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Professional Remodeler

Breathing New Life into Historic Buildings

By Jerry Kingwill, Cobb Hill Construction -- 3/10/2008 1:25:00 PM

In the current culture of selling new and improved versions of everything from toothpaste to electronics, the media portrays the debate over buying new rather than restoring old as a no-brainer. The construction industry is no exception. Fortunately, there are still those who can appreciate the value and beauty of historic spaces. It is this group of passionate builders, contractors, owners, architects, and developers who are fueling the growing renovation movement across the country as they work to protect, repair, and modernize some of the Nation's most beautifully and historically significant buildings. Understanding federal, state and local building codes for historical spaces is quite a complex task; however, this knowledge can be beneficial in the end because tax credits are often available for historical improvement projects.

Embarking on a historic renovation project requires extensive planning and attention to detail. Fortunately, there are associations on national, regional, and state levels that specialize in the preservation and renovation of such spaces. The [National Register of Historic Places](#) is an association that exhibits and maintains a list of historic properties that are worthy and in need of preservation. The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 developed the National Register of Historic Places to aid in the coordination of private and public restoration funding efforts for the registered buildings.

The register has four categories that delineate the list of over a million registered spaces. The first category, labeled "Event," institutes that the property must have a relevant connection with an event in American history. The next category, "Person," identifies that the space is affiliated with a significant member of the American past. Thirdly, if a property's architectural or artistic style is the work of a master designer or architect, it would fall into the "Design/Construction" category. Lastly, if a property has the potential of providing information that

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Cobb Hill Project Manager Claude Dupuis, and Supervisor Mike Olivier oversaw the transformation of Concord, N.H.'s historic theater which included the creation of a three-story glass-enclosed stairway entry and atrium, and major renovation and restoration work to the lobby, 'Governor's Hall' function room, and theater.

Photo by John Gauvin

may be pertinent to American history; it would fall under the “Information Potential” category. The National Register of Historic Places is strict on their guidelines, while continuing to promote the well being and significance of any historic space.

Out With The New, In With The Old

While some builders continue to be distracted by new steely structures that accentuate sharp, angular architecture and futuristic facades, a new trend towards refurbishing anciently elegant spaces is making it imperative that construction companies continue to gain experience in bringing old buildings back to life. To begin, it is important to acknowledge that there are several ways for an old building to be recreated while still maintaining its historic significance and charm. Renovation is often confused with preservation and restoration. However, it is important to distinguish between the three; and to realize that all of these acts are able to work smoothly together to preserve and improve historic spaces.

Preservation, in relation to historic buildings, is the act of maintaining or repairing the space to protect against change. Historic preservation projects generally frown on any improvements or modernization in respect to the building itself or technological aspects. However, the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#) is an important association that encourages the rejuvenation of aging buildings. Their “Main Street Community” program concentrates on revitalizing downtown communities. The initiative invites and encourages chain stores, such as pharmacies, to inhabit historic buildings by renovating old spaces instead of tearing down and building new ones. The process of preserving old buildings allows the character of such space to lend itself to modern commodities.

Restoration or Renovation?

Restoration, in a historical setting, is generally considered to be an act of bringing the space back to its original state. Whether it be architectural details, design, or if the building is put back to its original use, historic restoration could entail numerous steps. It could mean anything from cleaning or removing layers of paint or even repairing and replacing parts of the building. It is acceptable, however, to introduce new climate control systems, such as heating and cooling units that are up-to-date.

Renovation of a historical space is quite a different process. In this situation, the historical space is used as the backbone of the project, while any additions would be modern and commonly luxurious. Renovation is a widespread tactic when working with older spaces, especially from a construction aspect. Honoring the true beauty in an old space and emphasizing its historic elements are essential in a renovation project.

For example, the Centennial Inn of Concord, New Hampshire, owned by Haycreek Hospitality, has recently undergone a significant renovation. With a contract amount of over a million dollars, the century-old building has maintained its original architectural details and now utilizes modern day technology.

The Inn has a unique history. Before this historic building was established as an Inn, it was a home for the elderly. The original Centennial Home for the Aged was established in 1876, and was aptly named for the 100-year anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. In 1892, the Centennial Home required more space and contracted architect

Amos Cutting of the firm Cutting & Holman of Worcester, Massachusetts to develop the structure now known as the Centennial Inn. Although the Inn's history is quite compelling, the building is not listed with the National Register for Historic Places.

