



Serving Architects, Contractors, and Owners in Commercial Construction



---

## Renovation Sparks New Vitality

by **Kenneth Betz** on [March 11, 2019](#) in **Exteriors, Featured**

**Owners, developers, and tenants increasingly prefer traditional neighborhoods and forms.**



Architecture firm Goettsch Partners announced the culmination of a major renovation campaign for historic Chicago Union Station with the recent completion of the Great Hall Restoration. Photo: ©Amtrak, courtesy Goettsch Partners

***By Kenneth W. Betz. Senior Editor***

Renovation and adaptive reuse, driven by the concept of New Urbanism and a desire for place making, authenticity, sustainability, affordable housing, and other pragmatic concerns, is emerging as a first-choice option and not just a second-best, make-do choice.

The concept of New Urbanism—creating mixed-use, walkable cities where people can live, work, shop, and play—is a significant factor in both renovation and new construction according to Jay Szymanski, AIA, NCARB, LEED AP, Associate, The Architectural Team Inc. (TAT), Chelsea, MA.

“Adaptive reuse projects are often located in areas of cities that are undergoing a revitalization—former manufacturing buildings in industrial areas that were once the center of the city’s vitality are being brought back to life as new commercial and residential developments, often becoming catalysts for further urban revival. In many cases these industrial buildings were historically located along waterways for power and ease of getting

materials in and out. Renewed interest in providing public access to waterfront areas dovetails well into the New Urbanism principles and makes these adaptive reuse projects even more viable,” he said.

“Principles of New Urbanism play a key role in many historic renovation projects, mainly because people specifically seek out a traditional neighborhood structure—a mix of retail, housing, and entertainment, all within a walkable area,” agreed Scott Maenpaa, project manager, The Architectural Team Inc.

“From the perspective of developers, local leaders, and residents, existing structures often lend themselves very well to transitioning into a New Urbanism neighborhood fabric,” Maenpaa continued. “The Central Building in Worcester, MA, is a great example. It’s an historic, eight-story structure currently undergoing a mixed-use conversion directly in the central business district, a location that is very appealing to the developer and to the city. It’s an opportunity to bring housing, pedestrian traffic, amenity space, and also new businesses, including a restaurant and childcare facility,” he said.

“The New Urbanist movement is largely about placemaking,” observed Eugene Flotteron, AIA, director of architecture, CetraRuddy, New York City, “and the idea that a community or neighborhood can hold more than one role in someone’s life—it can be a place to live, work, and play, rather than fulfilling just one of these functions.

“For example, Manhattan’s Financial District is transforming from a purely commercial area into a real 18-hour community, where developers are recognizing the value of attracting people to stay after working hours with new shopping, restaurant, and residential developments. Recently, CetraRuddy completed an adaptive reuse project, 20 Broad, which converts a former office building next to the New York Stock Exchange into a 533-unit residential community. A decade ago, it would have seemed inconceivable to see this kind of project in the Financial District location,” Flotteron said.

John Kirk, AIA, partner at Cooper Robertson, New York, agreed that New Urbanism is about place making, traditional town patterns (street and block plans), connectivity, and walk-ability.

“At some genuine level, place making and pattern is an architectural matter,” he said. “A John Nolen plan populated with houses by Richard Neutra and Le Corbusier wouldn’t feel the same as they do when populated by more traditional vernacular forms of building as at Meyers Park in Charlotte, NC, or Windsor Farms outside of Richmond, VA—the reason being that the Neutra and Corbusier houses were not intended to fit into a context (or make any attempt to establish a context), or to connect. They were intended to disconnect, to stand out—with no interest in creating a cohesive whole.

“The best places in the world can be described as cohesive. So the issue becomes one of preservation of the character of older buildings that do connect to their context, while breathing new life into them and adapting them to contemporary patterns of living,” Kirk concluded.

New Urbanism, as an overarching approach to community planning, promotes a lot of positive things—compact, walkable, dense, diverse, mixed-use neighborhoods that provide people with the ability to meet their daily needs without the use of a car, acknowledged Kristin Halloran, AIA, CDT, LEED AP BD+C, historic rehabilitation and adaptive reuse area leader, Cooper Carry, Atlanta.

“However, I think that what most of the general public sees as the central focus of New Urbanism is a neo-traditional aesthetic—not even the form of the individual buildings, but the applied style—when that wasn’t originally the point,” she said.

“New Urbanism is really just old urbanism. Before cars, cities developed all over the world as walkable, dense, mixed-use neighborhoods where everyone worked toward using space efficiently because it made their daily lives easier,” she continued.

