

JOYCE GORSUCH

RED ROCK'S NEW VISITOR CENTER

BRINGING GREEN TECHNOLOGY TO THE CANYON

LESS THAN AN HOUR'S DRIVE FROM THE STRIP, RED ROCK CANYON RECORDS EXTREMES THAT RIVAL LAS VEGAS' GLITZY LURE—HEAT, COLD, SUN, AND WIND. THE NEW, LEED-CERTIFIED VISITOR CENTER THERE PRESENTS A SENSORY STORY—AND A WAY TO TREAD LIGHTER IN THE HARSH YET DELICATE MOJAVE DESERT.

Why a new visitor center at Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area? Ask Laverne Dickey, and he may question you in return. "Have you been out here on a busy day?" asks Dickey, manager of the new visitor center. "In the old building we greatly exceeded our capacity."

Dickey says the older, 7,600-square-foot facility, built during the 1980s, received 500-2,000 visitors per day. That's 30-35% of the estimated 1.2 million people every year who visit the site which is administered by the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Now imagine dozens of visitors in it during a storm, with the lights off. "In the old building, when the electricity went out, we had to close it down," says Dickey.

Fast forward to 2003. Decision makers at the BLM have advertised the new Red Rock visitor center project on the website fbo.gov, and have accepted bids from various firms, such as Line & Space.

Architect Henry Tom and the Tucson-based Line & Space have worked on the project from conceptual design to completion. Tom's colleague Johnny Birkinbine says the new center includes 8,700 square feet of interior space, 44,000 square feet of exterior exhibits, and 5,800 square feet of exterior amphitheater. Among the project's highlights, Tom cites multimedia interpretive information that prepares visitors to explore this part of the Mojave Desert.

"A visitor will come here, gather facts about the place, and make the connection between the information and what's out there," says Tom. The general need for water conservation translates into the individual's practice of staying hydrated, and wearing a hat and proper shoes.

To provide a little eye candy to help visitors digest all the data, designers have given the new building a bigger space for the gift shop. They also installed an 80-foot-by-6-foot window that faces the red, wind-sculpted Calico Hills.

Visitors see the hills when driving onto the site, and then lose the view as they approach the parking lot. "Inside the building that view is given back to you," says Tom. "The windows give you a sense of being close to the Calico Hills."

In addition to beauty, the project's experts have incorporated scientific brawn. Machines and materials meet criteria set by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System, developed by the U.S. Green Building Council, a nonprofit organization that promotes environmentally responsible building design.

LEED-certified features include solar-powered lighting and mechanical units. A photovoltaic system converts sunlight into electricity, generating up to 60 kilowatts at any moment. That's 20% of the power needed for both buildings, old and new. (The old visitor center now houses administrative offices, a library, and a workroom.)





THIS PAGE: Fire Pavilion © Garrett Winslow

Additionally, carefully constructed doorways create visitor-friendly transitions between cool, shaded areas and hot, brightly lit ones—including a revolving door that loses only two percent of the energy lost by a single-hinged door, a differential of 26 cubic feet versus 1,200 cubic feet. And by housing nearly all exhibits outside rather than inside, the demand for conditioned air is one third of the demand in a comparable interior space.

These features are starting to provide a return on the investment. According to Dickey, in the first three months since November when the new building opened to visitors, the solar panels have saved the BLM \$1,000. Within a year, BLM managers will have an idea of how much they'll save on the water bill. The roof can harvest and store 15,000 gallons of rainwater that will hydrate the cat claw acacia and other native plants.

Retrofitted restrooms save resources, too. Perforated steel panels help heat the small building in the lower parking area. A fan draws air from outside, where sunlight meets metal, and directs the heated air indoors.

Amid the contemporary know-how, ancient sensibilities lend a visual poetry to the outdoor exhibits. Color-coded interpretive displays organize information into four pavilions that pay homage to the classical Greek elements: Air, Earth, Fire, and Water.

The exhibits' partnering of rugged vista and abstract sculpture fascinates Candi Baranski. As interpretive development manager for the project and an employee at HB Stubbs, the company that turned designs into fabricated items, Baranski says that the new Red Rock visitor center is one of the most extraordinary projects she's worked on. "It's different from other projects, because it's such an abstract, playful contrast to the geology," says Baranski. "Installations frame the views, make them even more dramatic."

The exhibits are accessible, too, by meeting criteria in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the 1990 law that aims to make public places more physically accessible to everyone. The site has ADA-specified doors, ample space for maneuvering, and ADA-compliant ramps for the outdoor pavilion.

The pavilion will provide the venue for the main event at the center's grand opening on Saturday, April 10. Teddy Roosevelt impersonator Joe Wiegand will give a first-person interpretation of the new facility, as a key founder of America's recreation movement might have experienced it.

To contact the new Red Rock visitor center, call 515.5350 or for more information visit blm.gov.