

Architecture & Design

Boston's Back Bay Hotel: A Case Study in the Value of Adaptive Reuse

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Mr. Verrier

Back in 2001, Saunders Hotel Group, LLC (SHG) and Irish hotel group Jurys Doyle commissioned The Architectural Team, Inc. (TAT) to design a luxury hotel project in Boston – but it wasn't to be a tall, glassy tower. Rather, our task was to renovate, restore, and update a classic structure that had been a part of the city's fabric for nearly a century: the former Boston Police Department headquarters. Located in the historic and trendy Back Bay neighborhood, this beautiful seven-story Italian Renaissance Revival building rendered in limestone dates back to 1925. SHG, owners of the historic Lenox Hotel in Back Bay knew to engage an architectural firm that places a strong emphasis on historic preservation and adaptive reuse, and nothing could have been more exciting for us. The resulting Back Bay Hotel offers a compelling case study on the value of restoring and converting such historic structures.

Photo by Bruce Martin, Courtesy of The Architectural Team

Located at the corner of Berkeley and Stuart Streets in the heart of Boston's Back Bay, the building speaks to the rich history of the city, and of the Back Bay in particular. Once a literal bay, the area was formed into buildable land as part of a massive municipal fill project in the 1850s, and is home to a number of notable 19th-Century buildings, like McKim, Meade, and White's Beaux Arts Boston Public Library and H.H. Richardson's Trinity Church. Now regarded as having some of the country's best 19th-Century streetscapes, full of quintessentially Boston brownstone row houses, the Back Bay is a popular shopping, cultural, and commercial destination. As someone with a long history in Boston, I feel a personal connection to the Back Bay, and I've always felt an affinity for old buildings – they're often so beautiful, and they become an integral part of their neighborhood, which in turn helps make cities so interesting and gives them character. It was important for us to help ensure that the Back Bay kept its vitality.

SHG and partner Jurys Doyle Hotel Group understood what The Architectural Team has believed for decades – that historic buildings are too important to our identity and national diversity to be considered disposable. For one, this structure is among the last Italian Renaissance Revival buildings erected in Boston. From the perspective of differentiation, preservation presented the developers with an opportunity to create a one-of-a-kind property in a part of Boston that already had a number of luxurious hospitality offerings. The Back Bay is synonymous with classic architecture; keeping this building in place allowed SHG and Jurys Doyle to capitalize on the atmosphere of the neighborhood and differentiate its offering from newer competitors that can't claim this level of architectural heritage or detail.

Carrying out the renovation, however, required a lot of work and some creative thinking on the part of the project team; it also provided a reminder that adaptive reuse requires just as much thoroughness as new construction. An early structural analysis showed that while the building's original hand-drawn plans suggested the structure's ability to handle the vertical loading was adequate, in certain places it was actually half as strong as it needed to be. Because the renovation called for additional stories to be added to the building, it was doubly necessary to reinforce the structure. The placement of new steel and concrete jackets around seventy percent of the existing columns significantly improved the building's structural soundness.

From a visual perspective, the exterior stone, brick, and masonry walls were chipped and in need of repair. The team undertook a complete exterior restoration, including repairing and buffing the limestone, and polishing the original 13-foot brass doors to restore the structure to its former grandeur. The team worked hard to ensure that the restoration of original features supported the preservation of the building's architectural significance, while making it suitable for a very different use than its original function, and bringing necessary elements up to date. The original entrance, for example, was only accessible by a grand staircase, so the team created a new fully accessible main entrance on Stuart Street. A new two-story hall connects this entrance to the historic lobby, preserving the grand entry sequence.

Accommodating the hotel program itself, which called for 225 guest rooms, commodious amenity areas and a modest banquet facility posed a challenge. Situated on 17,234 square feet of land, the seven story, 95,000 square foot building was primarily used for administrative offices, though it did contain short term jail cells as well as numerous fire-proof munitions and record storage bunkers. Incorporating the clients aggressive program within the modest footprint of the existing property required a creative approach leading

to three decisive moves. A 3,000 square foot, 11-story lateral addition at 7 keys per floor was added to the backside of the building. This plan accommodated a receiving area at the ground level along with rooftop mechanical space. Next, two stories were added to the entire building. The design team felt strongly that this was the maximum number the building could handle visually and further proved to be structurally economical. 2 below grade forecourts were then excavated on either side of the Berkeley Street entrance, unlocking what was previously low ceilinged, dark unusable basement space that could now house the programmed restaurant and lounge. These combined moves increased the buildings size by 50 percent while preserving the historical integrity of the buildings most public facades.