“Besides the style misunderstanding, another common misconception about New Urbanism is that it requires a blank slate. I think that the misapplication of New Urbanist thought can sometimes lead to the loss of very valuable assets in our communities in the form of older buildings,” Halloran warned. “We just need to stop assuming that old equals bad for long enough to realize that they’re often exactly what people are saying they want.”

## What Do People Want?

Asked what people want and expect from renovation, Halloran responded, “In general, people want the same things from a renovated building that they want from a new one. Old buildings can be charming, but that can only go so far to make up for convoluted circulation or drafty windows. We have to focus on the original intent and the character-defining elements.

“While it’s true that some people will always prefer exposed brick, there are no hard and fast rules for rehabilitation. In many cases, we can choose to restore original features that have been compromised over time—for example, removing a lowered grid ceiling that was installed to conceal ductwork when HVAC was added to a building that didn’t originally have a good way to accommodate it because it was built when the only option was to open the windows. If today’s standards for occupant comfort require an HVAC system, then the result is exposed ductwork. That may be an aesthetic choice to some extent, but I see it as preferable to keeping a ceiling that’s so low it blocks the windows,” Halloran said.

“There’s not one specific aesthetic that can be classified as historic—over a few hundred years American construction methods and materials, building types, and architectural styles have evolved (not to mention the notable regional differences that existed for most of the country’s history), and it’s important to let the building and its new and old uses lead the way,” she said.



CetraRuddy is part of a team working with the Swedish photography organization Fotografiska to renovate and adapt a landmarked New York building into a cultural center that will become an integral part of Fotografiska’s U.S. brand. The six-floor, 45,000 sq. ft. historic landmark building was constructed as the Church Missions House in 1894 in an area once known as Charity Row and has housed offices for various philanthropic organizations over the years. Photo:

Courtesy CetraRuddy

## Other Reasons to Renovate

Other factors drive adaptive reuse and renovation as well, TAT's Jay Szymanski commented, "From an economic point of view, the issue of rising construction costs makes adaptive reuse and renovation an attractive alternative to demolition and new construction."

From a sustainability perspective, the idea of preserving an existing structure and preventing the demolition materials from being sent to a landfill makes a lot of sense environmentally. These historic buildings often contain so many raw materials that to simply replace them with newly sourced components would be nothing short of careless—requiring far more energy and added costs to replace than to refurbish them and extend their useful life," Szymanski observed.

"The greenest building is often the one that's already standing," Flotteron concurred, adding that, "many state and local government agencies also offer tax incentives or subsidies for sustainable reconstruction, which encourage the retrofitting of performance-enhancing mechanical systems that make renovated properties competitive from an energy use standpoint."

"In recent years, concerns about material conservation and sustainability have become increasingly widespread," Cooper Carry's Halloran noted. "There have been well-publicized studies about the amount of waste produced by the construction industry, and historic buildings are often solidly built of materials that were intended to last—masonry walls, steel or wood windows, metal or tile roofs. People have started to realize that when a building is demolished all of that debris has to go somewhere, probably a landfill, and that those materials could remain in use. In addition, for the same cost, a project that reuses an existing building can put a larger percentage of its budget toward labor—creating jobs for local residents—than a new building, which spends that money on materials."



CetraRuddy converted a 1880s-era former bookbindery in New York's Tribeca neighborhood into a community of 53 luxury condominium homes. The building elements that contributed to its success were grand structural proportions, thick brick walls, and a large central courtyard for light and air. Photo: David Sundberg, ESTO; courtesy CetraRuddy

## Affordable Housing

Affordable housing is another big driver of historic adaptive reuse projects, according to TAT's Maenpaa. "Millennials are being priced out of cities, and collectively we want to encourage younger generations to remain in urban areas, engaged and actively contributing to the community, invested in its future. Socially, those younger generations want to stay in cities, too, because of the convenience and vitality."

"Affordable housing is also key to helping longtime, working-class residents stay in the places they've lived, even as the communities become more expensive," Maenpaa continued. "There are various government incentive programs that encourage development of affordable housing and to undertake adaptive reuse and renovation projects. These include HOME Funding (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Washington), tax credits such as Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC, HUD), and Historic Tax Credits (HTC, National Park Service, Internal Revenue Service, Washington). Combining these programs is an optimal way for development teams to successfully fund transformative projects. We believe this trend will increase nationally as additional communities recognize the positive impact of creating a broad array of housing options and converting existing assets to new uses."

"Another important consideration is that many existing buildings could not be constructed today. By contemporary zoning ordinances and other codes, these structures are overbuilt in terms of lot coverage and floor area. Renovation often brings valuable height and bulk advantages and offers a chance to capitalize on or add features that commercial and residential tenants seek, such as large floorplates, roof and terrace access, and locations in vibrant, already built-out neighborhoods with nightlife, mass transit, and other desirable elements," Flotteron pointed out.

