

2013 Best Real Estate Projects/Historic Preservation: Stanly Mosk Library & Courts Building *(a DGS-managed project)*

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Historic preservation becomes a much tougher job when the building also needs to be updated for daily use. New elements, such as access under the Americans with Disabilities Act, must blend in as if they had been there from the start. Modern technology can't call attention to itself.

"Upgrading while keeping the history is hard to do — much harder than a project from the ground up," said Best Real Estate Projects judge Allison Otto.

The state Department of General Services had a long list of improvements to make to the 85-year-old, five-story Stanley Mosk Library and Courts Building. They included:

- Upgrading fire and safety features
- Improving security
- Making ADA updates
- Removing hazardous substances
- Refurbishing historic elevators
- Restoring and rebuilding wood and lead windows
- Restoring and upgrading lighting
- Restoring exterior granite and terra cotta
- Replacing roofing and coping
- Replacing a skylight
- Building new mechanical penthouses.

"What impressed me most about this project was the incredible attention to detail and absolute commitment to maintaining the historic beauty of this building," said judge Amy Lerseth.

One way General Services ensured authenticity was to hire a project historian to review, maintain and educate all employees on the materials in the building. The historian also found craftsmen for specific work such as repairing leaded windows, modifying door hardware, and refurbishing leather-covered doors.

“This is the right way to do it,” said judge Robert Boucher. “I know from a contractor’s standpoint, trying to do the job well could have been a nightmare.”

Too often Boucher has gone into an old building and seen restorations that didn’t go quite right. “And once you’ve done that, nobody ever goes back to make it better,” he said.

Long service

While the building across the street from the Capitol carries the name of Justice Stanley Mosk, who died in 2000, it has been in service since 1928. Changes and additions over the decades weren’t always done with care. When the building got air conditioning in the 1970s, the duct-work and machinery went into spaces that had served as light wells, turning the interior into a gloomy space that the historic light fixtures couldn’t overcome. Telecommunications cabling had been tacked on the outsides of walls.

Additions and tweaks over the years often mean that an old building no longer matches the original drawings. In the case of the Mosk building, the old drawings primarily showed how the interiors were supposed to look, not what was supposed to be under the plaster.

“We ran into a whole bunch of surprises,” said Pella McCormick, project director for the Department of General Services. “We found a lot of voids that we didn’t realize were there. In other places, where we thought there was space, it was solid. It turned out that they were basically solid plaster 6 inches thick over black iron, which means you can’t really run telecommunication and power through the walls.”

That problem was solved by drilling through the floors. Meanwhile, there was the question of the ornate ceiling. The drawings were vague as to what, exactly, was holding them up, McCormick said. Was there enough attic space for fire sprinklers? Two workers spent hours worming their way around the crawl spaces to find out.

Care and conservation

“What impressed me, indescribably almost, was the protection they devoted to the building,” said Gary Kurutz, special collections librarian emeritus for the California State Library. That protection extended beyond the fragile artwork to the granite steps outside. At times it seemed that everything had some kind of sheathing around it.

“I said to several people I wish I had the plywood concession for that project,” Kurutz said.

He appreciated the care all the more because some mistakes occurred during an earlier seismic retrofit, when someone accidentally punched through a 1928 Maynard Dixon mural.

Unlike most office buildings, the courthouse is designed to be viewed from all four sides. On the outside, workers had to put up scaffolding around the entire building without damaging the terra cotta and granite facade. They drilled into the grout lines and epoxied stainless steel rods through to the underlying structural elements. At the end of the job, each hole had to be filled.

Some windows were removed entirely and sent off site so that damaged wood could be replaced. That required custom milling knives so the old and new wood would match. The windows also had to be treated as hazardous materials because of lead paint and asbestos glazing.

Kurutz also was impressed with the new fire suppression system. It’s not quite accurate to call them “sprinklers.” The new system from Finland uses a mist to smother fires without flooding the building. According to General Services, the new system uses 80 percent less water than a traditional system, and the heads were colored and camouflaged within the murals lining the building to blend seamlessly with the artwork.

Compared to other historic Sacramento buildings, the Mosk courthouse and library tend to get little public attention, Kurutz said. It may be a bit too dignified, giving the impression that the public isn’t welcome. But to the contrary, the public owns the place. Those who come in for a tour can catch some subtle details such as the polychrome ceramic starbursts on the portico. They are a product of Gladding McBean in Lincoln, which also supplied other materials for the renovation.

Unlike some other construction projects, this one benefited from good timing.

“We did our budgeting when the market was on the rise,” McCormick said. But because the jobs went out to bid at the lowest point of the recession, the state got some good deals.

“But there were so many unknowns that we used up our contingency pretty readily,” she added. Had there been extra in the budget, General Services would like to have had the murals cleaned, but otherwise it got pretty much all that it wanted.

The Third District Court of Appeal and the State Library moved back to the building in April.

“They seem to be happy,” McCormick said. “So far, so good.”

About the project

After roughly 85 years of continuous use, the Stanley Mosk Library & Courts Building needed some serious retrofitting to bring it up to speed for ongoing use. The renovation, which included lighting, fire and security upgrades as well as hazardous waste abatement, was completed in June 2013.

Who

Developer: Department of General Services

General contractor: Arntz Builders

Architect: Carey & Co. Inc.

Structural engineer: Simpson Gumpertz & Heger Inc.

Civil engineer: Winzler & Kelly

Mechanical, electric and plumbing engineer: Flack and Kurtz Inc.

Construction management : Vanir Construction Management Inc.

Location: 914 Capitol Mall, Sacramento

Size: 188,600 square feet

Cost: \$50 million