sensors that regulate light fixtures in response to fluctuating natural light levels. "This building demonstrates how the practice of architecture can enhance the urban landscape without

harming the environment and leave the land we build on better than we found it," Harmon says.

Each of these AIA chapter spaces illustrate that centers for architecture aren't simply offices or dispensers of continuing education credits, but thriving public spaces that can appeal to tourists, residents, and architects alike. Though they exist under the greater umbrella of the AIA organization, these centers are uniquely tailored to address their chapters' goals and cities' characters. Their design vocabularies vary, but they all share a modern language that both contrasts and complements their historic contexts, serving as visual advocates for an ever-changing profession.

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