

When a beloved old building needs to be brought into the modern era, sometimes the best way to do that is by taking it back to its past... and then suspending it in time.

I ascended to the second floor, turned the corner, and stopped. Or rather, was halted in my tracks, struck with awe and wonder. Before me lay a long, broad corridor that could only be described as *grand*. White and charcoal marble inlaid in concentric rectangles spanned the width underfoot. The stately flooring gave way to sections of carpeting on which perched clusters of mid-century modern chairs. The walls on both sides were anchored by precisely-rectangled white wainscoting, capped with an additional white chair rail. Above the chair rail the walls were clay-grey. Punctuating the corridor down its length were floor-to-ceiling columns, also clay-grey, which soared to fourteen-foot arches. The arches had the effect of creating a series of frames for the white, punched tin ceiling, from which hung a center row of spherical chandeliers—glowing orbs suspended by chains attached to their burnished brass equators. I felt as though I'd stepped out of the twenty-first century and into a page from a literary classic; the building had just announced its presence. Suddenly everything I'd learned about our project and this 140 year-old structure came together.

In 1887 the Jesuits were gifted 40 acres of land in Denver, with the specification that they build a college for men. They broke ground on September 13 of that year and completed the core and shell in 100 days. Classes started on September 5, 1888. At the time, Main Hall was Regis University's only building. Its 60,000 square feet housed administration on the first and second floors, classrooms in the basement and third floor, and dorms for male residents on the fourth floor. The exterior was made of rhyolite which, when heated by the sun, became rosy. This earned it the nickname, "The Pink Palace."

The building underwent periodic renovations. Additions increased it to 75,000 sf. But now the University wanted to restore the building to a place of grandeur it had never had. Unfortunately, such an endeavor would be costly. It would be cheaper, the Board realized, to tear the building down and replace it. But they just couldn't do it.

“I’ve been here twenty years, being trained by the Jesuits,” Mike Redmond, Vice President of Regis University’s Physical Plant, said. “I got my undergraduate and my Master’s here. Main Hall is the signature building of the campus, the typical Old Main. That building is a landmark. It *is* Regis.”

The Board agreed with Redmond. Even though it isn’t a designated landmark, the Pink Palace has made its mark on people’s hearts. So from June 2016 through August 2017 GTC performed Phases 1 and 2 of a multi-phased project that will continue through 2020. “We’re trying to take it above and beyond the era in which it was built,” Brian Laartz, GTC President and Project Principal said.

Phase 1 was a \$1.2M renovation of the second floor, which acts as a main entry to the building. During this phase the team restored some existing wainscoting and replicated it throughout the corridor. “We wanted to leave some of the old in there for character,” Jerico Enriquez, the Project Architect from Bennett Wagner Grody said. They removed the ceiling to accent the arches, and installed stamped tin tiles similar to the old ceiling on the fourth floor. The team installed new marble floors and laid seating areas with carpet planks in a subtle mix of colors to feel more vibrant. They replaced the paint selection, from previously all-beige to a more modern white and grey. They renovated the conference room and two bathrooms, created ADA-accessible restrooms, and added a “powder room” – a whimsical throwback to the building’s era of origin. They also installed unique globe chandeliers from Boyd lighting. “At that time, one hundred years ago, the building was catered to the user,” Enriquez said. “We wanted to be sensitive to the history of it when we did this design. We deliberately selected fixtures that are timeless.”

Phase 2, a \$1M renovation on the first floor, involved demolition of storage space to widen the hallways. The team replaced old metal radiators with baseboard heating. They installed wainscoting down the whole corridor (previously there was none) to match the second floor, and replaced all the doors and hardware to restore a historical look. The team also removed some ceiling tiles to create an open grid and painted all exposed pipes and upper ceiling a dark charcoal. The move simultaneously opened up the space and gave maintenance better access to the pipes. Tack panels were then installed on almost every flat surface, since the first floor is home to the Art Department.

Solutions of Special Problems

“The challenge with old buildings,” Amy Powell, GTC’s Project Manager for Phases 1 and 2, said, “is that you don’t have blueprints on how they were built. You never know what you may find.” Main Hall’s bearing walls are four to five feet wide at the base and graduate to one foot at the top of the fourth floor. The bearing walls are constructed of two walls: a 4”-8” rhyolite stack wall, and a rubble wall connected to the rhyolite. “One of the problems when drilling into old walls like these is the rubble can cascade and roll out,” Powell said. “But you have to core drill and widen these walls for the new ADA openings.” The GTC team had no choice but to proceed with extreme caution, pressure grout, shore, and use special concrete cutting instruments to widen the openings.

Another challenge was that the floors were angulated. After 140 years, the existing floorboards had loosened, and they squeaked. “It was like walking on a ship,” Laartz noted. The GTC team came up with an experimental fix by cross-nailing the existing floorboards, then applying a mesh and lightweight concrete compound, and then floating to level. The floors don’t squeak at all now. “Their experiment worked better than expected,” Redmond said.

Excellence in Project Execution and Management/Team Approach

Since Main Hall is the heart of the campus, occupied 24-7-365, the teams confined construction to summers, when things were slightly less active. A plan was put in place to entirely encapsulate the work area and complete one-eighth of the corridor at a time. They also got to know Regis personnel fairly well while working in their space. When the crew pulled out some old, wooden carpenter’s nails from the walls and floors, GTC Superintendent John Callahan made crosses out of them for the office staff—much to the ladies’ delight.

Environmental/Safety

Construction methods changed over the years, and not all upgrades were environmentally sound. Everything from asbestos to lead paint had been introduced to the building. “When Main Hall was initially built, it was actually a clean building,” Redmond said. “The stone, lime and mortar, and sand base were fairly environmentally friendly.” The real problems, he noted, started in 1935. “The addition contained lots of hazardous materials that had been introduced into the construction industry.” Regis had a team that remediated before each new renovation, but the GTC team was also trained to have a keen eye. And every time the team reached a new layer, they had to test it.

Callahan recalled a few frustrating incidents. Once, they removed three layers of old flooring, testing each time, and then the fourth layer was “hot.” Another time, while carefully drilling through a wall, one of the GTC team spotted a suspicious-looking fiber. Always on the lookout for potential ACMs (Asbestos Containing Materials), GTC quickly called the Regis team to test it. “Turned out to be horse hair,” Callahan grinned, shaking his head. “It’s a very old building.”

Construction Innovations/State-of-the-Art Advancement

In 1887, buildings were not constructed with electricity—let alone computers—in mind. But Regis is committed to maintaining cutting-edge technology. GTC added wiring behind the walls for discrete power outlets and installed strategic Wi-Fi hotspots in the ceilings: the chair-clusters down the halls are actually true, modern collaboration areas. They also installed 21st century HVAC and lighting which, in addition to being energy efficient and green, are both computer-controlled.

Excellence in Client Service and/or Contributions to the Community

In the end, the visceral reaction I was having, staring down the hallowed Hall, is the same reaction many people have had. Mike Redmond, the Board, and the alumni are happy. The success of Phase 1 led to fundraising to complete the entire renovation. Regis’s President, Fr. John Fitzgibbons, walked past Jerico Enriquez one day recently and gave him two thumbs-up. I wandered the Hall for a bit, then asked a passing student for directions to get back to my car. We chatted as she led the way, and I mentioned that my company is the firm doing the restorations. “Oh, thank you so much!” she gushed. “I love this building! I make excuses just to walk through it!” *Wow.*

“Yes, we did consider scrapping it and building a new one,” Redmond said. “It would’ve been cheaper. But this is *Main Hall*. And besides,” he added, “seeing it restored slowly is more fun.”









