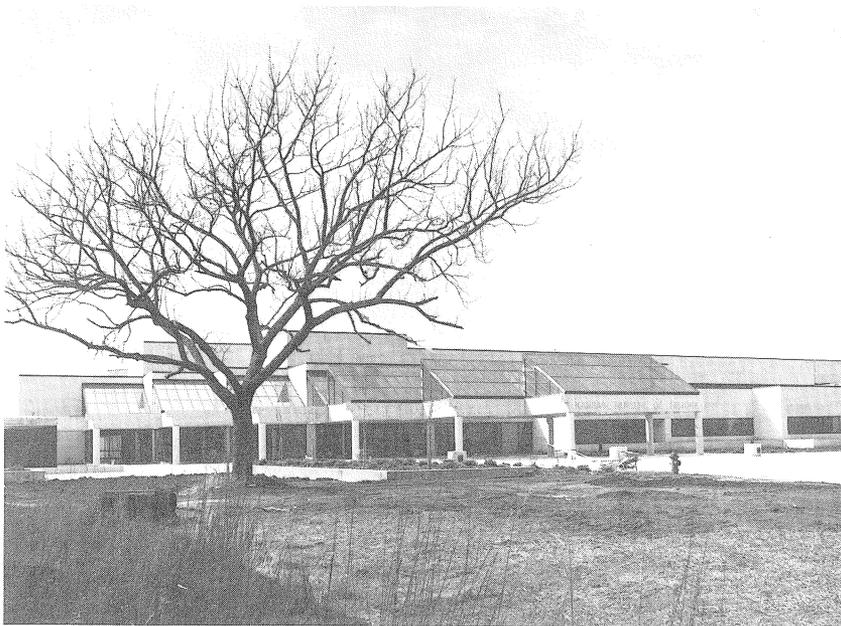


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# The Kansas Museum of History: A Functional Design for the Future

