

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

U OF M LAW SCHOOL KEEPS REMNANTS OF BUILDING'S FORMER LIFE

Every building has its secrets and One North Front Street is no exception. In fact, the closer you look, the more you realize the landmark at this address has layers of secrets, impossible to detect without a guide.

Relax, this is no Dan Brown thriller and the secrets we're talking about are strictly architectural. The building, known to generations of Memphians as the U.S. Customs House, Court House and Post Office, has been since January the new home of the University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law.

Designs for the original building were done in 1884 and it was completed several years later. Then came plans for a west addition in 1903; two years later the construction was finished. In 1929 there was an expansion that created a new east faade. Some reference sources also indicate a "restoration" in 1960 and a "remodeling" in 1983.

Talk about layers.

With so many people fiddling over so many years, you would think the result would be something of a muddle. But what's left today is a

remarkably graceful structure, dominated by a central colonnade -- reportedly inspired by the east front of the Louvre in Paris. The building is even listed on the National Reg-

ister of Historic Places. The 1929 design seemed to do the trick -- it salvaged the best of the past and wrapped it in an Italian Renaissance Revival package that brings dignity to the streetscape.

And today the interior has a new life, thanks to an adaptive reuse project by architects Askew Nixon Ferguson and Fleming Associates that meets the needs of the law school while honoring the building's period architecture.

First floor

Visitors enter the lobby through imposing bronze doors. The light-filled space features a 20-foot-high ceiling and floors and wainscoting of pink Tennessee marble. Behind the visitor desk is a sitting area distinguished by a dozen cast-iron columns that date from the 1880s.

"This is not their original paint color," says Jeanne Myers, project manager for Askew Nixon Ferguson. "When we first saw them, they were painted a color I can only describe as Pepto-Bismol Pink." Today a neutral color palette complements the interior marble.

Also on this floor is a large auditorium with a tiered floor. Doorways in the rear lead to a sitting area, still under construction, with views of the Mississippi.

In the south lobby, where the old Custom House space was located, is the reading room of the Plough Foundation Law Library. Stacks are found here, in the basement, and on the three floors directly above.

Project director and architect William S. Nixon points to storm windows that were installed inside rather than outside the room's curved period windows. "This placement promotes energy conservation while maintaining the integrity of the structure's faade," he explains.

The architects preserved a wall section from the Custom House period, including service windows where customers stood, apparently for long stretches. Because when the light is just right, impressions of their footprints still can be seen on the marble floor. The architects intentionally left them as a reminder of the space's former life.

In the north lobby, student lounges are located behind a new glass wall, which features a sandblasted design of box shapes. This is another nod toward the building's former life since the wall once housed mailboxes for postal customers.

Second floor

To reach the second floor, visitors use one of two elevators or climb the steep staircase, a part of the 1929 addition. On the second floor, which houses mostly administrative offices and two large classrooms, there are still reminders of the building's past.

A door leading to the faculty board room features elaborately decorated brass doorknobs and hinges; even the brass transom hinge still functions. In this room are two of several fireplaces left in the building. Further down the hall, two wall brackets, worn with the patina of age, date from the 1885 building.

Close by are two courtyards, forming the building's wings, which provide students with areas for study and relaxation.

Third floor

With its soaring ceiling and breathtaking plasterwork, it's hard to imagine the historic Old Federal Court Room was once a mail-sorting room painted pink and aqua with a dropped ceiling and fluorescent lights.

One day, Nixon and Myers, curious about what was behind the dropped ceiling, took a look. "At first, all we could see was black," says Myers. "Then we discovered that black paint covered the plasterwork." Luckily, it was easier to remove the paint than to replace the period details.

There was more -- in the center of the ceiling, a glass skylight, measuring 15-by-11 1/2 feet. Since original light fixtures were missing, new faux alabaster versions were found that complement the interior. The law school now uses the space as a classroom and a Moot Courtroom.

In the north wing, the new faculty lounge and break room feature period wood paneling and ceiling beams painted with elaborate stencils. Down the hall are two 1929-era bathrooms, also restored.

Fourth floor

It's no wonder that Nixon refers to this top-floor glass reading room as the "jewel box" of the building. It features a window, measuring more than 200 linear feet, that offers a breathtaking panoramic view of the Mississippi River.

Bracing for the future

With the New Madrid Fault an ever-present danger in this region, it's no surprise that the architects made seismic retrofitting a priority in the renovation.

"With the \$2.1 million funds allocated for the seismic retrofit, and the \$3.5 million allocated for the structural work in the 'new' part of the 1903 section," William Nixon explains, "we prioritized the structural seismic work that was possible within those budget constraints to make the building and occupants safer should a seismic tremor occur."



The new home of the University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law has historic elements from the building's past, including (top) a circa 1930 hand-painted wooden beam on the ceiling of the faculty lounge; (clockwise from top left) an ornate brass door hinge that dates back to original 1884 building; the classic ceiling and skylight in the old federal courtroom were restored after being covered by a suspended ceiling in the '70s; a detailed door knob that dates to the original 1884 building; the composite columns from the original building in the school's lobby along with a postal service window, and (bottom) a detailed copper frame around a poster holder.

They turned to structural engineers Burr & Cole of Memphis and seismic consultants Rutherford & Chekene, Inc. of San Francisco, a city familiar with devastating earthquakes. New 12-inch-thick reinforced concrete shear walls are attached to the critical interior parts of the building's load-bearing masonry walls. While most of this system is hidden in the construction, some of it can be seen from the large window on the fourth floor where galvanized steel parapet bracing keeps sections of marble and limestone decorative ornament securely attached to the building.

Tour the building

Tours of the building are available every first and third Tuesday of the month at noon. Those who want to take a tour must register at the front desk of the law school. For more information about tours for large groups, call Linda Hayes at the law school, 678-2103.

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