He cited CetraRuddy's residential conversion of Walker Tower, a former telephone-exchange building in New York City's popular Chelsea neighborhood, which "creates a compelling and unique high-end condominium community by taking advantage of elements unique to its existing structure. The historic 24-story Art Deco building was constructed before the neighborhood's height limits were enacted, so it's a rare tower for the area, rising high above its surroundings. By utilizing zoning-dictated setbacks to create large, accessible terraces on upper-floor spaces, we generated protected 360-degree views that formed a major draw for potential residents."

"On the other end of the size spectrum," Flotteron observed, "trends such as increased interest in boutique office spaces also encourage renovation. Some tenants now see smaller properties as a chance to take over an entire building. A smaller, historic structure becomes a real opportunity for a tenant to create a brand and an image around their property. This applies outside of the commercial-office sector as well. For example, we're working with the Swedish photography organization Fotografiska, renovating and adapting an entire landmarked New York building into a cultural center that will become an integral part of Fotografiska's U.S. brand."



The Central Building in Worcester, MA, is an historic, eight-story structure currently undergoing a mixed-use conversion by The Architectural Team (TAT). Situated directly in the central business district, the location is appealing both to the developer and the city as an opportunity to bring housing, pedestrian traffic, amenity space, and new businesses to the area. Photo: Courtesy TAT

## **Destroying Neighborhoods**

“What is problematic today is that economic factors are conspiring to destroy charming traditional neighborhoods,” Cooper Robertson’s Kirk observed. “The phenomenon is they get re-discovered, because of their charm, and often first by the creative classes who recognize the inherent character, who are intrepid about moving into what may be marginal neighborhoods and who fix up the homes. And voila, there is a renaissance.

“This happened in the Midtown and Virginia Highland neighborhoods of Atlanta in the late 1980s. Then property values escalate, and, in tandem, real estate taxes. Suddenly a modest bungalow is so expensive only wealthy buyers can afford it,” he said.



The Residences at Mill 10, the conversion of a former textile mill into a senior living community, connects to downtown Ludlow, MA, with an extensive network of walking and bike paths emphasizing wellness and social interaction. Photo: Andy Ryan, courtesy TAT

## What's Authentic?

People often say they want authentic experiences, but is that just a generational buzzword?

“I don't think authenticity is a millennial buzzword, but perhaps millennials are more interested in it than previous generations—millennials are making Nashville, TN, one of, if not the, fastest growing cities in America—and Nashville is authentic,” John Kirk asserted.

Kirk continued, “In renovation work, authenticity comes from being true to the DNA of the original building—but not necessarily slavishly preservationist. I like to say that working in a sensitive setting is like the first rule of medicine: do no harm! We have worked on the most hallowed ground in the country—Thomas Jefferson's home at Monticello, George Washington's home at Mount Vernon, the Gettysburg National Military Park (the first piece of land to be put on the National Registry of Historic Places), the New York Botanical Garden, the St. Louis Arch, the Farmington Country Club (with its 1803 addition to the original 1750 house), and a plethora of built projects in historic downtown Charleston—and in all of those settings we have preserved what is best about it, enhanced and transformed it, and made the new seamless with the old. When we embarked on our renovations and additions to the Farmington Country Club, I said to our client, “if we do our job well, you won't know we were ever here.”

“The inherent character, and authenticity, in seeing how a building is made—assuming it is well-made—is truly visually rich,” Kirk said. For example, “Were Jefferson alive today, I imagine he would be a big fan of exposed ductwork. His whitewashed colonnade at the University of Virginia is a master class in architectonics. All the framing is exposed—the beams, rafters, purlins, and wood decking—and there is incredible richness therein. When we renovated the Stone Mill at the New York Botanical Garden, part of the original Lorillard Estate, to



convert it into an event venue, we simply peeled back the layers and exposed the building's outstanding bones —brick exterior walls, stone interior walls, exposed floor and ceiling rafters, and wood-plank decking—that is all we did, and it's beautiful.





The Medical Arts Building in Atlanta was completed in 1927 as a state-of-the-art medical office building but its occupancy suffered after the construction and later expansion of the Downtown Connector, part of the Atlanta expressway system. The building stood empty for years and was considered an eyesore. Plans are underway with architecture firm Cooper Carry to convert the building to a hotel. Rendering/photo: Courtesy Cooper Carry

### **Connecting to the Narrative**

Cooper Carry's Kristin Halloran concurred that authenticity is an important element in historic rehabilitation and adaptive reuse. "Authenticity is really about connection to the narrative of a place—not just its age. It can be expressed at all scales and on old and new projects alike. The rehabilitation of an existing building already has

a connection to its community, so it can be inherently more authentic from the start, but new construction can absolutely be part of an authentic place, as long as it's connected to the context and the community," she said.