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by Mark A. Hunt

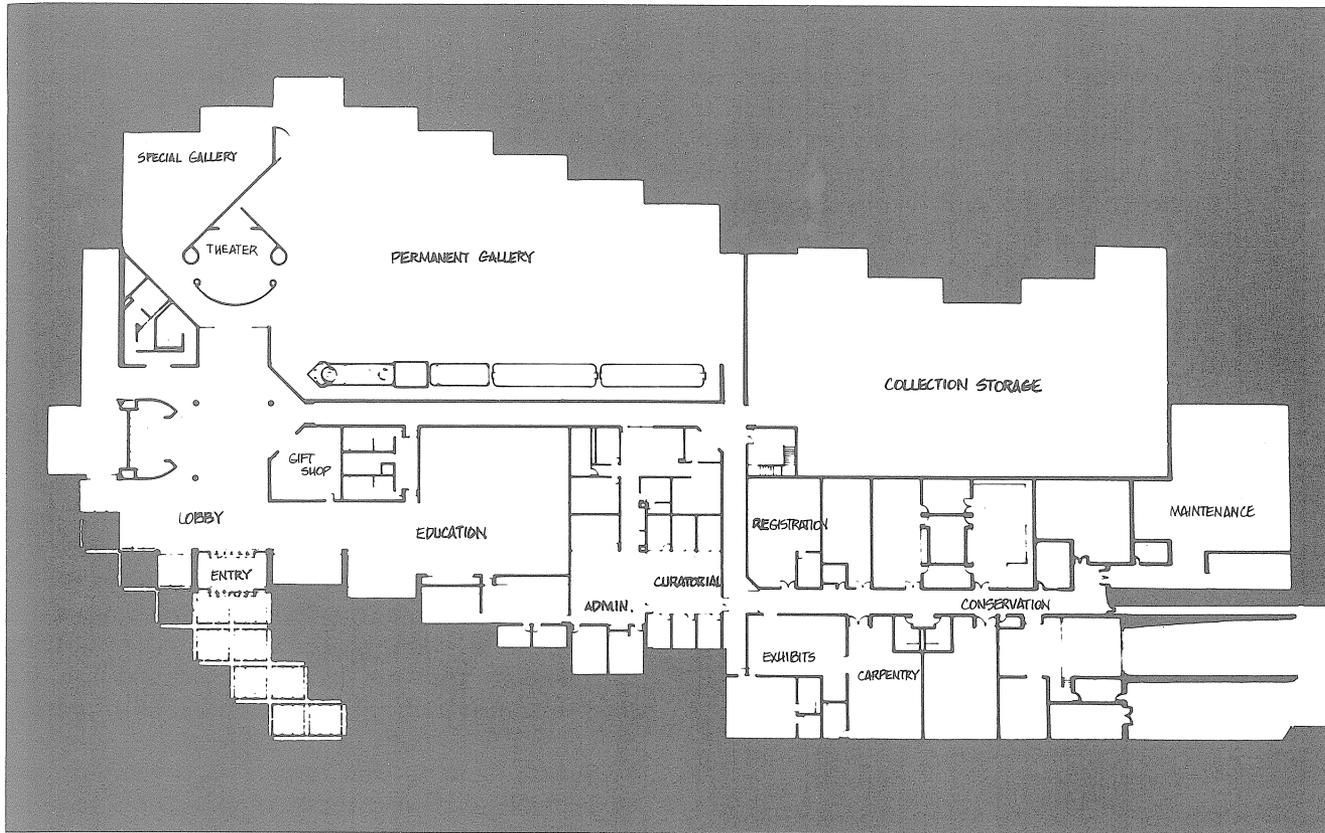


THE Kansas Museum of History is situated on eighty-one acres of meadow and woodland in west Topeka. Crossed by two small creeks, the area retains a pleasant, rural character. Visitors approach the building on Sixth Street from the east, encountering a paved entry road that meanders down a hill, across one of the creeks, and past a grove of walnut trees before entering the parking lot. Although the museum occupies an area of almost ninety thousand square feet, the natural warmth of the cottonwood limestone facade, the trees and shrubs around the building, and the covered entry help to make the building as inviting and pleasant as the natural environment surrounding it. A paved plaza sweeps from the entryway around the museum to the east, creating an appropriate setting for *The Great White Buffalo* sculpture by Lumen Martin Winter in the center of a reflecting pool. The plaza reaches northeast of the building toward the old Pottawatomie Baptist Mission, completed in 1850, which gives the property a special historical significance.

To understand fully the design and layout of the new Kansas Museum of History, one must first understand the purposes and functions of the Museum Department. First, the department collects the objects of history; without them the museum would not exist. Second, the museum preserves these objects for the future. Third, the staff performs research to learn more about the objects—who made them and who used them, for example. This information then becomes the basis for developing the interpretation of Kansas history for the public through a variety of means: exhibits; educational programs including tours, classes, film series, lectures, special celebrations, and festivals; publications such as exhibit catalogs and an occasional monograph; and audiovisual presentations.

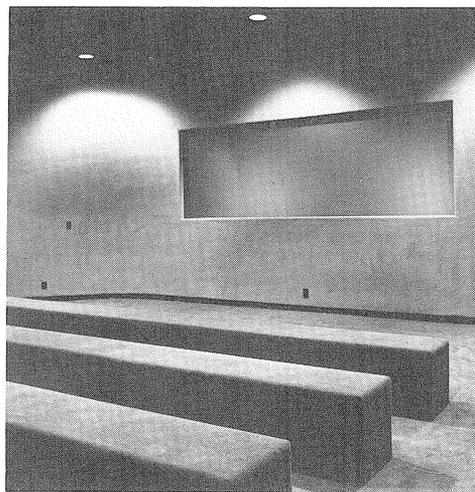
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Keeping those purposes and functions well in mind, the department worked with the firm of Schaefer and Associates of Wichita and several outside consultants for about one year to create the design for the new building. The architects made extensive use of glass at the entrance to the museum to provide an open, airy feeling in the main lobby. Several glass atriums along the east edge of the lobby repeat the design of the glass-roofed entry canopy and allow sunshine to enter and warm the space. The stone used on the exterior of the building has been placed on the walls of the interior lobby as well, combining with a wood ceiling and floor to create a welcoming environment for visitors. The lobby is large enough to accommodate the sizable tour groups and substantially increased visitation expected at this new location. A single-level building, the museum is completely accessible to the handicapped. Lounge seating, a small dining area, and an information desk are provided for the convenience of visitors. A museum shop opening off the lobby will carry a selection of Kansas historical publications, Kansas crafts, exhibit posters, reproduction objects, and many other gift items related to Kansas history and culture.

