

Photos: Dan Cunningham



The atrium (at right in photo, left) nods to existing visitor's center. A garden between them (below) will someday be the forecourt for a new conservatory.

## Two's Company

Public buildings in parks and gathering places where people learn or entertain are a bit of a niche for LeMay Erickson Architects of Reston. A tour of Northern Virginia's vast recreational system, in fact, would bring you again and again to the firm's projects. One of the jewels among the region's protected green spaces is Meadowlark Gardens Regional Park in Vienna – 100 acres of rolling hills, ponds, walkways, and gardens. And, like many great public gardens, this one (or 75 acres of it, at least) came to public hands through philanthropy. Economist Gardiner Means and his wife, social historian Caroline Ware, wanted to preserve the Virginia countryside they loved long before Northern Virginia began to be overcome by sprawl. The couple entrusted their beloved farm to the park system in 1980 and helped guide its development for public use.

Charged with developing a three-building complex on the site, LeMay Erickson first designed the visitor's center, which opened in 1992. The second piece built was the atrium, a contemporary building in warm red brick that relates to its park-like environment and Virginia roots. It opened in 1998. Glass frames the flexible "garden room," whose uses range from business functions to wedding receptions. The terraces, paving, pond, and landscape materials extend from the interior and reinforce the openness and transparency of the glass. A massive 2,000-square-foot skylight bathes plantings, stream, fountain, and activities with light.

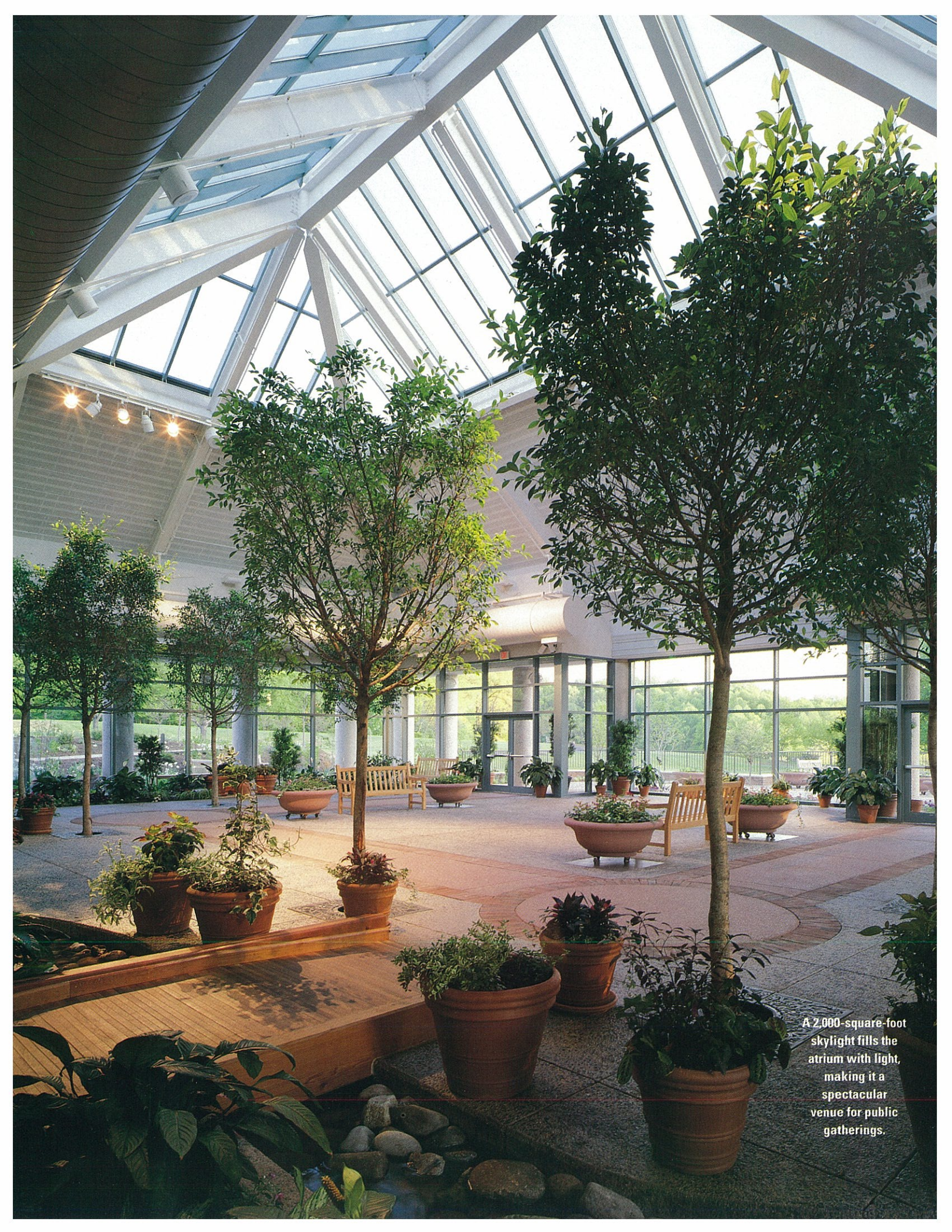
Today, Meadowlark Gardens' two existing building flank a formal lawn that will someday serve as a forecourt to the yet-to-be-designed third building, which is anticipated to be a true arboretum or conservatory with amenities such as classrooms, shops, or a restaurant. For although it is informally called a conservatory, the Meadowlark Atrium is not a "conservatory" at all – which, simply put, is a home for plants. As adapted for the Meadowlark project, the term is defined as "an indoor space that allows many different kinds of plant materials to exist and grow and integrates with all the activities of this building," says Michael LeMay, a principal of LeMay Erickson Architects. "It is a place for retreats, wedding recep-

tions, many different community activities." In such a space, says LeMay, you have to create the environment that allows plants to grow. "You also have to create an environment where plant materials are protected from the many users of the space," he cautions.

Materials such as sandblasted concrete and brick paving run continuously from inside to out, ending at the rear of the building in a circular terrace that overlooks the park and nearby lake. The building's massing, entry arch, and prominent roof form recall the character of the existing visitors center. "One of our niches is working with park authorities and designing with nature," says LeMay. It is a specialty requiring acute political skills and sensibilities, not only because it involves working with a park board, but because "you are also designing for the public, and it's important that the buildings meet the needs of the general public in terms of design, safety, and expense," adds LeMay.

– Sue Robinson





A 2,000-square-foot skylight fills the atrium with light, making it a spectacular venue for public gatherings.