

News Release

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U.S. General Services Administration Gets New Contemporary Region Headquarters in Atlanta's Former Great Depression-era Main Post Office

*\$62 Million restoration and adaptive reuse project merges preservation of
character-defining historic elements with sustainable design*

ATLANTA, Aug. 30, 2011 – Focusing on the confluence of sustainability and historic preservation, architecture firm [Lord, Aeck & Sargent](#) has designed and overseen a \$62 million exterior restoration and interior rehabilitation/adaptive reuse of downtown Atlanta's former Great Depression-era main post office.

First dedicated in 1933 to serve as the central postal facility for the southeast, then acquired by the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) in 1981 and renamed the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Building (MLK Building) in 1988, the structure was occupied over the years by a variety of federal agencies – among them the FBI and the former U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service – but since its January rededication is now the headquarters for the GSA's Southeast Sunbelt Region.

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The completed project, which adhered to the [U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties](#) as well as the [GSA's WorkPlace 20-20](#) design standards, is targeting LEED Silver certification from the U.S. Green Building Council.

“In approaching this project, we wanted to understand as much as we could about the history of the building with the dual goal of preserving its character-defining historic elements and simultaneously adapting it to serve the GSA’s current needs for an energy-efficient, contemporary workplace,” said Susan Turner, a Lord, Aeck & Sargent Historic Preservation Studio principal who led the project.

Noted Mike Fifty, a GSA senior project manager who oversaw the MLK Building’s interior rehabilitation, “We wanted to change the perception of GSA employees who would be moving to the building from a nearby federal building. Quite frankly, none of them wanted to move here because the building was dark and unpleasant. It had asbestos and lead paint as well as mold, mildew and puddles of water caused by drain backups and significant amounts of water penetrating the exterior walls. No employees thought it was possible they’d ever come to love the space, but everybody is thrilled with this building, and there are no complaints.”

Depression-era building exhibits a “starved” classicism

Designed by prominent Atlanta architect A. Ten Eyck Brown and his associates, the building is considered one of the best examples of federal architecture of the Great Depression era. The 350,000-square-foot structure’s modern classical symmetry and art deco ornamentation exhibit a “starved” classicism that reflected the economic conditions of the time. For example, while Georgia granite was used for the two-story base of the building and Georgia marble for the remaining stories, the less visible back of the building is clad in white brick. The tiered building design resembles a wedding cake: a large two-story base and symmetrical office wings, middle stories set back from the base and two upper floors pushed back even farther.

Exterior restoration repairs significant damage to façade

During its initial building condition assessment, the restoration team determined that there was significant stone displacement caused by rusting of the supporting steel shelf angles. The team also found some damage to the façade stone as a result of sealant that had been applied to the mortar joints in the preceding decades, thus trapping water.

As a result of these findings, the exterior restoration included repair of more than 6,300 stones, more than 600 original steel frame windows and all of the building's cracked parapets, many of which the GSA had removed in the mid 1990s to prevent the stone from shifting even more.

Although the original scope of work called for the complete removal of the exterior stone cladding, the team determined that such an approach would be too invasive and would ultimately weaken the overall strength of the bond between the stone and the brick back-up. So Lord, Aeck & Sargent and its consulting structural engineer Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, recommended the strip method of stone removal, which entailed the removal of two courses of stone immediately above the shelf angles while bracing the existing stone above. This enabled access to the deteriorating shelf angles, which were replaced with stainless steel, and focused the impact of construction on the damaged areas.

The process of stone removal involved tagging and cataloguing each of the removed stones with information that allowed reinstallation in exactly the same place following refurbishment.

Another huge challenge was the repair of the original steel windows, key toward preserving the building's exterior historic character. The steel frames were stripped – inside and out – of lead-based paint, repaired, repainted and sealed. In just over 100 cases, either the deterioration was too extensive, or the windows had earlier been replaced with aluminum windows, so new steel replacements had to be built.

“As significant features, we ensured that the steel replacement windows were designed and fabricated as historic replicas to blend seamlessly with the originals,” said Rob Wanderman, a Lord, Aeck & Sargent associate architect and project manager.