Directly across the lobby from the main entrance, two pairs of glass doors form the entrance to the exhibits. A short audiovisual presentation on Kansas history and the environment shown periodically in the small orientation theater will provide visitors with background information for their tour through the main history gallery. There, exhibits interpreting



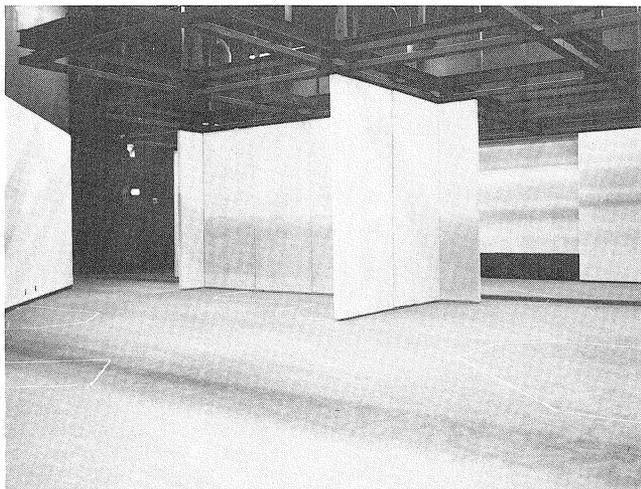
THE ORIENTATION THEATER

the history of Kansas from prehistoric times through the twentieth century will provide a pleasurable, multisensory learning experience. The exhibits will include thousands of historical objects and documents, presented with exhibit techniques such as audiovisual and video programs, recorded sounds, full-scale natural history dioramas and reconstructions of historic structures, microcomputer stations, and fiber-optic maps, along with "hands-on" tours and other educational activities. Dramatic spot lighting will focus attention on each exhibit detail. The *Cyrus K. Holliday* train occupies the entire north wall of the main gallery. A ceiling height of thirty-five feet permits the construction of multi-level exhibits as well as the display of especially large artifacts such as an airplane and a windmill.



THE PERMANENT GALLERY

On the east side of the orientation theater, a special gallery offers space for changing exhibits. A panel system on ceiling tracks in this gallery



THE SPECIAL GALLERY

provides the flexibility to create an appropriate configuration for each new show. The panels and walls are covered with carpet for ease in mounting exhibits.

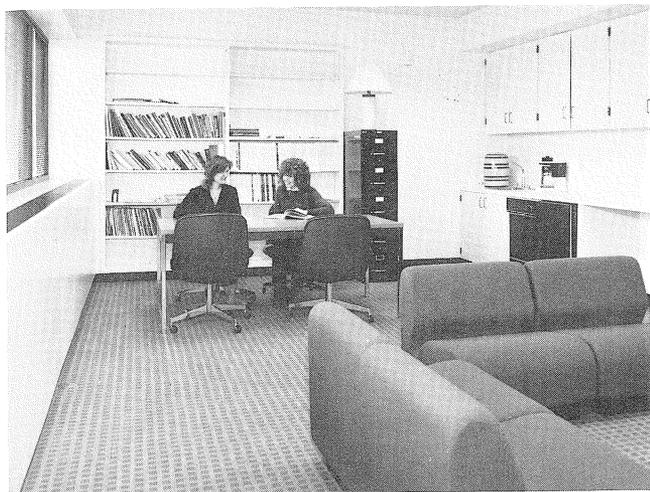
Immediately to the right of the entrance to the main lobby is the educational programs area of the museum, carpeted in bright red to distinguish it as a place of excitement and activity. The additional lobby space located here is for special tour groups and will include lounge seating and a small gallery area with a "discovery room" for hands-on learning activities. Directly west of the special groups lobby is a multipurpose room that will be used for large meetings and lectures. It can be subdivided into four separate spaces by portable walls mounted on ceiling tracks to accommodate small craft classes, pre- and post-tour activities, and workshops. Visiting school groups will be able to eat their lunches in these smaller classrooms. A service alcove to the north of the classrooms includes a sink, a refrigerator, cabinets, and counterspace as well as a portable stove and a microwave oven for ethnic and historical food demonstrations and the preparation of refreshments for meetings. A portable dance floor for historical dancing and theater presentations will be available to lay over the carpet.

