

# BANKER & TRADESMAN

THE REAL ESTATE, BANKING AND COMMERCIAL WEEKLY FOR MASSACHUSETTS

ESTABLISHED 1872

## DESIGN MATTERS

# Historic Community Greets New Visitors' Center



The Concord Visitors' Center, located at 58 Main St. in Concord, was designed by Nashawtuc Architects, a firm located in the same community.

**By Jeffrey Stein**

CLIENTS LOOKING TO CHOOSE AN ARCHITECT sometimes imagine that the architect's physical office itself will give clues about the sort of work the firm produces. They are correct. Architect Holly Cratsley's office is in a building that was constructed in 1742, the historic Wright Tavern on Lexington Road in Concord. Now Cratsley's eight-person firm, Nashawtuc Architects Inc., has designed the new Concord Visitors' Center at 58 Main St. That building, a block from her office, was completed this past July. To say the two buildings are good neighbors would be an understatement.

The Concord Visitors' Center is only the most recent building to come from Nashawtuc Architects. In 15 years, the Concord firm has designed 476 projects, the majority of them

within the community. It is difficult to walk down any street in Concord and not see Holly Cratsley's work. It is equally difficult to point to any piece of it and identify it as hers. The work of her firm, emanating from their 260-year-old headquarters, is contextual. It recognizes the building traditions that have created Concord's sense of place – and adds to them.

A sense of place is a visceral quality that a visitor can feel. It's a quality that makes somewhere recognizable and understandable, and often leads to a feeling of comfort among those who do the recognizing. The architect's work is to make this happen, to explain a place through form and material and construction detail, and to inspire strangers and local residents alike with a sense of understanding and respect for where they are. That's a real challenge in Concord, for visitors find themselves in a community steeped in history. It played a prominent role in the first battle of the American Revolutionary War and later served the epicenter of an American literary renaissance

and home to some of the nation's greatest philosophers and writers, among them Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Nashawtuc Architects – the name derives from a native hill at the edge of Concord Village – does that at the new Concord Visitors' Center by paying attention to the center's surroundings, natural as well as cultural. A visitors' center was first suggested at a Concord town meeting more than 100 years ago and was discussed off-and-on through the entire 20th century. The town, by some estimates, receives more than a million visitors each year. The community did without a facility to greet them all, however, until a public/private partnership came together to create this one.

The center was built entirely with private funds. The Middlesex Savings Bank next door donated land; the architects donated part of their fees; the Concord Chamber of Commerce

JEFFREY STEIN is the architecture critic for *Banker & Tradesman*.

continued on page 2

together with the Concord Business Partnership raised money; townspeople and developers donated many hours to the project. The result was turned over to the town just this past July. Closed for the winter, it will open for its first full season on April 1.

### **A Cupola Good Ideas**

The Visitors' Center is a modest building. It contains a lobby with information and people to talk to about Concord, and it has public restrooms. Situated well off the street it defines a lawn used for public events in warmer months and borders a public parking lot just behind it. The facility stands in the shadow of two big bank buildings, and Nashawtuc Architects' first challenge was to make the center visible to people who want to use it. This they accomplished by means of a large gable roof, clad in slate for long life and topped by a monitor – a cupola. The roof slopes toward the street, as do the roofs of most of Concord's smaller buildings that border Main Street. The eaves of the roof were designed without gutters, except in one

small spot where the roof bridges a covered walkway. No gutters mean no ice dams and no expensive roof and gutter maintenance for the town.

The area beneath the gable roof contains mechanical equipment necessary to run the building. Traditional attic vents serve as exhausts for air conditioners. The manner in which roof meets sky via the cupola allows the building to converse with neighboring cupolas. There is one across the street above a store and another, even grander, version in the next block atop the Unitarian Church.

The walls of this little building are low-maintenance brick laid in a pattern called "Flemish bond" just like those in the Middlesex Bank next door. Its insulated windows are proportioned like so many others in Concord. The ones high up are clad in metal so they never need painting. Those below, positioned where you can actually touch them, are framed in wood. Floors are non-skid clay tile; columns on granite bases and exterior ceilings that provide cover for annual events like those of the Concord

Garden Club or Lions Club on rainy days, are made of a composite material that won't need painting or maintenance and is able to withstand the extremes of New England winters and summers. The place is going to last a long time.

One of the architects' chief considerations was to ensure that the visitors' center – so close to the Middlesex and Fleet banks on Main Street – not look like a miniature bankette. But their act of visual integration was more successful than Nashawtuc had anticipated. Size, scale, traditional forms and materials – the need for the building to fit tightly in its historic context – all combined to demand uniformity. When creating place, there are tradeoffs to be made. So many Americans – thousands of them visitors to Concord – have a yearning for a sense of belonging after all the modern pressures of dislocation. Those pressures render the image of this building on this street to be comforting. Does the building do its job and seem to belong to this place? Yes it does. Not just for visitors, but for all of Concord. ■

---

*Reprinted with permission of Banker & Tradesman.*

*This document may constitute advertising under the rules of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts.*