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BALTIMORE VISITOR CENTER

Baltimore, Maryland

Travelers to Baltimore are well-served by the new Baltimore Visitor Center.

Situated in the inner harbor, the heart of Baltimore's waterfront, the center replaces a smaller facility located only 50 feet away. It consolidates several tourism functions—previously housed in temporary buildings—under one permanent roof, while increasing green space and decreasing clutter.

With a tourism industry attracting 11 million visitors annually, the City of Baltimore wanted to promote itself. "We needed to expand so we could increase our tourism industry," said Nancy Hinds, director of communications for the Baltimore Area Convention and Visitors Association. "We want tourists to stay longer and come back."

Since the tourism industry is Maryland's third-largest source of income, increased tourism should translate into increased jobs. "It's a viable economic resource," Hinds said. "It benefits everyone in the community."

Attractive and inviting, the petite new sculptural object building is a striking complement to the larger object buildings along the harbor. "It is a critical component of a master plan for the revitalization of the western and southern shores of the Inner Harbor," said Richard T. Burns, AIA, NCARB, principal of Design Collective, Inc., the project's architect.

The new building features two distinct elements—a 5,000-square-foot, glass-enclosed exhibit hall supported by a 3,000-square-foot bluestone-clad structure that features staff offices, restrooms and a theater. A clear and simple design facilitates the visitor experience with an information desk and a circulation spine that separates the theatrical and exhibit hall functions. A wavy roof floats over the exhibit hall, giving the center a strong and recognizable component visible throughout the downtown area and connecting it to the Inner Harbor.

According to Burns, the structure's siting proved challenging. The site is directly in line with the main gateway into the city and is visible throughout the Inner Harbor. "By setting the building back from this view corridor, we framed a view of the harbor and aquarium beyond," he said. "Your eye is drawn to the roof form, which lifts to acknowledge the city view and drops softly to an adjacent park."

For the City of Baltimore, the challenge was making sure that the exhibits and kiosks were informative and welcoming for visitors as well as for other businesses in the Inner Harbor. According to Hinds, everyone worked together to ensure the design was universally attractive. "That was another challenge—making sure that everyone is happy with it," she said. "We wanted to design an appealing building that draws people to it. By working together, we have achieved that."

