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Making Old Things New

By Robert Nieminen

“And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’”

—Rev. 21:5

Something occurred to me recently as I reread this verse of scripture: God is not only an architect and designer at heart, but he also specializes in restoration projects. To this pilgrim, faith is more about renewal than it will ever be about rules or religion; it is about the Creator reaching down and breathing new life into souls that have remained vacant and neglected for too many years.

Perhaps that’s why I have a special place in my heart for adaptive reuse and historic renovation projects, the focus of this month’s issue. Of all the projects that come across my desk, by and large my favorites tend to be the ones where a design team has expertly executed a vision for a forgotten, run-down building or interior space and brought it back to life.

I suspect I like them because of the inherent challenges they present as well. There are often structural problems in old buildings; the floorplate may not be the ideal size or shape, and the original purpose of the space may be ill-suited for its new use. (The stunning former prison-turned-Liberty Hotel in Boston comes to mind—see *Transform it*, and *They Will Come* in our July/August 2008 issue or online for a look inside.)

Much like us, old structures need a lot of love and care. But the one thing they retain that new spaces seem to lack is character—something that takes time to both develop and uncover. Perhaps no one knows this better than Bob Verrier, FAIA, vice president and managing principal of The Architectural Team, the subject of this month’s Profile.

Verrier has been the architect of record for more than 30 historic structures, and was honored earlier this year as an AIA Fellow for his work in adaptive reuse and historic preservation.

He has earned various accolades throughout his more than 50-year career, including being personally honored by President Ronald Reagan with a National Historic Preservation Award for the preservation and adaptive reuse of the Baker Chocolate Factory in Dorchester Lower Mills, Mass.



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“I’ve always been interested in old buildings because they’re so incredibly beautiful, and when you see them empty and not being used, it’s a terrible thing to see,” he says. Driven by a passion for repurposing old mills in the Boston area where his firm is located, Verrier was doing adaptive reuse and sustainable design well before it was trendy to do so.

“Before people even knew about LEED, restoring these old buildings was absolutely green,” he adds with conviction. “What could be more green than saving a building?”

I couldn’t agree more. But while historic renovation and adaptive reuse projects certainly laid some of the earliest claims to sustainability, there are plenty of highlights in new construction that have captured our attention as well—evidenced by our annual list of the Top 10 LEED Projects of the Year. Of course, not every project on this year’s list falls under the LEED-NC category, nor did they all earn a Platinum rating. We sifted through scores of entries and selected what we feel is a broad cross-section of projects across various commercial market sectors that exemplify the best of what’s possible under the current LEED rating system.

However, despite its widespread popularity, LEED has not been without controversy or criticism. Earlier this year, “the design world was abuzz with grumblings of dissatisfaction over the newest iteration of the world’s most popular green rating system,” writes sustainability expert Penny Bonda, FASID, LEED AP, in this month’s *EnvironDesign Notebook* column. As a result, the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) was forced to postpone the release of its much-anticipated LEED 2012 rating system (now known as LEED v4). In this revealing article, Bonda uncovers what went wrong and presses USGBC Vice President Scot Horst for answers to questions about the next chapter of LEED, complete with heroes and villains—a compelling story you don’t want to miss.

Whether we’re talking about an abandoned building being brought back to life, an existing framework for sustainable design that needs an overhaul, or simply a weary reader in need of a little reinvigorating, I think we can all use a fresh coat of paint from time to time. Call me sentimental, but I’m a believer in restoration.
