

Civic center revisits past

Designers meld old with new

By Charles Levin
STAFF WRITER

PITTSBURGH — The forest green spiral staircase inside the new civic center evokes Pittsburgh's historical industrial image — and, equally, a Coney Island roller coaster.

Whether or not city government promises a wild ride, visitors to the main lobby will be treated to an interpretation of the tin mills at United States Steel's early 20th century plants as they gaze up to exposed girders and long rectangular skylights.

In researching the design, architect Fani Hansen sought to portray the city's long history of blue-collar industry.

"That was the inspiration, absolutely," said Hansen. "It was very important that Pittsburgh had something that was Pittsburgh and not taken from somewhere else."

Those themes continue throughout the 71,000-square-foot, three-story building, which now commands the skyline by the Railroad Avenue exit on Highway 4. Steel girders jut up from floors at 45-degree angles while orange heating ducts stream across exposed ceilings.

Hansen found her ideas while poring over piles of old black and white photos of the U.S. Steel Columbia-Geneva plant, courtesy of the Pittsburgh Historical Society.

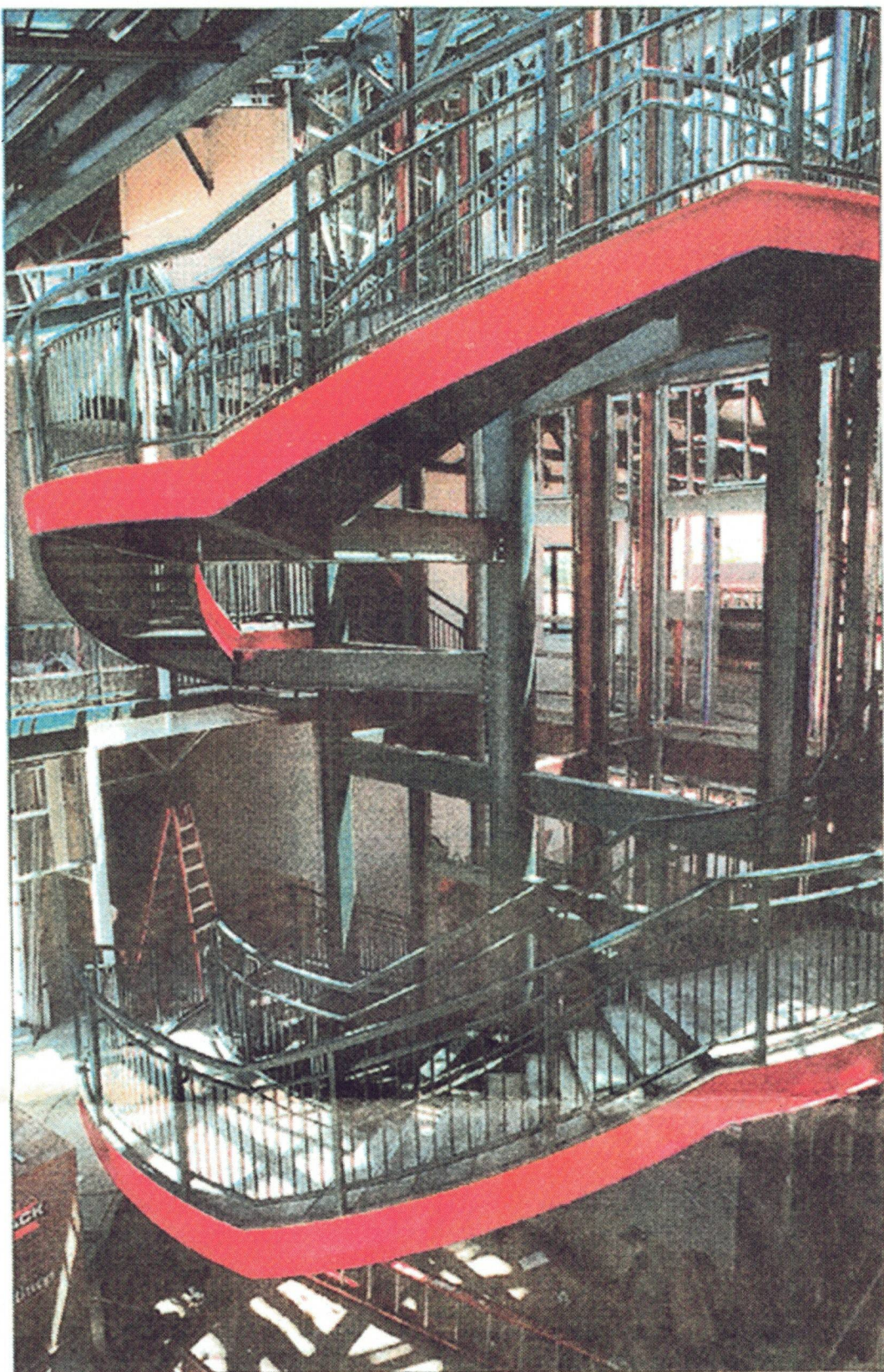
She also read newspaper clips, interviewed more than 100 residents and toured USS-POSCO Steel Industries' older plant sites.

The result was an effort to salute the "past and how we can grow from the past to the future," Hansen said.

