

TARNISHED IMAGE

Capitols, a symbol of democracy, have lost some of their luster, but renovations started in better times are now often a budget burden.

BY GARRY BOULARD

In a colorful celebration attended by several thousand, Idaho Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter and legislative leaders from both parties in January officially unveiled the results of a project two years in the making: The renovated Idaho State Capitol.

The project included a restored marble lobby, cleaned and painted rotunda, and an additional 50,000 square feet of underground space.

“For 100 years this building behind us has represented the freedom of the people of Idaho,” Otter remarked, beneath a huge American flag. “May it represent that for the next 100 years.”

But for many Idaho legislators, the newly renovated statehouse also represents the wisdom of sound fiscal management even in the worst of economic times.

“The thing that really matters is that we

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were on time and on budget,” says Idaho Senator Joe Stegner. “I was concerned about this project from the beginning because any time you renovate a building as old as our capitol, a building that hasn’t been renovated before, you don’t know what’s underneath a lot of the layers.”

An additional concern was how high the price might go for repairing the out-of-date plumbing and electrical systems. But in the end the project was completed for \$120 million.

“That’s \$10 million less than the renovation was budgeted for,” says Gary Daniel, a spokesman with the Idaho Capitol Commission. “For a project of this size and scope to come in so substantially under budget is almost unheard of.”

The cost and timing of capitol renovations are a concern in several states, and in some, the results are not quite as positive as in Idaho. Projects decided upon when fiscal times were better are now both a burden on the budget and difficult to explain to taxpayers, already angry about deep cuts to services.

TOUGH CHOICES IN NEW YORK

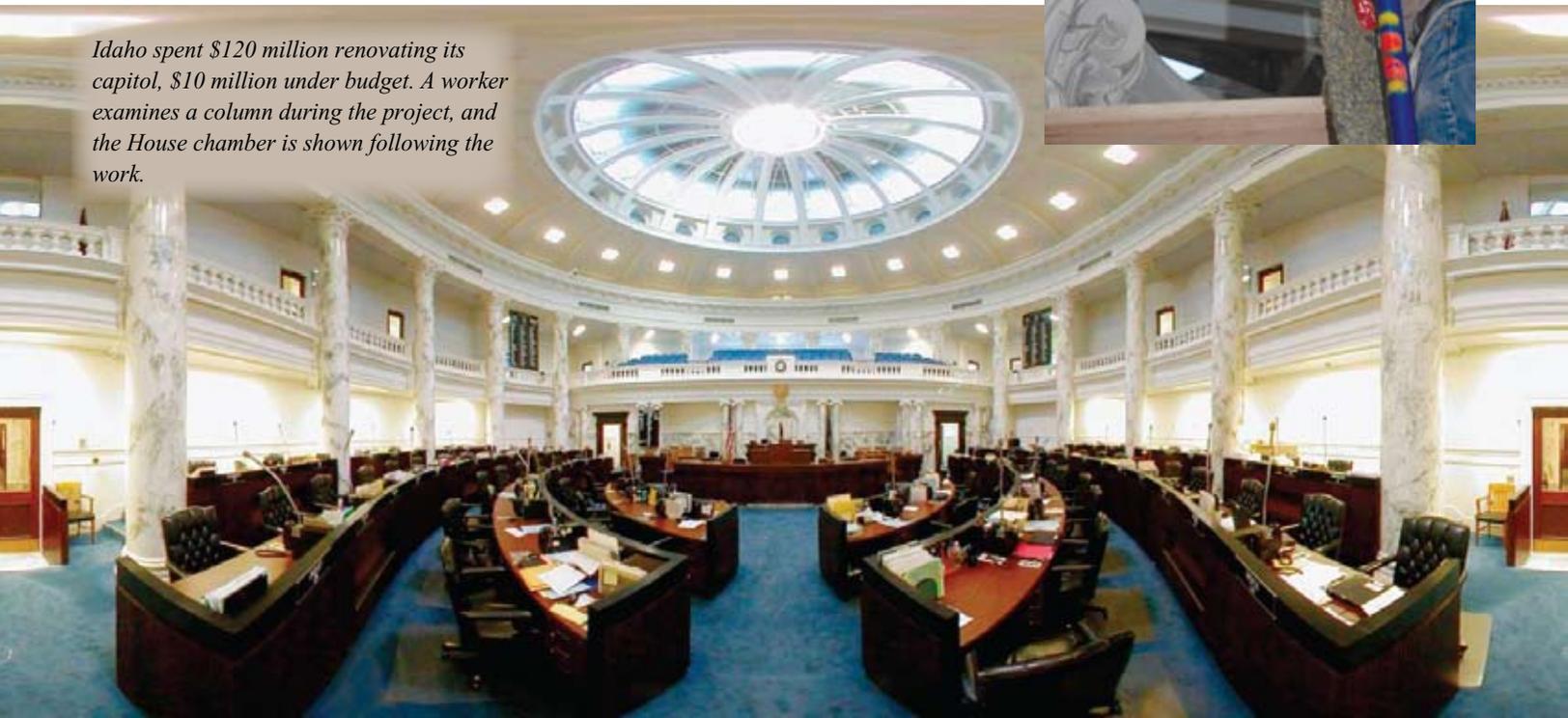
New York legislators are at odds over the completion of a \$75 million statehouse renovation project started 10 years ago.