"How people feel about a building absolutely matters in what we do as architects. We need to make good decisions about how to treat a building: whether to keep it exactly the way it is—which is appropriate sometimes, like in an interpreted environment—or to make adaptations while expressing the building's character and the architect's original intent," Halloran explained.

"Most cities and neighborhoods that retain portions of their historic streets, blocks, and lots evolved over a long period of time, even if there was originally a master plan. That kind of incremental development leads to diverse building stock and contributes to a sense of authenticity," she continued. "Many, many people contributed to the growth of any given place—physically, of course, but also socially, culturally, and economically. Retaining existing buildings and places and inhabiting them in the 21st century connects us to the people and events that came before us, and provide an important sense of the continuity of a place."

Indeed, older buildings are often perceived as more authentic. "It's important in renovation and adaptive reuse to recognize the building's history," TAT's Szymanski advised. "Providing the story of its past life provides authenticity. Older buildings are inherently more authentic: it's often easier to visually understand how the structure works in an older building. In new construction we typically tend to hide the structure, while the approach in adaptive reuse is characteristically the opposite. For our firm, it is the recognition of the elegance and preservation of those buildings that were ordinary in their day. Creating the architectural fabric that connects us to our common past is vital."

TAT's Maenpaa feels that it's possible to balance original building elements with new construction in a way that feels genuine, honest, and in keeping with the existing character. "At The Central Building in Worcester, MA, for example, we weren't able to keep the original ground-floor storefronts, but we didn't try to precisely replicate them, either. Achieving the same aesthetic would have been impossible. Working closely with the National Park Service, we discovered a storefront manufacturer who could create the same narrow lines of framing as on the original. This allowed us to keep the overall profile, in keeping with lines of the restored limestone façade. Even though you can tell it's a newer application, it's true to the character of the original building," he said.

## **Creative and Appropriate Uses**

Finding creative and appropriate new uses for existing spaces is another way to preserve ambience, according to Maenpaa. "For The Central Building, we repurposed a large area of the second floor that was previously a marketplace known as 'Main Street' as a community area. With a series of original skylights and ornamental pilasters left on display, we incorporated a new movie room, lounge, and community kitchenette to recreate this area as the 'heart' of the building once again."

Eugene Flotteron noted that, "from a renovation perspective, an 'authentic' experience reflects sensitivity to context and neighborhood fabric and to features that make a particular building and its surroundings unique and desirable. People want to feel a connection to place, especially when a neighborhood has a distinct character—such as the iconic loft environment of New York's Soho or Tribeca areas. Successful renovation projects need to express or reflect that character while serving current neighborhood needs.

“Finding ways to preserve, utilize, and highlight a building’s original features and finishes are a crucial part of this process and central to the added value that renovation projects can bring for developer clients,” Flotteron elaborated. “As one example, our firm recently completed the renovation of 443 Greenwich, a residential conversion in New York’s Tribeca neighborhood. In reinterpreting this 1880s-era former bookbindery as a community of 53 luxury condominium homes, the building elements that made this a successful industrial facility such as grand structural proportions, thick brick walls, and a large central courtyard for light and air, also lent themselves well to high-end multifamily use, offering the privacy and sense of refuge that residents desire in the luxury market, along with the cachet of downtown loft living.

“Although the project work included an entirely new steel structure behind the landmarked facade,” Flotteron explained, “we preserved as much of the authenticity and original character as possible. In the process, we even uncovered original 200-plus-year-old Carolina pine beams. The species is now extinct, and by incorporating these beams as key design elements in each residential unit, we were able to offer a real touchstone to the building’s past, and something truly unique.”

Renovation and adaptive reuse is part of the history of the built environment. There have been periods in history when old was bad and new was good, but today, characteristics such as authenticity, sustainability, community, and continuity clearly are more consequential.

[CetraRuddy](#)

[Cooper Carry](#)

[Cooper Robertson](#)

[The Architectural Team \(TAT\)](#)

[Fotografiska](#)

[HOME Funding](#)

[Low Income Housing Tax Credits](#)

[Historic Tax Credits](#)

[Read more about the Union Station Great Hall renovation.](#)

[What Went Wrong With Union Station](#)

<https://www.gpchicago.com/news/gp-completes-restoration-chicagos-historic-union-station-great-hall/>



### About Kenneth Betz

[View all posts by Kenneth Betz →](#)

## Connect With Us

Find us on the following social media channels:

