

The Speaker's New Golden Ceiling, And Other Capitol Improvements

By Jennifer Bradley

Forget the giant Tyrannosaurus rex skull.

The most impressive sight in the offices of Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga) is the glowing gold ceiling in the Dinosaur Room. The ceiling of Gingrich's main conference room was repainted with 23-karat gold leaf late last month, as the room, built 95 years ago, was restored to its original appearance.

The Members' "retiring rooms," one on either side of the Speaker's lobby, just outside the House chamber are the only other rooms in the Capitol known to have gold-leaf ceilings.

The work in the Speaker's office was just part of the restoration, renovation, repainting and repairs that go on in the Capitol when Members and Senators are away.

According to Barbara Wolanin, the curator for the Architect of the Capitol, newspaper reports from 1901 declared that the Speaker's conference room was "handsomely furnished," but did not mention the gold-leaf ceilings.

At some point in the subsequent 95 years, the gold was painted over. It was rediscovered and restored when work started on the ceiling five weeks ago, when the long fall recess began.

Last week, workers also replaced the chandelier in the room. The old one, said Wolanin, was "a little bit harsh on the gold." The replacement light fixture had hung in the room previously, when the late Rep. Tip O'Neill (D-Mass) was Speaker of the House.

When O'Neill left, the chandelier was loaned to the Bapst Library at Boston College, which used it in a replica of O'Neill's Speaker's office. When the college dismantled the office in September, they returned the chandelier to the Capitol.

The only thing left to do in the room is stenciling over the gold-leaf paint — and taking the plastic drop cloth off the dinosaur.

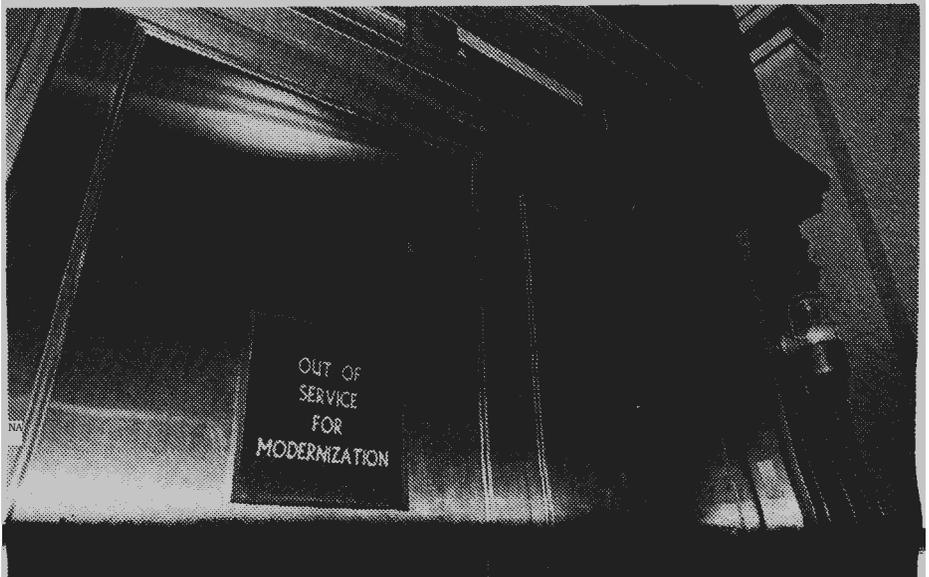
The work in Gingrich's office is typical of the post-election hubbub in the Capitol.

A worker in the Architect of the Capitol's paint shop in the Senate basement said that recess is "when we stay our busiest."

He pointed to a colleague who was stripping the paint from a set of 200-year-old windows that open onto the balcony in Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle's (D-SD) office.

Daschle spokeswoman Molly Rowley explained that Daschle's jib door was being restored. A jib door consists of a top window, raised with pulleys, and two short doors underneath. The window used to stick, making it inconvenient for staffers to use when they wanted to step out onto the balcony. New pulleys and weights are being installed in addition to a new coat of paint.

Fresh paint seemed to be everywhere in the Capitol last week, in fact. The desks were vis-



Photos by Rebecca Roth

Among the various repair projects being undertaken on the Hill during the holiday recess: above, a painter outside the press gallery; below, elevators get souped-up.

itors surrender their cameras and sundry electronic items before entering the House gallery bore "Wet Paint" signs and a fresh white coat

Similarly, workers were painting the first-floor Senate restaurant, hurrying to do what they could before the new Senators arrived today for orientation. Other painters said that the House family dining room was also being touched up, and state seals would be painted in the John F. Kennedy Room, which is part of the Secretary of the Senate's suite.

One Architect of the Capitol painter/restorer spent last Tuesday experimenting with paint colors and finishes as she tried to find the right shade and texture for a painted octagon around the gargantuan chandelier in S-216, the President's Room. The room is officially for

the President's use when he comes to the Capitol.

In the early years of this century, US presidents used the room frequently, especially for hectic end-of-session bill signings. Now Senators use the room for informal conversations and interviews.

There was invisible maintenance going on as well.

One of the Senate subway cars on the line between the Capitol and the Russell Building was out of commission.

Hiram Haywood, an electromotor mechanic helper, explained that the car was undergoing major engine repair and rewiring. The recess, he said, is "when we do the maintenance.... We try and wait until [Senators] are taking breaks." During the session, he said workers would "keep putting a bandaid on it... [in order to] keep it running."