“It just doesn’t make sense that when you are cutting programs, asking people to do more with less and people are out of work all across the state, we are going forward with this project,” says Senator Thomas



IDAHO PHOTOS: GARY A. DANIEL

Idaho spent \$120 million renovating its capitol, \$10 million under budget. A worker examines a column during the project, and the House chamber is shown following the work.



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New York Senator Thomas Libous

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The final phase of the renovation, with a \$48.7 million cost, was launched in 2009 and includes repairs to the 134-year-old building’s intricate skylight.

“We have a very beautiful State Capitol and certainly all of us want to continue to preserve it,” says Libous. “But there is no pressing reason why we should keep this project going. The roof is not falling. The skylight is not falling. This part of the project can be held off until we get on a better financial footing.”

New York Assemblyman Jack McEneny, who describes himself as a fan of the project, agrees it’s an “exhaustive renovation” that includes removing partitions put in place during the governorship of Thomas Dewey, who wanted to make space for more people. “It even went to the point of installing a divider down the middle of the wide gracious hallways,” says McEneny.

“But there are some practical things going on, too,” he says, “such as the removal of asbestos and putting in modern wiring. We just replaced a 1920s air conditioning and heating system.”

Historians of the Victorian capitol are not surprised that the renovation of New York’s statehouse has taken so long and cost so much. Theodore Roosevelt, upon becoming governor in 1899, was astonished to see that construction of the building, which had started 25 years earlier, was still going on, at a cumulative cost of more than \$25 million. He promptly declared construction was over.

ANDY CROSS/THE DENVER POST



Netting at the Colorado Capitol catches any falling debris.

SOARING COSTS IN KANSAS

Susan Thrane, an expert on the nation’s statehouses, agrees projects such as the one in New York are going to be expensive.

“Everything with a building that size, particularly when you think of the materials used and the intricate architecture of the structure itself, is going to cost more,” says Thrane, author of “State Houses: America’s 50 State Capitol Buildings.”

“But when the work goes on for what seems to be too long a period of time and more and more money is spent,” she says, “you risk coming in for some real criticism by people who think such renovation projects are just too extravagant.”

That may be the case in Kansas where the renovation of the Renaissance Revival-style 140-year-old statehouse started out a decade ago at an estimated cost of \$132 million. The final cost may exceed \$300 million by the time the work is done next year.

“It’s outrageous,” says Kansas Senator Chris Steineger, who in 2007 unsuccessfully proposed a bill requiring an audit of what was being spent on the renovation. “That bill didn’t go anywhere because at the time the economy was booming and legislative leaders were, I think, a little embarrassed and hoped

inquiring minds would stop inquiring.”

“But now that the economy has tanked and we have a budget crisis and the cost overruns continue to mount,” he says, “I think people are more open to the idea of getting control of this project.”

Dennis McKinney, a former representative and minority leader who is now the state treasurer, says the statehouse renovation project began to get more expensive than originally anticipated when “they found out there was a lot more wrong with the building than originally thought.”

And the work has been extensive, repairing a decaying limestone exterior, roof leaks and renovating the Capitol’s basement to make way for offices and a visitor’s center.

“We also got hit hard by the high inflation in the costs of materials and the contracts for some services, which also increased as time went by,” says McKinney.

The onset of the recession has had a silver lining, according to McKinney, because it led to a decrease in the costs of materials. But it has also made for a more challenging political environment.

“People get angry,” says McKinney. “They say if you are cutting budgets, why not cut off the renovation work? We’ve had



SENATOR
JOE STEGNER
IDAHO



SENATOR
THOMAS LIBOUS
NEW YORK



ASSEMBLYMAN
JACK MCENENY
NEW YORK

TWO DECADES OF CAPITOL RESTORATION



EDWARD CRIM/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Minnesota's Capitol dome in St. Paul underwent a restoration starting in 2005.

While restoration work on capitols across the country is now facing serious fiscal pressure, these projects are far from the only work done in recent years on statehouses.

In fact, according to Susan Thrane, the author of "State Houses: America's 50 State Capitol Buildings," an historic era of statehouse renovation fueled by a stronger economy was ushered in during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

"It was much easier during that period for legislatures to sign on to extensive renovation projects because the money was there. When that happens, the public is likely to be supportive too," says Thrane.

