

The Ambassador Barbara Barrett & Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Washington Center at Arizona State University, occupying a renovated office building in downtown DC.





View from above before the renovation and rooftop addition.



View from above showing the rooftop addition and terrace. Note the extended windows at ground level, accommodating the lowered first floor.

AZ in DC

Arizona State University Puts Down Roots in the Capital

by Steven K. Dickens, AIA, LEED AP

Arizona State University (ASU) is one of the largest universities in the United States, with some 60,000 students attending classes on its main campus in Tempe, plus another 50,000 at satellite campuses and online. In the past, ASU was perpetually at the top of rankings of “party schools,” but in 2002 its then-new president, Michael C. Crow, set the course for a different vision: the “New American University” model, Crow called it, in which, among other things, the school would measure itself “not by whom it excludes, but rather by whom it includes and how they succeed.”

“One university in many places,” is a key piece of Crow’s concept—the university works to be convenient for the student, rather than the other way around. Distance (internet) learning is central to this, of course: some 30,000 of ASU’s students are enrolled in online programs and don’t actually go to physical classrooms. But offering a broader reach and higher-quality brick-and-mortar classrooms and other academic facilities also figures in, with numerous new campuses and

Project: Ambassador Barbara Barrett & Justice Sandra Day O’Connor Washington Center at Arizona State University,
1800 Eye Street, NW, Washington, DC

Architects: **CORE architecture + design**
Structural Engineers: **Shemro Engineering**
MEP Engineers: **Girard Engineering**
Civil Engineers: **Wiles Mensch Corporation**
Geotechnical Engineers: **Schnabel Engineering**
Historic Façade Engineering Consultants: **Odeh Engineers, Inc.**
LEED/Specifications Consultant: **Rosa D. Cheney, AIA, PLLC**
Owner’s Representative: **Monarc Construction**
General Contractor: **DPR Construction**

buildings bringing state-of-the-art learning facilities to a wider range of students—and bringing students and faculty to varied places relevant to their studies. This program was effective in attracting funding from both public and private sources, covering costs for an immense increase in students from families with



Close-up of the rooftop function space, with sliding doors open to the terrace.

incomes below the poverty line (more than a 600% increase), plus an impressive collegiate building boom.

Most of that building boom is in the Phoenix area, but one far-flung outpost is the 32,000-square-foot Ambassador Barbara Barrett and Justice Sandra O'Connor Washington Center in downtown DC, just a few blocks from the White House. The center's name honors the former diplomat and the former Supreme Court justice, respectively, both of whom stood out from the Washington federal crowd in part because they never let their identities as Arizonans fade. The center houses a half-dozen programs that were already in DC but in scattered, leased spaces, none of which had exterior signage bigger than a plaque. The center unifies and magnifies ASU's Washington presence, with the entire building serving as a sign that the university is a force here in the capital.

The building was constructed as apartments in 1910, when the neighborhoods west of the White House were almost exclusively residential; it was converted to office use in 1960, when substantial tracts of rowhouses and apartment buildings in the area were being demolished for new office blocks. The mid-century expansion of DC's office core north and west of the White House predates the city's historic preservation statute (passed in 1972), and the results of the boom left remarkably few pre-war buildings in the area now called the "Golden Triangle." One survivor, however, was the apartment building at the southwest corner of 18th & I streets, NW, which had no parking and whose floor plates were too small for most market-rate tenants, but a location only five minutes' walk from the White House. According to the Arizona media source *AZCentral.com*, when planning for the Washington Center was under way,



Rooftop terrace.

ASU's president Crow literally put his hand on a map of central DC covering the area in which he wanted the center to be located—a radius of about ten minutes' walk from the White House. ASU's real estate wing went to work, and found the building at 18th & I to be a nearly ideal candidate..

For the previous owner, who was seeking to sell the building, **CORE architecture + design** had done "test fit" studies as part of the marketing package. When ASU purchased it, the university saw wisdom in building on CORE's previous work, so the same firm was hired for the job, with principal **David Cheney, AIA**, as the lead. The university's architects (back at the main campus in Tempe) played the critical role of

coordinating the various user-tenants, leaving CORE to focus on the challenges of design, preservation and other approvals, and construction logistics.

The first problem was that the building simply wasn't big enough for ASU's needs. Filling in a pre-existing courtyard—more like a big light well, really—and adding an eighth story resolved that elemental problem but, as is so often the case, created others. It was necessary to get approval from the DC Board of Zoning Adjustment, and, more consequentially, the DC Historic Preservation Office (HPO) became involved.

The Barrett and O'Connor Washington Center was one of the first projects subject to a new form of historic design control. The building was not in a



Rooftop function space, with sliding doors open to terrace.