An important consideration was allowing the local geography to tell the story, Hansen said. Spacious windows on both sides of the crescent shaped building offer prime views of Mount Diablo and its foothills to the south and smokestacks and Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to the north.

"In a way, visiting the civic center will give the visitor an educational and historical look at the city," Hansen said.

The \$22 million project is now 80 percent complete and on schedule to open by Halloween, said Senior Civil Engineer Joe Sbranti. Construction is going so well that several departments



RAY SAUNDERS/GERMANSTAFF

THE STAIRCASE dominates the lobby of the new Pittsburgh civic center and resembles a twisting, turning roller coaster. The architect pored over old steel mill photos to come up with ideas for the design.

Center

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— such as community development, building, engineering and planning — may be able to move into their first-floor, east wing digs by September, Sbranti said.

This will allow the city to begin demolishing parts of City Hall and replace them with landscaping, Sbranti said.

The much-anticipated civic center will consolidate all of Pittsburgh's departments under one roof for the first time. Citizens need no longer wander among several buildings and blocks to get their business done.

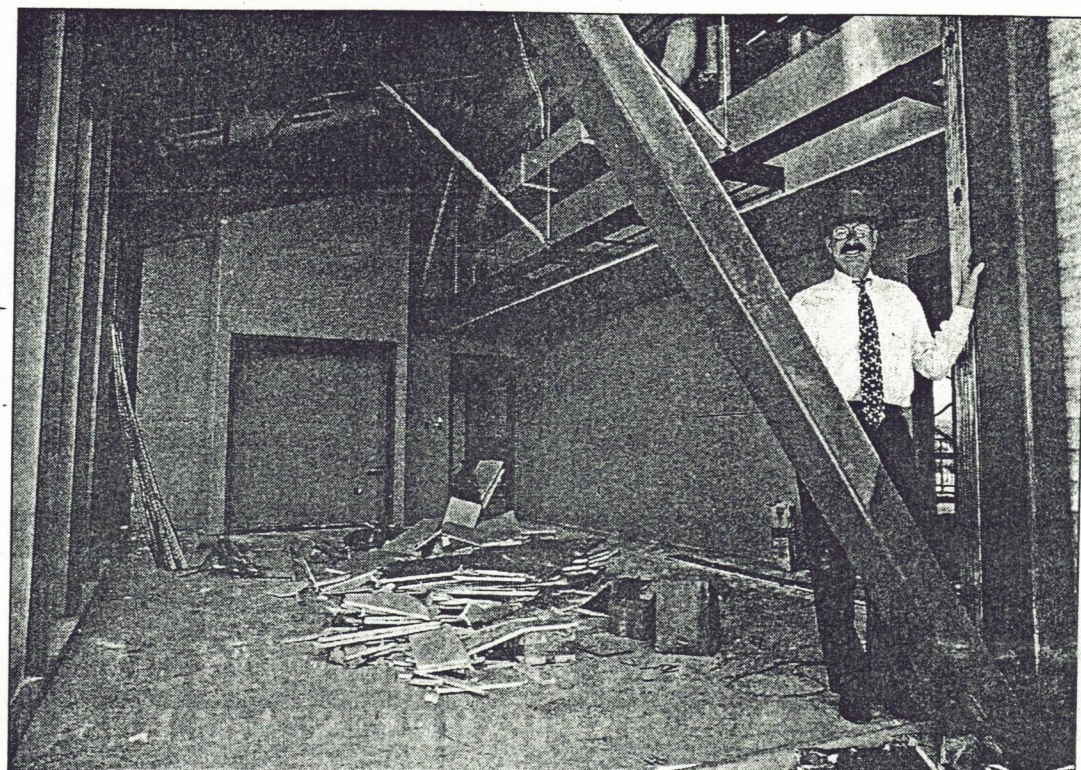
The city's police department, now crammed into one small building and several trailers, will enjoy the entire first floor west wing and part of the second floor.

The spiral staircase dominates the main lobby, snaking skyward over a steel skeleton that will house the elevators. The lobby will feature a multi-colored stone floor cut from Brazilian granite and commissioned murals, tapestries and traveling art displays.

A rear balcony lines the second floor over the main entrance to the south. Outdoor patios with cement planters flank each end of the building.

Rectangular cuts in floors, surrounded by green fences, periodically appear on the second floor, allowing views below and permitting sunlight and ventilation.

On the third floor's east wing,



RAY SAINT GERMAIN/STAFF

PITTSBURGH CITY MANAGER Jeff Kolin stands in what will be his office. The center is 80 percent complete and is on schedule to be open by the end of October.

residents can lambaste or praise the City Council in a new chamber that will accommodate 130 — more than double the current City Hall's capacity.

City Manager Jeff Kolin and other administrators will inhabit the west wing third floor.

Until September, it will take a little imagination to envision the new building complete. For now, the civic

center looks like a war zone, awash in dry wall dust and rubble as masons lay bricks and workers Spackle holes while boom boxes blare pop music on every floor. Offices and conference rooms remain exposed with gaping floor-to-ceiling holes where glass walls will go.

"It's hard to look at a work in progress and see what's going to be there at the end," said Councilman

Bob Lewis, who has toured the facility several times. "But I think it's going to be unique for any city in Contra Costa County."

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