

Projects of Note

PROJECT OF THE WEEK

National Archives Undergoes Renovation

Exhibition closed July 5; research side will remain open



by Tracy Sisser
Associate editor

As lead architect for a multimillion dollar renovation project at the National Archives, D.C.-based Hartman-Cox Architects is helping preserve our country's founding documents and expand public access to them.

The National Archives is the home of the "Charters of Freedom" – the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Since 1952, these documents have been preserved in helium-filled cases, which are now displayed in the rotunda of the Archives building, located on Constitution Avenue within sight of the U.S. Capitol. It has been found that these cases are showing signs of deterioration. As a result, the documents will be removed from their current encasements, examined by conservators, and re-encased in new airtight containers made of aluminum, titanium, and glass that will be filled with argon gas, according to the National Archives.

National Archives Project Manager Patrick Alexander said building officials are using this opportunity to undertake other life-safety and code deficiencies, with funding appropriated by Congress.

Hartman-Cox is spearheading the \$110 million dollar effort. The project includes renovating the stack and research areas, creating a new genealogy and family history center, enlarging the microfilm room, and building new conference and meeting spaces. In addition, the rotunda will be brought up to

comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Currently, visitors and researchers must climb stairs to enter the rotunda where the Charters of Freedom are displayed. After renovations, visitors with disabilities will be able to enter through a new general public entrance, instead of through a side entrance and locked gate.

The firm has also designed a system that lowers and raises the Charters of Freedom in and out of the security

age and reorganizing the structural floors and supports of the area. The "found" space will be used for offices, teaching areas, new lobbies, and exhibition spaces around the rotunda, Boiardi said. He also noted that marble used for new floors and for patching will come from the same quarry in Tennessee as did the original marble when the building was constructed in the 1930s.

The Washington Post reports that "inside the rotunda, two features of John Russell Pope's original design – the steep walkway leading to the display cases and the stairs in front of the cabinets – will be demolished. Officials will remove a black metal ramp that had been used by people in wheelchairs." In addition, the Archives' Alexander said the leading edge of the display cabinets will be dropped from 42 inches to 28 inches above the floor, and the cabinets will be tilted up at a 25 degree angle, so that documents will be accessible to visitors with disabilities. This will allow for all four pages of the Constitution to be exhibited, whereas now only the first and last pages can be displayed.

Hartman-Cox, whose practice centers on institutional work and commercial office buildings, was awarded the contract for the National Archives project after a competitive bid process. The firm has been working on the project since 1998. The building, which closed on July 5, will reopen in 2003. The research side of the building will remain open during the renovations.

The Post reports that donors will fund the \$2.2 million needed to clean and restore the artwork and provide the resources to build the movie theater. Congress is funding the other renovations. ■



Why is the Magna Carta so British? It was drafted in 1215 by King John of England. It is a document that the King signed to limit his power over his subjects. It is a document that the King signed to limit his power over his subjects. It is a document that the King signed to limit his power over his subjects.

vaults. The system is created to reduce vibrations and ensure a smoother transition between display and security mode, said Mario Boiardi, FAIA, a partner at Hartman-Cox.

Boiardi said the renovations will result in a "much more intensive use of space" at the Archives. He noted that the biggest component of the renovation would be removing six levels of document stor-