Lobby, with sculpted wall—evoking the slot canyons of Arizona—at left, and exterior of Decision Theater at right.

historic district, nor was it an individually listed landmark, so on the face of it, the HPO would have no role. But in recent years, HPO has started a program of design review based on the potential that a given building *could* easily be nominated for landmark status (or *could* become part of an expanded historic district; or, if it already falls within a historic district, *could* have its formal status switched from “noncontributing structure” to “contributing structure” within the historic district). In each of these circumstances, a lengthy process—during which the project essentially goes on hold—would virtually always culminate in full oversight by the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB).

Recognizing the burden that such a situation can place on a property owner, HPO has devised a process in which the owner agrees to a modest level of historic oversight in return for HPO’s not pursuing a higher level of historic preservation protection. The oversight covers the most important aspects of preservation while providing significant flexibility on aspects of secondary or tertiary importance.

In this case, HPO’s primary requirements were a high-quality restoration of the exterior façades and a significant setback of the new eighth floor. Conveniently, these were things that ASU and CORE wanted anyway—the restored façades to enhance the university’s image, and the setback to provide a roof deck for gatherings. But it wasn’t entirely so easy. In exchange, HPO allowed some design elements that, in a project subject to full historic controls, would typically be resisted and oftentimes denied outright.

First, only the outside walls were kept; the entire interior structure was demolished and replaced by a new concrete frame. This technique was not uncommon in the early years of

historic preservation in Washington, but starting in the 1990s, HPO and HPRB moved towards requiring fuller-building preservation. Nowadays, HPRB’s approval of a façades-only scheme is strictly limited to circumstances in which other options aren’t viable.

Second, CORE was able to pull the first floor down a half-level to grade level. This provides a high-ceilinged main floor and tall windows and doors that give the building a strong sidewalk presence, and it greatly eases accessibility. From the preservation perspective, however, it alters the historic condition, which was an English basement configuration. HPO wisely saw that, in this case, the positives outweighed the negatives. Moreover, the original configuration is maintained at the bay windows at either end of the L-shaped façade, so the history has not been erased.

An invisible type of preservation occurs in the walls themselves. In older masonry buildings, the outer walls were load-bearing, but typically when only façades are maintained in a rehabilitation project, the façade essentially becomes a “curtain wall,” which is a non-structural wall supported by the new structure beyond. In this case, however, the building’s small footprint (approximately 60 feet square) did not allow for the additional columns and beams that would be required to carry the weight of the façade, so in fact the exterior walls are still load-bearing. This required a painstaking demolition and temporary bracing process.

ASU wanted the building to be “of Washington,” but also wanted symbolic ties to its home base. The architects wrote, “As homage to the American desert Southwest home of Arizona State University, a sweeping 40-foot-long by 10-foot-high sandstone feature wall greets visitors in the building lobby.”



Decision Theater, the design of which was inspired by the War Room in the movie *Dr. Strangelove*.

The “slot” canyons of Arizona were the inspiration. The effects of water and wind acting over millennia were translated to digitally-modeled forms created by a CNC (computer numeric control) fabrication system in which two pulleys pulled a diamond-cut rope across the surface of the stone. This yielded the general form that CORE sought, but sandblast-sculpting by hand was necessary for the full effect, reducing the sharpness of the edges and highlighting natural striations in the rock.

The resultant feature is a blend of modern and ancient, abstractly tying the DC facility to Arizona. It forms the west wall of the entrance lobby, its undulating diamonds a counterpoint to the curved wood slats of the east wall. To those in the know, at least, the east wall announces another ASU-specific feature of the building: the “Decision Theater,” which is “an accelerated decision-making simulation room, of which [ASU has] several all over the world,” according to **Christopher Peli**, the project designer at CORE. He added, “On the inside, we had a little fun with the idea of this intense ‘situation room’ simulator.” The big circular light fixture and dark acoustic surfaces were the design team’s homage to the War Room in the classic Cold War movie *Dr. Strangelove*.

The Decision Theater is very acoustically sensitive. It would not normally occupy such a visible and prominent—but noisy—location, but the building’s first floor (lowered to street grade) was the only story with sufficient ceiling height. The floor and partitions

are isolated from the building’s structure and have high acoustic separation ratings, similar to those of a recording studio.

CORE’s primary interior design work occurred at the lobby level and the new eighth floor, which features a glass-walled space that functions as a classroom, auditorium, and ballroom/event space. “We spent a great deal of time hiding the technology and accommodating the different layout configurations... to make it as flexible but impressive as possible,” noted Peli. The *pièce de résistance*, requiring two post-tensioned concrete beams, is the outside corner, where custom six-panel sliding doors can open the entire space to the adjacent terrace (which, with its views to the Eisenhower Executive Office Building—part of the White House complex—a block east, unmistakably says “Washington”).

The center houses an impressive array of programs that benefit enormously from the location: four different ASU schools; multiple think-tanks related to ASU and the southwest; a policy journal; and ASU’s federal government relations office. As renovated, the building now sparkles amid the more utilitarian office buildings of the Golden Triangle, and symbolizes the growing ties between Arizona and DC. 🏛️