

Wisconsin Historical Society: Offers first look inside new history center

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MADISON, Wis. – The Wisconsin Historical Society is excited to share a first look inside the new state-of-the-art history center that is expected to be completed in late 2026. The history center will sit squarely at the intersection of Madison’s vibrant State Street and Wisconsin’s Capitol Square, serving as a hub of community engagement and civic activity. The five-story, 100,000-square-foot landmark will provide unprecedented access to the state’s venerable collection of nearly 290 million items, while sharing regional stories within the context of American history.

Leading the exhibit design is Ralph Appelbaum Associates (RAA), known worldwide for its work on cultural attractions including the American Museum of Natural History’s new Gilder Center in New York City and the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. RAA, in collaboration with Continuum Architects + Planners and SmithGroup, are teaming with the Society’s renowned curators and historical experts to steward the nation’s next great history attraction.

“Wisconsin’s new history center will be the result of bringing together some of the nation’s top architects, exhibit designers, curators and historians with community voices, diverse perspectives and extensive consultations with the region’s Native Nations,” said Christian Øverland, the Ruth & Hartley Barker Director and CEO of the Wisconsin Historical Society. “This will be a welcoming, vibrant place for the community to gather, engage, reflect and share in our history.”

Visitors will be welcomed into a large, open lobby that will feature space for public programming, a retail storefront and dedicated areas to serve students and community groups. The lobby will lead to an expansive wooden staircase resembling an ancient dugout canoe, inspired by the region’s long history

of water travel and the recent recovery of two Native American dugout canoes from Madison's Lake Mendota. The prominent staircase will offer commanding views of the Capitol and serve as an active gathering space for free public programming with an adjoining café.

The second floor will house a rotating community gallery that will provide a platform for local history organizations and other groups from across Wisconsin to share their unique histories, as well as a changing gallery large enough to bring the nation's most sought after traveling exhibits to Wisconsin.

The third floor will be home to two permanent galleries. The first gallery will be a lively celebration of Wisconsin's identity in American culture, featuring beloved objects such as a vintage 1969 Oscar Mayer Wienermobile as well as items from the Society's rich film, television, music and media collections. The second gallery will be an interactive exploration of American experiences, including the history of our democracy, examples of engaged citizenship and experiences of the region's Sovereign Nations. Integrated into the gallery will be opportunities to explore genealogical records from the Society's extensive archives as well as an engaging forum for exercising productive civic engagement.

The fourth floor will feature an immersive gallery that evokes the feeling of being outdoors among Wisconsin's vast and varied landscapes that have sustained human life and seen thousands of years of resourcefulness, ingenuity and innovation. Through one-of-a-kind items from the Society's world-class agricultural collection, to interactive exhibits that place visitors among shipwrecks of the Great Lakes and treasured recreational pastimes like hunting, fishing and boating, guests will explore the unique reciprocal relationships Wisconsin people have forged with the natural world over thousands of years. Two adjoining terraces overlook the Capitol Square, Lake Mendota and the Driftless Area in the distance, providing a direct connection between the exhibit experience and the landscapes beyond the walls of the building.

The fifth floor offers striking event spaces designed to host a variety of public and private gatherings. The space connects to a spectacular rooftop terrace that invites the community to experience incredible views of the Capitol, the Madison Isthmus, area lakes and beyond.

"It is rare to have such an unbelievably large collection to work with, including a substantial selection of music, oral histories, photographs and film that will allow

visitors to make personal connections to shared stories,” said Patrick Swindell, principal and creative director for Ralph Appelbaum Associates. “We are designing Wisconsin’s history center exhibits to be a balance of objects, scholarship and lived experiences that will inspire moments of engagement and reflection.”

The building’s exterior, with top floors rotated to enhance the view of the surrounding landscape and symbolically connect to all corners of the state, is also an homage to Wisconsin’s history of craftsmanship, mining and industry.

“The center is wrapped in a layered façade that provides movement and depth to the building’s exterior that, much like history, reveals new perspectives as your vantage point changes,” said Monteil Crawley, principal at SmithGroup and lead architectural designer for the center. “Local materials including weathered zinc, embossed stainless steel, granite, and glass create a dynamic exterior inspired by Wisconsin’s ever-changing landscapes, the movement of the surrounding lakes, and the state’s rich history of industry and innovation.”

The history center replaces the Wisconsin Historical Museum, which was located in the space of a former hardware store and unable to adequately provide access to the state’s collections to school groups and residents. The new center will be located on the site of the former museum and two adjacent properties on Carroll Street. It will welcome more than 200,000 guests annually and double the number of students served to 60,000.

“The new history center will serve as an open door to one of the most significant historical collections in the country and will be a legacy project that ensures the stories of our region are properly shared for generations to come,” said Øverland. “We are grateful for nearly two decades of growing public and private support, and we are thrilled to see Wisconsin’s new history center visible on the horizon.”

For more information or to support the project, visit wisconsinhistory.org/historycenter. For more images and video, visit the history center [media gallery](#).

About the Wisconsin Historical Society

The Wisconsin Historical Society, founded in 1846, ranks as one of the largest, most active and most diversified state historical societies in the nation. As both a state

agency and a private membership organization, its mission is to help people connect to the past by collecting, preserving and sharing stories. The Wisconsin Historical Society serves millions of people every year through a wide range of sites, programs and services. The Wisconsin Historical Foundation, a 501(c) (3) tax exempt organization, receives grants and private contributions benefitting the Wisconsin Historical Society and administers the membership program. For more information, visit www.wisconsinhistory.org.

About SmithGroup

SmithGroup(www.smithgroup.com) is one of the world's preeminent integrated design firms. Working across a network of 20 offices in the U.S. and China, a team of 1,300 experts is committed to excellence in strategy, design, and delivery. The scale of the firm's thinking and organization produces partnerships with forward-looking clients that maximize opportunities, minimize risk and solve their most complex problems. SmithGroup creates exceptional design solutions for healthcare, science and technology organizations, higher education and cultural institutions, urban environments, diverse workplaces, mixed-use and waterfront developments, and parks and open spaces.

About Continuum Architects + Planners

Established in 1996, Continuum Architects + Planners' is a highly technical and creative team of experienced professionals offering interactive planning and programming, inspired architectural and interior design, comprehensive project management, strategic sustainable design, detailed historic consulting and rehab, and valuable technology as part of our in-house services. A recipient of more than 60 awards, Continuum designs diverse building types in an array of markets, including higher education, commercial, residential, federal, and civic in the state of Wisconsin. They have completed 50 projects for the state of Wisconsin including: The University of Wisconsin Madison Chazen Museum of Art and currently the new Engineering Building. Most recent projects include UWM's School of Freshwater Sciences and the Lubar Entrepreneurship Center.

About Ralph Appelbaum Associates

Ralph Appelbaum Associates (RAA) is the world's largest practice dedicated to the planning and design of museums and narrative environments. Past and current projects—over 850 commissions in 52 countries—include many of the world's most

recognizable cultural attractions. More than 75 million people encounter their work every year. Headquartered in New York, with branch offices in London, Berlin, and Beijing, RAA's international studios are diverse and interdisciplinary: drawing together designers, architects, artists, historians, educators, media-makers, technologists, writers, and poets that are passionate about encouraging a mindful connection to the world around us. They use the tools of storytelling, design, theater, media and interactive technology, and the narrative power of architecture, to communicate big ideas that convey the history, core values, and key messages of their clients. They strive for the optimum balance between sustainability, value, design, and experiential quality and believe that connective and transformative experiences in public spaces are essential for individuals, communities, cities, and nations—now more than ever.