

The Restoration and Renovation of the St. Louis Post Office/Custom House

St. Louis, Missouri

Patty Berkebile Nelson Associates

The St. Louis Post Office/Custom House (1873-1889, Alfred B. Mullet) would get an almost perfect score on any preservationist's worthiness test. The building is stylistically important and typologically significant. It was technologically avante-garde when built and, although abused, has suffered few non-reversible interventions. Most important, it is a handsome, noble structure imparting grandeur and dignity.

Unfortunately, by the late 1950s the building did not suit the needs of its owner, the General Services Administration (GSA). At the same time, it looked increasingly attractive to developers who lusted after its prime downtown site. The threat of imminent destruction in 1961 roused a tough band of preservationists comprised of the usual assortment of tenacious, but relatively powerless, historians, architects, dilettantes, and other zealots who manned the forward position long enough for the national preservation movement to catch up. By the 1970s, the issue became socially and politically acceptable. Old buildings were being saved with increasing frequency, and we had a President, Jimmy Carter, who cared about cities. Ultimately, it was Carter's Urban Policy Act (favoring location of government offices in city centers), and the Co-operative Use Act (mandating mixed government/commercial use for federal buildings) that saved the St. Louis Post Office from destruction. GSA was directed to

restore and renovate the building for federal offices and leased commercial space.

Hardly a preservation crusade in America had been the object of greater energy and national focus. It was against this background of attention that GSA set about its task knowing each step would be under close scrutiny. First, GSA conducted a limited, paid design competition to select the architect. This method was also intended to establish, with some concensus, the direction that restoration would take.

Patty Berkebile Nelson Associates formed a joint venture with Harry Weese and Associates (with James Marston Fitch as advisor/conservator) to comprise one of three selected teams in the competition. It was clear from our first visit to the building that Alfred Mullett would be a tough act to follow. Thus, very early in the process, we thought of ourselves less as designers than as protectors. This conceptual base formed the substance of our competition entry. We attempted to tiptoe in and tiptoe out, be humble (if architects can be humble), and focus on reversing damage already inflicted upon the original design. We feel that our commitment to minimal intervention, strongly stated and illustrated in our entry, won the competition against distinguished, but more intrusive, solutions.

In design competitions more promises are made than kept. Although

we made our promises honestly, competitions do not allow for comprehensive detailed answers to all problems. An attempt to insert contemporary uses, expectations and standards into an 1870's structure carries with it a basket full of problems. Since we had offered GSA a restoration philosophy, not detailed solutions, our approach to each issue in the design development stage would be measured against our broad objective.

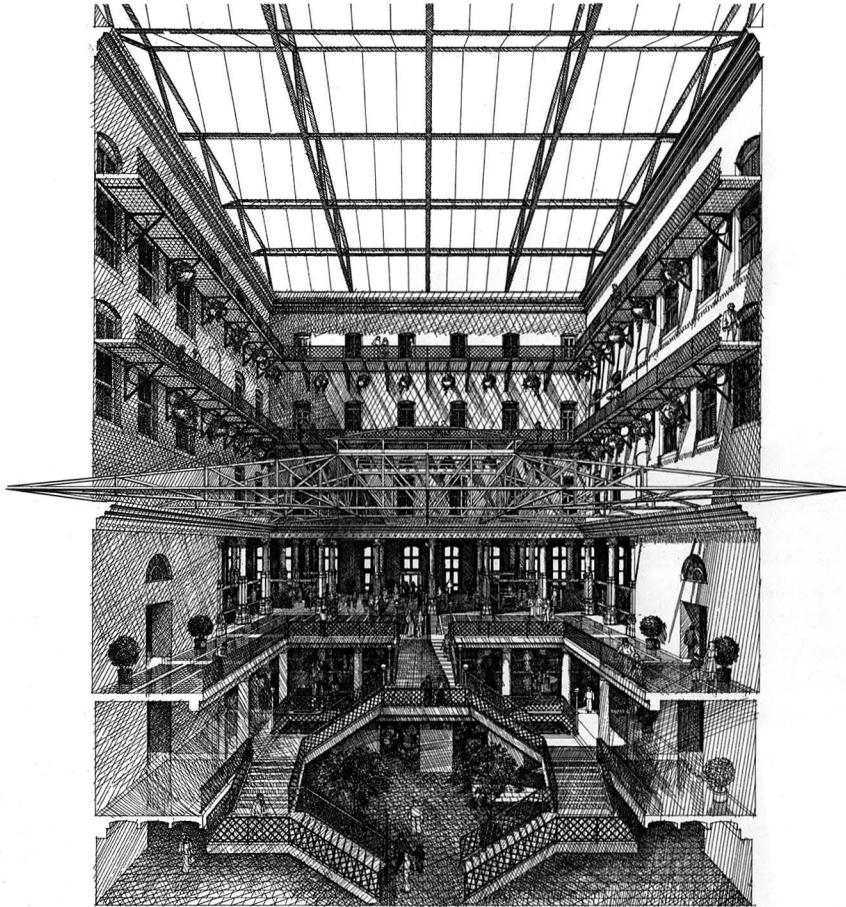
As it happened, when technical and functional concerns piled up, it was our commitment to minimal intervention, rather than owner or outside pressure, that kept the design in line. The GSA project team was getting heavy pressure from their various experts to go "by the book." Unfortunately "the book" applied to new buildings and not centenarian monuments. This led to the most important lesson to be learned by architect and owner.