Projects either launched or completed between 1999 and 2008 include the \$275 million expansion, remodeling and restoration of the Utah Capitol, completed in 2008, and the \$104 million restoration and expansion of the more than 200-year-old Virginia statehouse, which saw the addition of some 27,000 square feet of underground space.

More than \$3 million in restoration work was done to the Arizona statehouse during this same period, although some legislators say more money will have to be spent eventually to remodel the larger Capitol Complex.

The Arkansas Capitol in 1999 saw extensive stabilization and foundation work, with renovation work done along the lines of an 1885 remodeling. Restoration work to Rhode Island's "New Capitol" building—built in 1904—was completed in 2003, which included an upgrading electrical systems.

Repair and renovation work took place in more than half of the state capitols since the mid-1990s, according to the website cupola.com, which documents the building history of all of 50 statehouses. The work included security enhancements to the California Capitol in 2001, tower restoration and masonry repairs to the Massachusetts State House in 2008, and repair and restoration of Minnesota's the dome, beginning in 2005.

"These things really do come in waves," says Thrane, "which is not to suggest that maintenance at every statehouse will not remain an ongoing priority. But major renovation work recently completed may keep most of these capitols in good shape for another decade or so."

"That, at least, is the hope," she says, "particularly given today's economy."

"People get angry. They say if you are cutting budgets, why not cut off the renovation work? We've had to explain that if we stopped the renovation now, we would not be saving any money."

Dennis McKinney, Kansas treasurer and former representative

to explain that if we stopped the renovation now, we would not be saving any money in the current operating budget. The debt services don't start until 2011."

"That means we're stuck with it," says Steineger, "We have to keep going even in the worst of economic times."

COLORADO'S GOLDEN DOME

The constraints of the current economy made it appear nearly certain that legislators in Colorado would not be undertaking a renovation of the capitol's gold-plated dome, which recently was placed on the state's most endangered historical sites list by Colorado Preservation Inc. Only a last-minute compromise between sponsors of two competing bills allowed for passage of a measure that will tap up to \$4 million from the State Historical Fund in the first year, and then rely on private donations for the next two years.

"The shell of the dome is fairly corroded, which will require an extensive renovation," says Patrick Eidman, program coordinator for Colorado Preservation's Endangered Places Program.

Estimates presented during the debate over renovations pegged the job at roughly \$12 million.

Although the Colorado statehouse underwent more than \$47 million in fire-safety



REPRESENTATIVE
PAUL WEISSMANN
COLORADO



Restoration of the Kansas State House includes an expansion of the basement, a 550-car underground garage, a visitor's center and work on the House and Senate chambers.

PHOTOS BY TREANOR ARCHITECTS



upgrades between 2001 and 2009, Representative Paul Weissmann says the state could most probably not afford to undertake a similar project today.

"The money just isn't there," he says. "When we did the most recent renovations, we did them because it was a matter of life and safety. There were concerns about having only one stairwell going down from the third floor, and things like that, so the cost of the project was easily justified."

But the dome, Weissmann says, is not a safety issue, and he favored putting it off for a while.

When Colorado legislators voted to combine support from the State Historical Fund with future private giving, Weissmann says

he was in favor of the effort, but with misgivings. "I like the private partnering piece, doing it in the model of repair work to the Statue of Liberty and the Washington Monument," he says.

"But I am uncomfortable with the idea of legislators allocating anything from the State Historical Fund, which has always been separate from us," says Weissmann. "I just hope it isn't the beginning of a bad precedent."

Author Thrane thinks renovation programs in other states may face similar challenges because "so many of them undertook this kind of work around 10 years ago when the states had more money."

"The statehouse in Kansas was in terrible shape, so it makes sense that the work on that is going to go on for awhile," Thrane says. "But most of the other capitols right now are physically in good shape, which is a lucky thing considering the current economy."

Even so, Daniel of the Idaho Capitol Commission thinks legislators should not be afraid to ask tough questions when the subject of renovating their capitols finally does come up.

"Our leaders basically decided to re-scope the renovation project here," he says. "Instead of emulating the second floor and having marble 12 feet high along the corridors, they moved it down to waist level and saved \$2 million."

Other savings in the Idaho statehouse included using bronze hand rails instead of antique brass, which reduced the project cost by \$600,000, and factory-made windows instead of the hand-crafted kind for a savings of \$250,000.

"The important thing is to never feel that just because some project has already started and is incredibly large, you have to go along with it," says Stegner.

"We actually put this project on hold for awhile and then committed to not allowing the project to grow in expense."

There also is an intangible benefit in doing something right and under budget, Stegner says.

"The final product for us really took an emotional edge off a tough year. The excitement of coming back into this building and knowing that it was all financed on a sound basis made a lot of people feel good." 🏛️



SENATOR
CHRIS STEINEGER
KANSAS

CHECK OUT a Q and A with the U.S. Capitol architect at www.ncsl.org/magazine.