The existing brick building housed a thirty-two-room luxury inn and still boasts many of the characteristics of its original Queen Anne Victorian design. In July of 2006, new owners set out to modernize the old brick building while preserving its original architecture and design. The major focus of the Inn's latest renovation was giving it a more spacious and open-atmosphere, which required many structural changes. This became a challenge, since guests still occupied the Inn throughout the construction process; it was essential to keep the area accessible while maintaining a safe and courteous environment.

The renovation of the guestrooms and baths incorporated many changes, ranging from cosmetic improvements like new paint and wallpaper to large and detailed alterations such as the total rehabilitation of bathrooms. The bathrooms now feature new tumbled tile stone flooring and shower stalls. New tabletop vanities were installed with granite tops and vessel sinks. The original architectural details were restored and are now center focal points in the rooms, though are not to be outdone by the large flat panel televisions that hang on the walls. The integration of historical elements with modern technology is portrayed throughout the hotel and promotes the luxurious environment that the owners desired.

To maintain the rich and luxurious atmosphere of the historic Inn, imported Brazilian cherry floors extend into much of the public spaces, including the Inn's restaurant and bar. These spaces also received other sophisticated improvements such as a new HVAC system that was consciously engineered to coincide with the historic structure of the building. Furthermore, new barrel-vaulted ceilings were installed in the lobby that accentuated many of the buildings historic features. The bar was customized with a granite top and accented with stainless steel plating, while the restaurant features personal dining booths and chic modern furnishings.

The Inn is just one terrific example of how beneficial it is to work with a lavish, historic structure when creating a tastefully modern building. These spaces offer a plethora of opportunities, preserving a sense of the past that is essential to retaining the aura and charm of these century old spaces. The Centennial Inn has been both preserved and modernized through this single renovation. It is a luxurious space that has created a spectacular and intimate meeting place for business professionals and tourists during their visits to New Hampshire's capitol city.

Know Thy Code

Another important step in the revitalization process is gaining an understanding of historical building codes. These codes were developed to provide a mainframe of guidelines to adhere to when tackling a revitalization project. It is essential for the builder, owner, or any other contractor to be aware of any applicable codes as it could be detrimental to the project. Federal, state and local codes are a

tangled web of approvals, waivers and restrictions that could send a project straight back to the drawing board. Items to consider that may impede progress include zoning, parking, water and sewer capacity, fire sprinkler systems, asbestos removal, snow loads, handicapped accessibility, and/or elevator requirements. Managing progress around these codes can be a complex task, and it remains essential to employ members of the staff who understand all levels of the codes, from federal to local.

Although each step taken in a historic revitalization process seems intricate, the end result is beneficial to all members of the community. Most important to acknowledge is that both federal and state governments instill tax credits to owners of buildings that have been revitalized. [The National Parks Service](#) is one resource to gather tax credit information, and they direct traffic to individual state services as well.

Any homeowner, business-owner, or construction professional can benefit from realizing the beauty in older properties. Whether putting a property through a preservation, restoration, reconstruction, rehabilitation, or renovation project, it is important to appreciate and respect the historic elements of the space. Historic preservation, restoration, and renovation are important for many reasons, and have consequently become a trend in the construction market. It is essential to remember, that new doesn't necessarily mean superior, and that old doesn't always indicate ancient. Advertising culture will always center around selling a new product to replace an old one, and as a result, new buildings will always be constructed. Only those with a true appreciation of history can recognize the value and beauty in an old space, and it is this appreciation that has and will continue to power the preservation, restoration, and renovation movement now and in the years to come.



A 650 pound 1800's clock and a 2,032 pound solid steel 1800's bell, both recovered and returned to Concord via the determination of many in Concord, are now set behind glass for all to enjoy, in a Clock Tower placed in the front of Eagle Square on Main Street, across from the State Capital Building. Its beauty will be preserved and maintained by the NH Historical Society. Designed by DC Design of Concord, the exterior glass, granite, brick, copper roof, and finial over a steel frame were designed to match existing buildings in character.

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