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HISTORIC TAX CREDIT TOOLBOX



Art & Architecture: Artwork in Tax Credit Projects

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For some developers, it is not enough to renovate and update a historic building. Rather, they have a vision that links art, architecture and heritage. For some, history and architecture form the basis of interior design, typically expressed by using historic photographs along the corridor walls. Such is the case of the Palmer House in Chicago and the Netherlands Hotel in Cincinnati, both Hilton hotels. These properties feature large, framed, black-and-white photographs of one-time celebrity visitors.

Moreover, there are places such as the Argonaut Hotel in San Francisco. Located along Fisherman's Wharf, this Kimpton Hotel was created in a one-time Del Monte canning factory owned by the National Park Service (NPS). On the ground floor is the visitor's center and interactive museum for the San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park. Kimpton capitalized on the maritime heritage in its interior design. Where the building has a great past supported by great artifacts, the integration of the building's history into current operations is not uncommon in tax credit projects. The redevelopment of Denver's Union Station took a similar path, framing and installing historic blueprints, train schedules, tickets

and related paraphernalia to create an overall ambiance reflective of the building's heritage.

Increasingly, there are developers that push this envelope. One very visible example is the 21c Museum Hotels. With locations in Louisville, Ky., Durham, N.C., Bentonville, Ark., and Cincinnati, the basic concept of 21c is to integrate contemporary arts with a place to spend the night. Specific areas are created with the intention of being a revolving exhibit area where invited artists can show their works. Also, the hotel chain also actively collaborates with other innovative arts institutions to organize traveling exhibitions and other programming. 21c acquires and commissions contemporary art, not only for display in the hotels but for loan in support of "exploring the breadth of the human experience, lived or imagined."

Such also is the case of the Langham Hotel in the IBM Building in Chicago. The building was Mies van der Rohe's last work. Set on a pedestal overlooking the Chicago River, the 52-story glass-and-steel tower is an imposing architectural statement. IBM serves as a dynamic modernist counterpoint to the classicism of Daniel Burham and his

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successor firm, Graham, Anderson, Probst and White, as well as other Chicago architectural icons such as Holabird & Roche and Louis Sullivan.

Redeveloped as a historic tax credit (HTC) project, the Langham Hotel occupies a portion of the lobby and the lower 13 floors, while the remainder of the building continued its office use. The heritage of Langham Hotels dates back to 1865 to the Grand Hotel in London’s West End, which is often considered Europe’s first great hotel. Today, the Langham collection is worldwide and noted for its impeccable standards. The Chicago Langham, opened in 2013, was recently named TripAdvisor’s No. 1 hotel in the United States.

One critical aspect of the Langham is the integration of art and architecture. As guests approach the hotel, they are greeted by Ju Ming’s sculpture at the riverfront plaza. Compelling museum-quality art is then found through the hotel, including both public spaces and guest rooms—even public toilets. These vary from the whimsical, such as William Wegman’s wiaraner photographs, to atmospheric paintings such as Jin Le’s Devening Projects, to more abstract sculptural concepts such as the work of Jimmy Raskin. The Chicago Langham displays more than 50 artists, including well-recognized names such as Borofsky and Oldenburg. Next time you’re in Chicago, it’s well worth a visit to the Langham to view this remarkable collection of art.

As relates to HTCs, the obvious question is whether these art installations get reviewed and if so, by what standards? There is no written guidance, no preservation brief that provides a road map of what is acceptable and what is not. So how do the tax credit reviewers address this issue? Is everyone an art critic?

The short answer is no. NPS is not concerned with the content of the art. Generally, flat-framed pieces that are hung on the wall are considered fixtures and not reviewed at all. For HTC purposes, it doesn’t matter whether the hung piece is blueprint, ticket stub or historic photograph. Similarly, freestanding sculptural pieces are considered fixtures and not reviewed—even oversized pieces.

Rather, NPS review is triggered when the work of art physically affects historic materials. The installation of Ju Ming’s sculpture at the IBM Building plaza is a good example. The installation was reviewed both by the city of Chicago Landmarks Commission and by the NPS. The sculpture fell under Chicago Landmarks review because of city design regulations associated with historic buildings and the project’s use of the Class L historic property incentive. The NPS review was triggered by the use of the HTCs; with the NPS review included a preliminary recommendation from the State Historic Preservation Office.

Ju Ming’s Living World sculpture was a large piece. It consisted of a grouping of 11 human-like bronze figures,

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Image: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting Group
 Guests of the Chicago Langham hotel are greeted by Ju Ming’s sculpture at the riverfront plaza.



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between 5 feet, 7 inches and 7 feet, 2 inches tall, set on a freestanding plinth. The proposed location was IBM's east plaza, overlooking the Chicago River. The IBM site slopes drastically down from the northeast to southwest. In designing the IBM Building, van der Rohe addressed this slope by creating a travertine platform base for his tower. The front entry off Wabash Avenue is at grade, as is the east plaza overlooking the river. Along State Street, the building's base becomes a blank wall as the street slopes down, balanced with a broad open stair at the west. The west end of the property, along Kinzie Street, is an interior service and loading area that is essentially below grade and hidden from view. The hardscaped plaza is largely open, finished with rectangular pavers.

The city, state and federal reviewers were generally supportive of the concept. As a group, they recognized that the Ju Ming piece was an important artistic statement and as a privately owned, publicly accessible sculpture, the installation would contribute to the property and to the area. The concerns of all of the reviewers were similar: What would be the impact of the installation on historic materials and what would be the visual impact of on the plaza?

The first issue was addressed in a relatively comfortable manner. The plaza surface throughout consisted of rectangular granite pavers set atop a sand base. The developers proposed to remove two rows of five pavers and store them on site. The plinth would be installed into slightly reinforced concrete base set within the 250-square-foot opening. This approach minimized the physical impacts and allowed the installation to be fully reversed. Potentially, the plaza could be returned to its pre-existing condition.

The second issue was more subjective. The developer initially proposed a site at the northeast corner of the building. This location was located partially within the setback of the first floor. Although the proposed site serves a practical function as a pedestrian sheltered area and would appear to do the same with the humanoid figures, reviewers felt the proposed site did not show the artwork at its optimal and cluttered van der Rohe's setback. The developer and reviewers worked collaboratively to consider other locations, eventually settling on a site at the northeast of the plaza overlooking the river but also appearing as a quite natural collection on the plaza.

The larger lesson is this: Certain rehabilitation projects seek to use the HTCs while being transformative and catalytic. Out-of-the-box visions, such as the integration of contemporary art and historic architecture, almost by definition, fall outside written guidance. Reviewers first and foremost will worry about the impact on historic materials, but will also be concerned that treatments respect the heritage and historical architecture of the site. Effective proposals must not only anticipate these issues, but also have the flexibility to modify secondary aspects to fulfill the vision.

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