

Novogradac Journal of Tax Credits

News, Analysis and Commentary On Affordable Housing, Community Development and Renewable Energy Tax Credits

May 2011, Volume II, Issue V

Published by Novogradac & Company LLP

How to Fit Contemporary Office Space into Historic Buildings

By John Tess, Heritage Investment Corporation

You've decided on new office space. You've picked the perfect building and signed a lease. You are ready to begin designing, right? If you have chosen a historic building, the answer is: maybe not – not if that building has interior design review, such as that required in federal historic tax credit (HTC) projects. Such a choice is not unlikely; historic buildings are often in desirable locations and offer unique settings not found in new construction. Yet, the federal tax credit program has certain considerations you will have to contend with. These considerations are generally, and some might say vaguely, codified in the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. This article addresses how to deal with those considerations.

When rehabilitating a historic building, it is paramount to understand what historic features remain within the buildings to assess what alterations may be appropriate. When following the Secretary's Standards, Standards 2, 5 and 6 come into play most often.

Standard 2 says: "The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided."

Standard 5 says: "Distinctive features, finishes and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a historic property shall be preserved."

Standard 6 says: "Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterior-



Photo: Courtesy of Heritage Investment Corporation
The Rohm & Haas headquarters building in Philadelphia.

ation requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical or pictorial evidence."

While these standards may cause the weak at heart to walk away from a project, they are not hard to meet with early planning. In many cases prior alterations to a building have removed much of the historic fabric and there is not much historic to work with. In some cases, there is simply nothing deemed as historic. Typical issues include exterior features (windows, storefronts and entries), notable interior spaces (building lobby, elevator lobbies and corridors) and interior finishes (original plaster walls, ceiling and marble flooring).

continued on page 2

continued from page 1

Each building is unique in its opportunities and limitations for office reuse.

The development of the modern office building is a story of advancing technology and theories of efficiency. The single-use office building typology dates to the beginning of the 19th century when simple low-rise masonry buildings were constructed to facilitate commerce. During the mid-19th century, the rising demand for office buildings led to speculative construction and technological solutions for maximizing leasable space including movable partitions and iron framing that allowed for wider expanses. These early iron-framed buildings are the forbearer to the modern office building. Office buildings were limited in size as offices required windows for ventilation and lighting and masonry, wood and cast iron structural features limited building height. The modern office building typology was developed in the closing decades of the 19th century in what is best known as the Chicago School of architecture, a collection of design principles and "modern" technologies that proved to be the archetype for office building design for nearly six decades. This approach embraced new technologies that included steel framing, electric elevators, plate glass and electricity. This allowed buildings to be constructed to great heights with ample natural light and ventilation.

Still, without mechanical air conditioning, the early office buildings were limited in size. To maximize, architects designed buildings in H, E, O and U-shaped floor plans with double-corridors.

The typical office building had plaster walls and ceilings, wood floors and glazed wood partitions. Floor plates were significantly limited and static due to the considerable number of structural columns. The quintessential Chicago School office building is the former Reliance Building located at 32 North State Street in Chicago.

Office buildings constructed in the first decades of the 20th century increased in height and mass but retained the general characteristics of the early office towers. Although by then, office buildings featured radiant heat, mechanical ventilation was not yet utilized and natural ventilation was still required. Office buildings erected through the 1920s included interior lightwells and angular floor plans to maximize exterior square footage. These buildings maintained the floor plans of its predecessors – double-loaded H, E, O and U shapes. Finishes continued to be traditional with plaster walls and ceilings, wood floors and movable glazed wood partitions.

Office building design changed radically with mechanical heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC). Although comprehensive mechanical ventilation was first utilized in an office tower in 1929 at the Milam Building in San Antonio, Texas, it was not wholly adopted until after World War II. Post-war Interna-

continued on page 3

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Novogradac Journal of Tax Credits Information

Address all correspondence and editorial submissions to:
Alex Ruiz / 415.356.8088

Address inquiries regarding advertising opportunities to:
Emil Bagalso / 415.356.8037

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ISSN 2152-646X

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continued from page 2



Photo: Courtesy of Heritage Investment Corporation

Building #29 at the former Colt Armory Complex in Hartford has been repurposed as office space with an open floor plan at the center of the space and enclosed offices at the perimeter.

tional style and Modern Movement office buildings had a core and shell design with limited columns, services located within a core and maximized leasable square footage. Office buildings were no longer limited by natural ventilation requirements, and large square and rectangular floor plates became favored by owners and occupants.

