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* PLACES

Capitol

Grand, elaborate,
statuesque, gorgeous
— and it's all ours

By CHRIS MARTELL

Like many people who grew up in Wisconsin, I first saw the Capitol on a grade school field trip. Even the boys who'd been making rude noises in the back of the bus fell silent when we were led inside.

We'd read fairy tales about distant kingdoms. But looking up at the dome, with our mouths falling open as though we were baby sparrows, we saw

something grander than any castles of our imaginations.

The tour guide emphasized that this place was ours. We were not just little children with scabby knees. We were citizens of Wisconsin, and this magnificent building belonged to all of us.

We went up the grand staircases, into the gold-leaved governor's conference room styled after the Doge's Palace in Venice, and into the marble throne

room of the Supreme Court. Glass mosaics and paintings told the heroic stories of Caesar Augustus and King James as well as those of Wisconsin farmers and Chief Winnebago. We stroked the nose of the bronze badger outside the governor's office to bring us luck. From then on, for many of us, the star on the map of Wisconsin triggered kaleidoscope images of marble and murals and gold.

After college I moved to Madison

without a job, a place to live or even a boyfriend, but somehow knowing that this was where I belonged. While I was trying to figure out my life, I often had peanut butter sandwich picnics in a little park, now buried under Monona Terrace paving stones, between the Capitol and Lake Monona. The Capitol seemed invincible and reassuring with its elegant symmetry and the purity of its white granite.

Before long I was spending my days in the Capitol as a cub reporter covering government. The pressroom was ratty, but the first-love heart palpitations each time I entered the building never went away. I was intrigued by the 43 types of stone in the building, and loved the ladies' rooms with their ornate windows and vintage fixtures.

Years later, I got to see my firstborn dressed like an angel for a school holiday pageant, standing in an alcove on the balcony. Like many Madison children, she'd been coming to see the Christmas tree at the Capitol since she was a baby.

Moments like those make it easy to forget that the Capitol is a workplace as well as a landmark. By the 1980s the building was showing its age. It was sweltering in summer without central air conditioning, and drafty in winter. It needed wiring for modern technology. Some things of beauty and historical significance were lost during the \$145 million restoration project. But much more was gained. The Capitol would stand as a fully functioning daily reminder of a time when the public's respect for government was reflected in monumental buildings.

Its architect, George Post, said he wanted to create the world's greatest monument. His \$7.5 million building would replace the second Capitol on the site, which burned in 1904. Post died before the building, built between 1906 and 1917, was finished. Its dome is still the largest, by volume, in the United States, and the only one made of granite.

If Post didn't create the world's greatest monument, he did succeed in designing a Capitol that is widely considered one of the most beautiful statehouses in the nation.

While the building is as exquisite as ever, its prominence in the Madison skyline is quickly eroding. Construction cranes fill the Isthmus. Only a few years ago, the observation decks in the Capitol dome had panoramic views of the lakes and farmland. Those vistas are gone. The most beloved view of the Capitol, outlined by Lake Monona while entering the city on John Nolen Drive,

is now partially blocked by the hulking courthouse and the growing phalanx of condominiums that ring the Square.

For me, sadness at losing the stirring views of the Capitol has been tempered by the fact that I long ago made the acquaintance of the sculptures outside the building. They demand that you come close to admire them. On the north side, at the base of the dome, are my favorites. The female figures, ageless in white granite, are named Abundance and Prosperity.

May they keep watch over Madison for another 150 years. ■



Frank C. McDermis / WHI/7055

The granite statues of Abundance and Prosperity watch over the Capitol building.