Other exterior work included repointing and cleaning the entire façade, including the brick masonry in back and monel decoration over the main entry doors; restoring the façade’s terra cotta bands; painting the steel spandrel panels between the windows; cleaning the granite pavers in the building plaza; landscaping; and removing a metal greenhouse addition. All flat roofs were replaced with a roofing system that was insulated above and provided with white marble ballast to meet the LEED credit for reflectivity.

Then came time to re-open a leaking two-story light well in the back of the building. The light well had been closed in the 1980s and used primarily for storage as well as some office space.

“Because the light well had been shut off, it made the basement wet and dark. By opening it up, we converted the basement into what is now called the terrace level. The conversion maximizes natural light and allows it to penetrate to the center of that level and the ground floor above it,” Wanderman said. He noted that the bottom of the former light well is now an outdoor terrace garden with drought tolerant indigenous plants. The garden links the building’s east and west exterior plazas.

Interior restoration and rehabilitation emphasizes preservation of historic features

Interior work on the MLK Building included the restoration and rehabilitation of the nine-story building’s lowest three floors – the basement-turned-terrace level, ground floor and first floor – along with a mezzanine, comprising 164,000 square feet of space in total. Before construction began, however, there was extensive hazmat removal of asbestos and, according

to Fifty, more than seven tons of lead paint chips, qualifying the project for a brownfield redevelopment LEED credit. Demolition waste was sorted to separate material types for recycling when possible.

Important character-defining features of the building, such as the historic two-story postal lobby and marble stairways, were restored. The electrical and HVAC systems were updated and the elevators modernized, while the remainder of the space was rehabilitated into contemporary office space that also retains and showcases historic elements such as terrazzo flooring, exposed brick, wainscoting, postal catwalks and high ceilings with exposed ductwork.

Many of the materials from the first-floor historic postal lobby still existed but were in need of repair and cleaning, while missing features were replicated with help from photos of the historic lobby.

“The process of restoring the historic lobby turned up some great finds,” Turner said. “A postal window was uncovered during demolition, and it’s now re-exposed in its original location. The GSA located the lobby’s original monel postal tables with glass tops at other Atlanta area post offices. The tables were recovered, stripped of paint and restored, and because of imprints they made decades ago on the Tennessee marble floors, we knew exactly where to place them.

“In other cases, we had to improvise,” Turner continued. “For example, the original postal boxes had been ripped out, so we filled the space with etched glass infill panels that approximate the geometry of the boxes using contemporary materials and details. And while we used replicas of the historic pendant light fixtures, neither they nor the lobby transom windows offered enough light. So we recreated the original postal desk valance lighting concept to enhance the lobby’s illumination.”

Surprise interior historic features retained in contemporary office design

“The interior demolition was somewhat like an archeological dig because we uncovered historic features we never imagined existed,” said David Ramsey, an interior designer in Lord, Aeck & Sargent’s Historic Preservation Studio.

Among these features were brick wainscot and plaster walls hidden behind drywall that had been added to the inside face of the exterior walls. Upon their discovery, Lord, Aeck & Sargent reworked its design intent for the office space on the terrace level and ground floor.

“In our reworked design, the modern interiors that were needed by the GSA were held back from the walls by 15 feet so that we could save the historic elements, and we then created a modern, functional insertion within this historic shell, Ramsey said.”

In addition to restoration of the historic walls, also retained and restored were the historic steel window transoms and their wall-mounted operators. Replicas of historic pendant lights were hung from exposed ceilings around the 15-foot perimeter zone.

The office space on the terrace and ground floors is bright and cheery, thanks in part to an abundance of light entering large windows from the former light well and also to the prominent accent colors of deep brown, red, orange, green, blue and purple – colors inspired by historic postage stamps.

“We wanted the interiors to pay homage to the building’s history as a post office, so to help us decide how, we took a ‘field trip’ to the Smithsonian National Postal Museum,” Ramsey said. “As a result, we chose to use U.S. postage stamp images from the 1920s and ’30s both as artwork and to inform the overall interiors color pallet.”

While the primary interior wall color is a neutral butter shade that matches the original color determined through paint analysis, Ramsey explained that the stamp images and their corresponding eye-popping color pallet are used as wayfinding markers and guideposts throughout the large building, as well as on accent walls. In an added touch, 12 mint condition

historic stamps were randomly embedded in colored cement-based countertops manufactured with recycled glass bottles from local restaurants and bars.