These office towers provided the opportunity for new spatial arrangements with offices located at the perimeter and open work spaces within the interior spaces. These buildings were, by and large, constructed to be flexible and featured movable partitions, acoustic tile, and fluorescent lights. The trend toward office flexibility continued to evolve during the 1960s and 1970s as Arthur Miller's Action Office design was adopted and the cubicle farm proliferated. More recently, collaboration and networking have replaced the sterile cubicle with flexible workstations that provide each worker with a private space while fostering creativity and interaction between co-workers.

The current trend in office design is geared toward flexible office space with large open areas and grouped work spaces. Depending on the tenant, finishes may be traditional and include gypsum board walls and acoustic ceilings or may include more contemporary treatments such as exposed structure and synthetic or metal ceilings. The push toward green and sustainable technologies has led to innovative design in modern materials and systems. One universal requirement for modern office tenants is abundant opportunity for modern technology.

Industrial Buildings

Certain historic building types prove to be better suited for modern office use but this depends on the intended user. For larger

continued on page 4

continued from page 3

tenants and those looking for open floor plates, historic mills, factories and warehouses may provide a unique work environment that will meet the tenant's spatial needs. These types of buildings have proved to be extremely flexible with their large open spaces, often with high ceilings and skylights that provide natural lighting and aid in LEED certification.

One example of this is Building #29 at the former Colt Armory Complex in Hartford, Conn. The 96,000-square-foot brick and concrete structure featured an open floor plan with large sawtooth skylights on the roof. The building has been repurposed as office space with an open floor plan at the center of the space and enclosed offices at the perimeter.

First Generation Office Buildings

Based on the Chicago School archetype, these buildings often prove to be difficult to reuse as office space. They maximized exterior coverage for light and ventilation, but have a fixed floor plan and many columns. One particular problem is the presence of the historic corridors. Should these remain, it may be challenging to alter these spaces as part of HTC rehabilitation because these areas may be determined to be character defining and changes may be limited. In historic buildings where the floor plans are modern, there is more flexibility for altering the floor plan to meet the current requisites of new office tenants.

One example of a first generation office building that has undergone a historic tax credit rehabilitation for use as modern office space is the Medical Dental Building in San Francisco, Calif. The 26-story art deco office tower was used originally as speculative office space and featured a double-loaded corridor set within a T-shaped floor plate. Over the years, the building has undergone numerous renovation campaigns to meet the needs of its tenants, though original corridors and finishes exist, and despite the challenges, the corridors and office suites were updated to reflect the design requirements of modern tenants. Because the tenant spaces had previously been renovated, the opportunity to make alterations while still meeting the historic standards increased significantly.

Post-war Office Buildings

These second generation office buildings, constructed with comprehensive mechanical HVAC systems, provide significant opportunity for modern office reuse. As modern buildings from this period become recognized for their architectural and historical significance, many are now eligible for listing on the National Register of

Historic Places and are candidates for rehabilitation using the historic tax credits.

These second generation office buildings provide ample opportunity for rehabilitation and reuse as office buildings because of their open floor plans, ample deck-to-deck height and pre-existing mechanical and HVAC infrastructure. While existing services may require updating or replacement, it generally is easier to refit these buildings than it is with first generation office towers. On the interior, these buildings usually were constructed using a core and shell design, and intended for flexibility. Existing office spaces have been renovated and reconfigured as tenants changed or upgraded their space. Historic challenges with the reuse of these buildings may include the requirement to retain character defining features such as wall finishes, lighting and unique partitioning systems that may seem dated but not historic.

Recently, the 1964 former Rohm & Haas headquarters building in Philadelphia, designed by architect Pietro Belluschi, underwent a historic tax credit rehabilitation to enable the building to continue to operate as a corporate headquarters building. The project used the building's innovative original movable partitions to create modern office space that met the spatial needs of the tenant.

Conclusion

Although historic buildings may present challenges for reuse as modern office space, they present an opportunity to create unique office spaces that can meet the spatial demands of modern office tenants. In general, mid-century office buildings and former industrial buildings provided the greatest opportunity for reuse as modern office space due to their flexible floor plans and large open expanses. First-generation office buildings may be more difficult to reuse as office space due to their limited floor plate size, high number of interior columns and limited deck-to-deck height.

These historic office buildings may also retain historic fabric that includes corridors, which could limit the options for reuse as part of a historic tax credit project. Creative design solutions can overcome these limitations and allow these buildings to be reused as modern office space for smaller tenants and those that desire a traditional office configuration. When looking to rehabilitate a historic building for office use, it is important to have a qualified team in place to minimize risk and maximize the opportunity to create modern dynamic office space.♦

continued on page 5

continued from page 4

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