

A fixer-upper

Capitol repairs uncover classic features, cheap work



[John Henry](#)

Kansas Rep. Melvin Neufeld, pointing, talks about the House of Representatives chamber during a tour in the west wing of the Kansas State Capitol building in Topeka. [Enlarge photo](#)

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Topeka — Built in stages over more than 30 years, and repaired thereafter, the Kansas Capitol is a monument to both the best and worst in craftsmanship.

Legislative leaders, architects and construction managers beam with pride when they talk of some of the art and precision handiwork that they have uncovered as part of the current renovation and restoration project.

Looking at old-time photos of tough-looking immigrants who started construction shortly after the Civil War, architect Vance Kelley says the early planners wanted to "create a symbol of democracy to show people that government is here and it's a strong government."

But it's also a low-bid government.

While the detailed stenciling, murals, huge limestone blocks and copper dome blow away visitors and professionals alike, workers have also found a building riddled with repair shortcuts.

For instance, during renovation of the west wing, workers found the old plaster was mixed with horse hair and just wasn't holding up.

"We had to replace lots of plaster," says Statehouse architect Barry Greis.

Exterior pieces of masonry - some in the 50-pound range - have become dislodged after being tapped with a small hammer. And

while the massive stones in the basement command respect, there are hidden corners in the building where it looks like long-ago workers ran out of the good stuff and just jammed in whatever rock they could find.

Construction of the Capitol started in 1869 and was mostly finished by 1903.

After decades of remodeling, rearranging and below-standard repair jobs, state officials knew in the 1990s they had a major fixer-upper on their hands and started the process of trying to preserve the structure while transforming it into a modern office building.

But like a home-repair project sinking into a money pit, the subject of cost overruns for the Capitol project has become a sore point for some.

And there are all different ways of adding up the figures.

Bottom line: The project is now expected to cost \$285.6 million and be finished in late 2011.

Original cost estimates from 1999-2000 were in the range of \$90 million to \$120 million.

But then officials decided to add 118,000 square feet of new office space, mostly by digging out the basement. That added \$47 million to the project.

A new \$15 million parking garage for visitors and lawmakers was added to the state budget.

Construction costs and materials have increased greater than the inflation rate, and the latest large item change is the need to repair the exterior masonry.

Kelley, a principal with Lawrence-based Treanor Architects, says the masonry is in worse shape than originally thought. Workers have catalogued every rock's condition and found that it's going to cost nearly \$40 million to fix.

But despite the costs, and criticism from some quarters, legislative leaders haven't blinked.

"This is a project we are very proud of," says Senate President Steve Morris, R-Hugoton.

House Speaker Melvin Neufeld, R-Ingalls, recently spoke warmly of the quality of the art work in the Capitol, and the need for more.

He says about \$22,000 was raised from current and former House members who purchased their old desks and chairs. That money will be used to pay for artwork that will depict the role of minorities and women in Kansas history and adorn the walls of hallways leading to the House chamber, he says.

Once finished, Neufeld, Morris and others say the Capitol will make Kansans proud.

And that completion date is set for November 2011.

"We feel confident we are on schedule to do that," Statehouse Architect Greis says.

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