The offices for museum education staff, facing north toward the parking lot, include facilities for preparing the traveling trunks and slide packets distributed across the state. Built-in cabinets and shelves to store the large collection of reproduction



OPEN STORAGE IN THE EDUCATION AREA

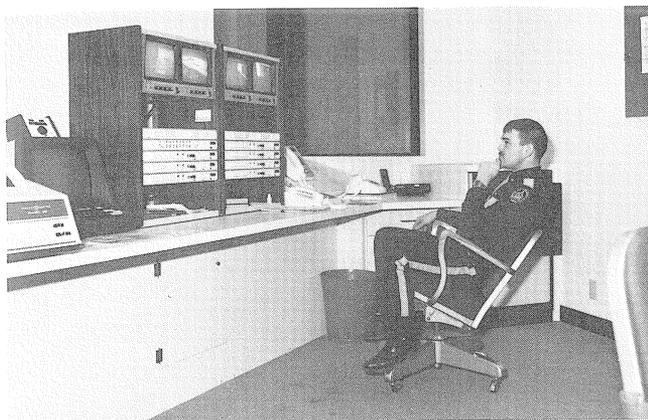
objects and other equipment used for museum education programs are located here. The office area includes a comfortable docent lounge and study area designed specifically to provide a special place



THE DOCENT LOUNGE STUDY

for the volunteers whose efforts allow the museum to operate a variety of programs serving a statewide constituency.

West of the educational programs area are the administrative offices, reached via a hallway leading from the main lobby to a small reception area. Immediately to the west of the reception area is the control center for the museum security system. The sophisticated electronic security of the building includes closed-circuit television monitors and



THE SECURITY CONTROL ROOM

perimeter and interior alarm devices as well as smoke and heat sensors and a fire sprinkler system. Security personnel will be on duty in the museum twenty-four hours a day to insure protection for the collections.

North of the reception area is a public research room, equipped with a microfilm reader and a reader/printer and study tables and chairs. In this

room, interested members of the public and scholars are encouraged to do research on the museum collections and their own objects under the guidance of curators. A staff conference room and the museum director's and assistant director's offices border the public research room.

Enclosed behind a glass wall next to the public research room is a suite of six offices with a central workroom. The three curators, two research historians, and the museum assistant have offices here. The workroom in the center provides space for the curators to study and catalog the collections. One office holds the department research and slide libraries and audiovisual equipment.



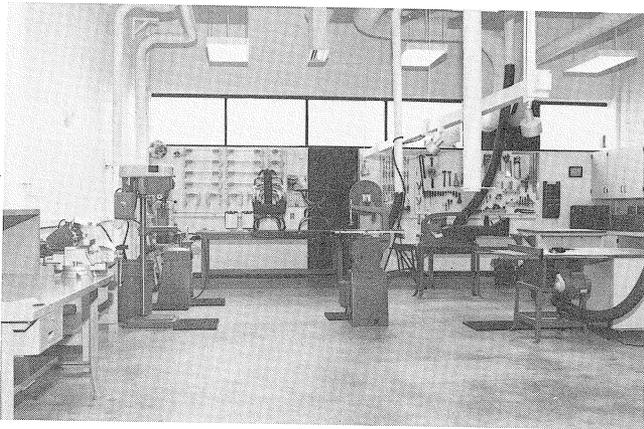
CURATORIAL OFFICES AND WORKROOM

The northwest quadrant of the museum houses workshops and laboratory spaces. An exhibit design studio with north light is located at the northeast corner of the exhibits division. The office of the



THE EXHIBIT DESIGN STUDIO

chief of exhibits opens onto this area as does a small photographic darkroom with a large process camera. An adjoining multipurpose work area houses silk-screening equipment, a light table, a small touch-up spray booth, and a larger walk-in spray booth used for painting exhibit panels and props. A wood-working and fabrication shop, equipped with power and hand tools and including a paint mixing and storage area, and an office for the chief carpenter complete the exhibits division.



THE WOODWORKING CONSERVATION LABORATORY/SHOP

Across the hall is the registration work area and registrar's office. It is here that objects donated to the museum are brought to be photographed and documented. The front section has a cement floor to accommodate large, heavy objects such as farm implements, while the back part is carpeted to prevent the breakage of fragile items. A sink and counter provide an area to clean especially dirty objects, while cabinets, shelves, and clothes racks lining the walls hold donations in process. A bank of twenty fireproof files contains all records on the museum collections.