Normally a building is designed to meet the rules (program). But there are cases, such as with a work of this significance, when the rules must be designed, or redesigned, to accommodate the building. It is one of the realities of preservation that functional compromises usually must be made; it does not serve the cause of preservation well to pretend otherwise.

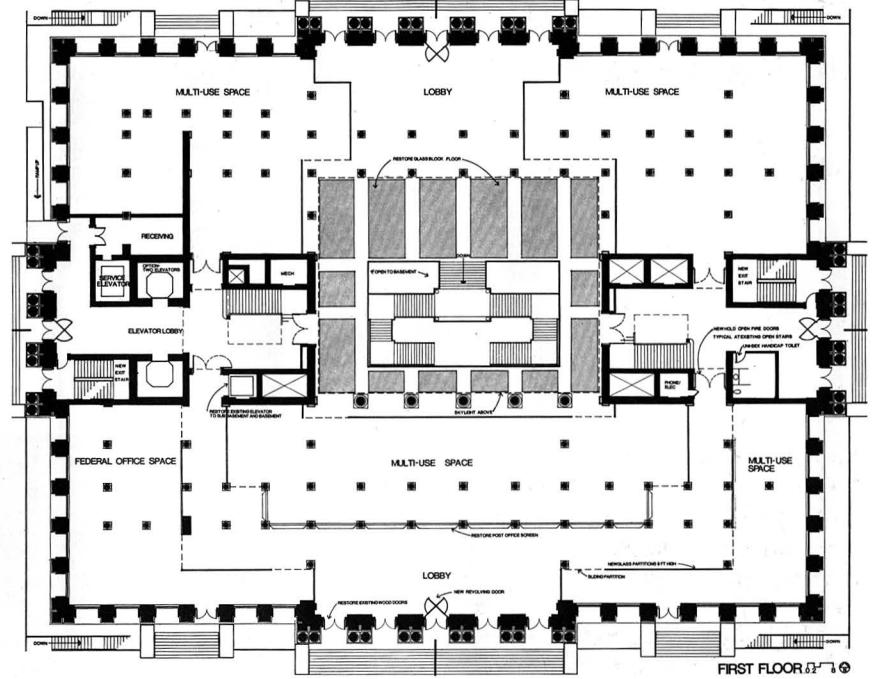
Good illustration of this reality is afforded by the Post Office's high, elaborate ceilings, which are an essential part of the building's

character. However, retaining the ceiling height made HVAC distribution a tough problem, since any subdivision of the floors into small private offices would be difficult to serve mechanically and provide ridiculously proportioned space. Our solution to these constraints was first to distribute HVAC vertically through expanded fireplace chases (or dummy chases), thereby accepting a slightly less responsive HVAC system, and second to rewrite the rules to say that, within existing interior building walls, only open office planning could be used. The latter stipulation was not a casual matter to GSA as it reduced their tenant options. But GSA became increasingly sympathetic, accepted this approach and took the initiative in some cases. GSA insisted that all rules on fire prevention and life safety apply, mandating the insertion of new exit stairs, smoke doors, and a sprinkler system. But the structural fire protection requirements were eased allowing the cast iron columns to be left exposed.

While good preservation demands creativity, discipline, judgment, and ingenuity, it also calls for a substantial re-ordering of the traditional architectural priorities. The preservation architect inevitably stands in the shadow of the original designer; pride of authorship is diffused, if not totally obscured. If this proves to be the fate of the preservation architects for the St. Louis Post Office, it will stand as solid evidence that they came close to realizing their best intentions.