Open, sun-filled teaming areas were placed along the perimeter zone to allow free access to views and daylight and to encourage communication and open dialogue. The design allows light to reach the interiors by locating workstations with low partitions near the exterior walls, while glass fronted office and conference room spaces are located inside the core.

“While the interior design is reminiscent of building’s postal history, we also wanted to pay homage to Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement he inspired,” Ramsey said. “One way we did this was to suggest that the GSA purchase modern furniture pieces that evoke designs created during 1950s-1970s Civil Rights era.”

Artwork pays homage to King and building’s history

Furniture, however, is not the only way the interiors remind the building’s inhabitants and visitors of its namesake. Twenty-five large black and white photographs of King with other well known civil rights and prominent Atlanta leaders are located along a wall in a well travelled first floor corridor. These images represent milestones of the Civil Rights era and commemorate King’s life and legacy.

An iconic portrait of King appears on a large 14-foot by 9-foot horizontal backlit wall plane located just beyond a set of glass doors at the back side of the postal lobby. It can be viewed by passersby walking in front of the building and is especially striking during twilight and early night hours.

On the back side of the backlit wall plane is a large block image of the historic postage stamps whose images and color pallet inspired the interior design. And on the terrace level is a gallery display of the building’s construction as a U.S. post office in the 1930s.

Mixture of new and old worlds don't clash

According to the GSA's Fifty, the adaptive reuse of a historic post office into contemporary office space for the federal government "couldn't have turned out better. It's a beautiful place, and the mixture of new and old worlds doesn't clash; it flows. It's a modern, open floor plan, yet when you go to the bay area by the windows overlooking the terrace, you see old schoolhouse-style hanging lights. It gives a delightful old-time feel to a new space."

The Project Team

The Martin Luther King project team included:

- Owner – U. S. General Services Administration (GSA)
- Lord, Aeck & Sargent (Atlanta office) – architect
- The Beck Group (Atlanta office) – construction manager
- Working Buildings (Atlanta) – LEED consultant and commissioning agent
- AECOM (formerly EDAW) (Atlanta) – landscape architect
- Sara B. Chase (Lexington, Mass.) – paint conservationist
- Welsh Color & Conservation (Bryn Mawr, Penn.) – paint conservationist
- NBP Engineers (Macon, Ga.) – MEP/FP engineer
- Eberly & Associates (Atlanta) – civil engineer
- Palmer Engineering Co. (Atlanta) – structural engineer (interior)
- Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates (Atlanta office) – structural engineer (exterior façade)
- United Consulting Group (Atlanta) – HAZMAT consultant
- Rolf Jensen & Associates (Atlanta office) – life safety engineer
- CD+M Lighting Design Group (Atlanta office) – lighting consultant
- St. Louis Antique Lighting Company (St. Louis) – historic lighting consultant
- Lerch Bates (Atlanta office) – elevator consultant
- Ingersoll Rand Security Technologies (Atlanta office) – hardware consultant
- Novus (Atlanta) – art consultant
- JPI (Atlanta) – art glass consultant
- APCO Graphics (Atlanta) – interior signage consultant
- Smithsonian National Postal Museum (Washington, DC) – postage stamps

About Lord, Aeck & Sargent

Lord, Aeck & Sargent is an award-winning architectural firm serving clients in scientific, academic, historic preservation, arts and cultural, and multi-family housing and mixed-use markets. The firm's core values are responsive design, technological expertise and exceptional service. In 2003, The Construction Specifications Institute awarded Lord, Aeck & Sargent its Environmental Sensitivity Award for showing exceptional devotion to the use of sustainable and

environmentally friendly materials, and for striving to create functional, sensitive and healthy buildings for clients. In 2007, Lord, Aeck & Sargent was one of the first architecture firms to adopt [The 2030 Challenge](#), an initiative whose ultimate goal is the design of carbon-neutral buildings, or buildings that use no fossil-fuel greenhouse gas-emitting energy to operate, by the year 2030. Lord, Aeck & Sargent has offices in Ann Arbor, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; and Chapel Hill, North Carolina. For more information, visit the firm at www.lordaecksargent.com.

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