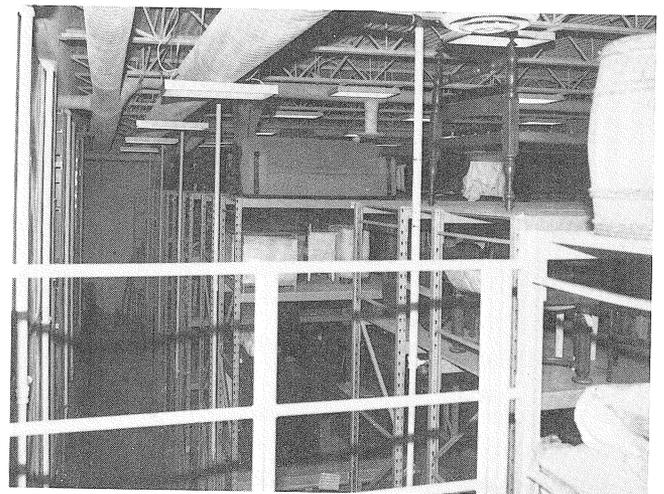
West of the registration area are the conservation laboratories, one for textiles and works of art on paper and one for decorative arts objects. These two laboratories share office spaces, a storage room, and an X-ray/photography room located between them. In these spaces two conservators treat the objects to arrest the deterioration process and to prepare them for exhibition or study. A third conservation laboratory/shop area across the hall contains woodworking and metalworking tools and equipment to fabricate replacement parts for objects. All the specialized and sophisticated equipment in these labs was purchased through grants from the Garvey Foundation of Wichita and the Union Pacific and Burlington Northern foundations.



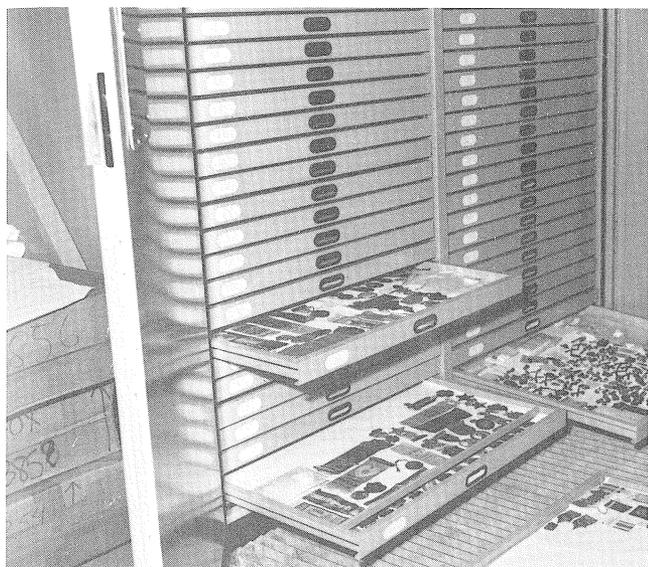
A CONSERVATION LABORATORY FOR DECORATIVE ARTS

Remaining areas in this quadrant of the building include a loading dock and enclosed parking area where objects and supplies can be unloaded safely during inclement weather, a fumigation chamber, a security squad room, and storage areas for supplies and groundskeeping equipment. Separate mechanical and electrical equipment rooms and an office workshop area for the building supervisor and his staff are located in the southwest end of the building.

The collection storage section occupies 13,800 square feet of the museum and is a high-security area where all the collections not on exhibit are kept. Bulk storage shelves hold furniture, farm implements, and other heavy items. Three levels of open shelves and special enclosed artifact storage cases store the smaller objects and the textile and



THE COLLECTION STORAGE AREA



CABINETS FOR SMALL ARTIFACTS

clothing collections. The storage cases are placed in rows on a three-story pallet rack mezzanine at the west end, greatly increasing the total storage capacity of the space. The staff use a special forklift to move objects between the different storage levels. An enclosed art storage room with custom racks for

the framed paintings and prints is located in the northeast corner of collection storage.

On the south walls of collection storage and the main exhibit gallery are large, removable metal plates to allow for the infrequent moves of oversized objects or equipment into or out of the building. Doorways and halls throughout the museum are ten feet wide and twelve feet high for easy movement of objects, supplies, and exhibit components.

Outside, the land with its native trees, shrubs, wild flowers, and grasses will provide the perfect location for a nature trail. Picnic tables and shade trees will furnish additional conveniences and pleasant surroundings for museum visitors. The Stach School, a one-room schoolhouse moved from Delia, Kansas, will offer groups an opportunity to take part in a classroom experience of an earlier time. Eventually, an operating historical farm interpreting the history of eastern Kansas agriculture may be developed as well.

Designed with the most up-to-date work facilities and functional, pleasant public spaces, the Kansas Museum of History now is ready to begin service as a special place of learning that will bring the history of Kansas to life for millions of people for many years to come. KH