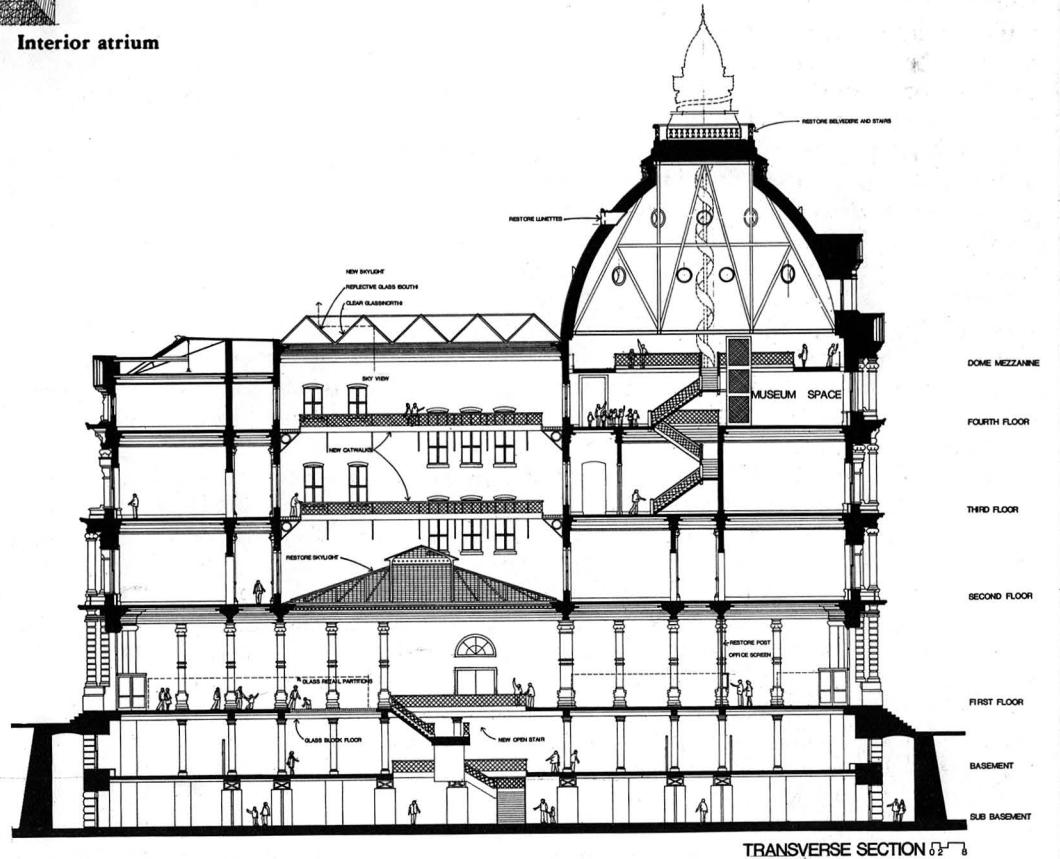
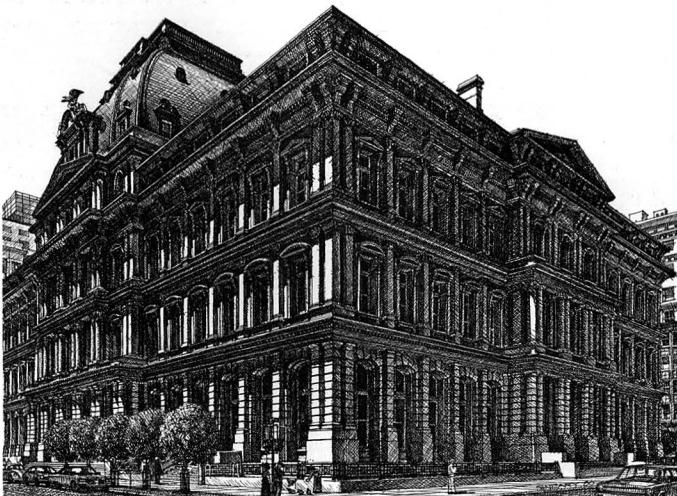


Interior atrium



FIRST FLOOR 62-7

Southeast view



TRANSVERSE SECTION 62-8