Photo by Peter Vanderwaller, Courtesy of The Architectural Team

The interior of the building was essentially gutted down the original structure with the exception of the main entrance and lobby where ornate plaster vaulted ceilings and the marble floors were carefully restored. Concepts 4, the interior design firm, collaborated with us to achieve a design that blends modern appointments, finishes and textures with classic architecture. The result is an elegant, sophisticated vibe that offers a coherent dialogue between its historic architectural beginnings and its new youthful and contemporary look. To commemorate its rich history as the Boston Police Headquarters for more than 70 years, the hotel features memorabilia from the Boston Police Department Archive throughout the property, including the original blue police lanterns that adorn the original Berkeley Street entrance.

Mention of these new additions and the challenges of accommodating a hotel program might raise a question: Cultural value aside, wouldn't it have been more efficient and cost-effective to simply build a new structure that could more easily accommodate the hotel? The answer is actually more complicated than it might appear. Tearing down an existing structure brings with it a number of associated costs, both fiscal and environmental – it takes a lot of manpower and equipment to demolish a structure, and an existing structure already contains so many raw materials that to simply demolish and replace them with newly sourced components is not only more expensive – it's nothing short of wasteful. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), construction debris constitutes approximately one-third of our waste stream. Between 2000 and 2030, the EPA estimates that 27% of U.S. buildings will be replaced. Think about those numbers -- that's a significant strain on the environment, and it creates a lot of additional costs for the development team. The Back Bay Hotel's redevelopment and reuse help mitigate these costs.

By contrast, adaptive reuse is an inherently sustainable practice and a more cost-effective one, as it takes full advantage of materials that are already in place. Adapting historic buildings for new uses makes both environmental and economic sense and boosts the sustainability of the communities where they take place; frequently it also raises the opportunity for historic tax credits, which are a boon to developers. In environmental terms, opting for renovating existing buildings such as the Back Bay Hotel in lieu of constructing new buildings reduces the community's carbon footprint and obviate considerable amounts of construction energy and resources - "embodied energy" as it is called in the language of sustainability. Even with the challenges of accommodating a hotel program and significantly increasing the square footage, converting the former Boston Police Headquarters building into the Back Bay Hotel was a more efficient process than building a new structure on that site could ever be. It was a proposition that fit perfectly with both SHG's and The Architectural Team's sustainability philosophies.

Preservation was also a process that paid dividends for SHG and Jurys Doyle. For one, the four-star, full-service hotel offers a compelling combination of historical character and requisite amenities and conveniences. It features 225 guest rooms and suites, a restaurant, lounge, and coffee bar, as well as conference rooms, fitness and business center. The lower levels accommodate administrative and support space. The outdoor sunken forecourts provide both the restaurant and bar with additional space during the warmer months. The first floor accommodates the main lobby, reception desk, concierge, lobby lounge, coffee bar, business center, and conference rooms, with guest rooms located on the second through tenth floors.



Photo by Bruce Martin, Courtesy of The Architectural Team

The Back Bay Hotel quickly became one of the most popular luxury hotels in the area, not only among potential guests but also among potential buyers. When the property was sold in 2012, the building's "iconic" historic status made it a "hot ticket," and a desirable commodity, according to Commercial Property Executive, who also reported that Jurys Doyle had received a number of unsolicited offers before striking a deal with Loews Hotel & Resorts to sell the property for \$84 million. Loews, based in New York City, had been looking to expand into the key Boston market for several years; what made the company decide to purchase the Back Bay Hotel? In a word: Uniqueness. The hotel's historic design and sense of character set it apart from the crowd and ensured that Loews' entrance into the Boston market would be a highly visible one. Announcing the purchase, Loews highlighted the Back Bay Hotel's status as one of Boston's preeminent historic buildings and its role as a key element in the brand's expansion. "Boston is one of the most vibrant markets in the U.S.," said Loews Chairman Jonathan Tisch. "This one-of-a-kind historic hotel is a unique addition to our growing portfolio." In making that addition, Loews revealed that it understood what SHG, Jurys Doyle, and the project team knew from the start: It pays to preserve our past.

A leader in historic preservation and adaptive reuse, Bob Verrier has designed 50+ award-winning historic buildings throughout his career. His work has been a hallmark of The Architectural Team's practice since its inception in 1971. Under Mr. Verrier's direction, the firm has built a foundation of 'lifetime' clients, enabling it to expand from four employees to more than 90. A graduate of the Boston Architectural College, he is registered to practice architecture in 27 states. As managing partner of The Architectural Team, Mr. Verrier has been instrumental in the preservation of hundreds of historic structures including but not limited to Walter Baker Chocolate Factory, Boott Mills, Livingston School, Counting House Lofts and Building 114. Mr. Verrier can be contacted at 617-889-4402 or bverrier@architecturalteam.com



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