

Raleigh says ‘welcome’ in style
The city’s visitor center receives a much-needed renovation
By Nancy E. Oates, Correspondent
News & Observer

Referred to as "the grand old lady with her slip showing" the Capital Area Visitor Center has put on her Sunday best.

With the help of designers from the Triangle East chapter of the Interior Design Society, who volunteered countless hours during the past year, and businesses statewide that donated furnishings and services, the visitor center now offers gracious Southern hospitality with all the charm one would expect of an edifice from the mannered class.

"Even the little boys on the school tours put on their best manners when they walk in here," says visitor center Director Betty Baker.

Built in 1918 by an affluent banker who became a mayor of Raleigh, the Andrews-London house at 301 N. Blount St., across from the governor's mansion, was badly in need of a new wardrobe. Institutional furnishings camouflaged the Georgian Revival architecture. Orange molded plastic chairs were strewn about the burgundy carpet. A dark Formica structure served as a reception desk, and fluorescent lights glared down over classroom-style easels.

"Many visitor centers are cold, stark, and utilitarian, as was this," says Alice McGee, president of the Triangle East chapter of IDS. "We wanted people to catch a certain mood and feeling when they walked in – that first warm welcome of Southern charm."

The impetus for change arose at Gov. Jim Hunt's inauguration in January 1997. Dignitaries flew in from across the country and congregated at the visitor center to meet their escorts. Watching some of the nation's biggest movers and shakers trying to take their ease in cast-off office furniture of the pre-renovated welcome center was on occasion that McGee vowed would never be repeated.

"It was an embarrassment," she says.

About the same time, McGee and Brenda Eskridge, a designer from Chapel Hill, gathered enough designers to form a chapter of IDS in the Triangle. Working on a community service project would be a good way for the new members to become acquainted and get used to working with each other, they thought. All agreed that the visitor center was a project worthy of their ministrations.

"When you consider how it looked and that about 200,000 visitors pass through the center each year, it seemed like the squeakiest, neediest wheel," McGee says.

Ten of the 75 members of the chapter set to work pulling together donations of furnishings and labor. In the end, antiques, furniture and accessories with a retail value of \$45,000 were donated. IDS members volunteered time that, if billed, would have added \$30,000 to the cost. (While a designer's fee is normally about 15 percent of the cost of a project, this restoration was unusually labor-intensive because the only way to acquire the furnishings was to persuade the manufacturers to donate them or to persuade another state-owned facility – such as the Executive Mansion – to relinquish antiques.)

"We've pulled in all of our markers and favors from around the community to make this work," McGee says.

For designer Marie Martin, who was in charge of the window treatments, it was a delight to see the grand old home come back to life. Because no family will live in it, the Andrews-London

house has been preserved by adaptive use – that is, it is to be used in a way that retains the structure and character of the place.

“We restored the personality of the house,” Martin says. “It’s great that the house can be used, even as government offices. We refurbished it as a home, so it’s not so institutional.”

Upon entering the visitor center, past the Doric columns, visitors are welcomed into the stately elegance that bespeaks the South. Artist Michael Brown has graced the entryway with a shadowy pastoral scene painted in shades of beige. Such scenes were popular in manor houses of the era. The rectangles carved into the solid wood reception desk reflect the raised panel design of the wainscoting. The seal created for the visitor center and painted above the reception desk picks up the pattern of the dentil molding around the 12-foot ceilings. A feathery tree on the staircase landing draws attention to the Palladian windows opening in to the second-story sleeping porch.

What was once the dining room, off to the right of the foyer, is now the audio-video room, where visitors can view a brief history of the Capital area. McGee found a small transparency of a painting of Sir Walter Raleigh that Talton’s in Winston-Salem was able to enlarge and turned into an oil portrait. Sir Walter now surveys the room from his perch above the fireplace. Carolina Antique Mall loans artifacts to provide a changing exhibit of how residents used to live.

Across the hall to the left is the parlor, offering comfort to visitors who want to rest while planning their tour. The brass chandelier once decorated the state capitol. Needlepoint depictions of the governor’s mansion and the state flag grace the walls. A new map of Raleigh replaces its crumbling predecessor, which lacked many of the newer streets visitors were trying to find.

Brochures and souvenirs are displayed in the library behind the parlor. Freshly painted hunter-green walls accentuate the bright white moldings. To the right of the library is the family gathering room, which serves the same function as a modern family room, with the original red clay tile floor. The original kitchen has been converted into the women’s restroom. Special effects painter Lisa Robinson stenciled swirling vines and flowers on the walls. A garden bench completes the effect.

The renovations were unveiled last week during a reception emceed by Sam Townsend, administrator of the state capital visitors section, with remarks by Secretary of Cultural Resources Betty McCain.

As for McGee, after taking a break during the summer to work for some paying clients, she will be back to work on the next phase of the project – refurbishing the public officers’ and docent training rooms on the second floor.

“It’s fun,” she says. “I don’t get to do a house like this every day. The ones being built now don’t look quite like this.”