

Solutions Database

#1060: Centennial Bank Building / Paul Peck Alumni Center Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Project description supplied by Voith & Mactavish Architects.

History

Designed as the Centennial Bank by Frank Furness, this building was constructed in 1876 during the United States Centennial celebration in Philadelphia. In its 100 years as a bank, the building underwent two additions. The first, designed by Frank Miles Day, was built in 1899 and replicated a portion of Furness` design. The second, a two-story block, was built in 1920 and made little attempt to relate to the original structure.

Several major interior modifications also occurred over the years. The original ceiling was covered by subsequent layers of plaster and suspended acoustic tile, the decorative brick work was obscured by layers of paint and drywall, and all visible traces of the historic wood trim were removed. In 1997, the building had stood unoccupied for ten years, and little recognizable detail from the Furness original remained.

Exterior

The exterior restoration process consisted primarily of roof, brick, and brownstone repairs. Although the brick was basically sound, it was in need of repointing and was heavily saturated from roof leaks that had occurred over the years. The existing asphalt shingles from the roof were removed, the damaged sheathing replaced, and then reroofed with new slate. In addition, the cast iron rainwater conductors inside the brick walls were clogged and severely cracked. The gutters built in the cornice were relined and resloped. To avoid damaging the brick walls, new copper rainwater conductors were dropped inside the old cast iron ones while the roof was removed, making the final connections to new piping in the basement. Once the brick had dried out, the efflorescence was removed with judicious cleaning and the brick was repointed with a softer mortar, appropriate to the nature of the brick.

Traces of color and pattern remaining on the glass, an early photograph, and a paragraph from a contemporary account of the 1876 opening describing one of the colors as "a peculiar iridescent green, similar to the underside of a beetles wing" provided the essential information for the clock restoration. A combination of paint and gold leaf on the back of textured glass produced the desired effect. Much of the original carved brownstone trim was delaminated, eroded, or patched with a red-tinted cement mortar. The missing and damaged areas were patched with a cementitious, mineral-based material that was applied, shaped, and then sculpted to recreate the lost ornamentation. A final component of the restoration to the exterior was the reconstruction of the exterior granite steps at the main entrance, which had been removed, possibly as early as 1899.

Interior

The interior restoration began with removing the drywall and stripping away several layers of paint to reveal three colors of finish brick arranged in geometric patterns. The leaking roof had damaged the wood lintels over the window openings and also led to the deterioration of the chestnut windows and trim, which had been carved in a low relief, abstract floral pattern. Window repairs included restoring the wood frames, reconstructing the missing decorative trim, and replacing the heavily deteriorated wood sash with new, insulated glass sash matching the original. We removed a set of intrusive, retrofitted interior steps to the main banking room, regaining the lost floor area and reunifying the space. The defining element of the restoration, however, was the Eastlake-style ceiling in the main banking room. Upon removing a suspended acoustic file ceiling followed by a second plaster ceiling, we discovered approximately 20% of the original ceiling was missing and 30% of it was damaged. Fortunately, the remaining plaster was relatively sound and enough of the artwork remained intact to allow for an accurate replication of the missing sections.

Many custom features were created using materials that matched or harmonized with the extant historic fabric. Quarter-sawn white oak, carefully stained and finished, proved to be an excellent match for the original chestnut millwork which remained in several areas. Hand-forged, wrought iron light fixtures and a chandelier were designed as complimentary elements.

New Addition

The new addition is set back from the line of the original facade to take on a supporting role to Furness` building, and also to justify the mass and position of the 1920`s addition. The application of such formal elements as the red brick with black mortar, the bluestone base, the brick bonding pattern, the pointed arches above the windows, the black brick detailing and the decorative brick corbel unifies the new addition`s facade with the facade of the Furness structure. A faceted entrance vestibule faces the campus center, faces the campus center and facilitates a smooth transition between the new and existing structures.

For more information:

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