

## Davidson Center, Huntsville

Photos courtesy of Gresham Smith & Partners



High visibility from the interstate spur approach into Huntsville is reinforced by vast glass expanses exposing the Saturn V stages inside.

By Philip Morris



You just can't miss it from I-565 in Huntsville: the new Davidson Center for Space Exploration. There's the familiar model of the Saturn V rocket outside, but stretched out and visible behind vast expanses of glass is one of the few Saturn V rockets left in the U.S., a dramatic gateway to the city's U.S. Space & Rocket Center. The official opening was January 31, 2008, the exact 50th anniversary of the first U.S. rocket launch, the Redstone Rocket.

Gresham Smith & Partners' Birmingham office designed the 77,000-square-foot, 470-foot-long display hall, which was constructed with the larger Saturn V components in place. The 'storefront' windows intended to capture attention from the highway cover a total of 17,200 square feet. Utilitarian finishes reflect the engineering thrust of the space program. Detailing on the building is minimal to make it a background, but supporting spaces are energized with shape and color to convey excitement.

Moving from the outdoor Apollo exhibit plaza, with its spiral paving capturing the tension of a launch, visitors enter a two-story rotunda and then the orientation hall to view a presentation about Saturn V's role in the space program. They exit at the second level where they can view the giant rocket separated into stages. Exhibits by California's Fricker & Radetsky pull people along. GS&P interior designers incorporated colors from the Saturn V, like the red that marks all points of entry.



A plaza featuring the full size Saturn V model leads to ticketing and orientation with primary circulation at the second level. Painted insulated steel exterior panels here introduce NASA colors.



In the sky-lit rotunda, visitors enter the orientation theatre at ground level then exit and circulate on the second. The luminescent blue floor selected by GS&P interior designers evokes the earth from space when seen from above.



A multi-purpose orientation room seats 360 stadium style. It is intended to symbolize people watching a launch during the 1960s, thus the varied and bright seating upholstery.