The Jigsaw Comes Together

It Wasn’t The Biggest, Toughest Job But Certainly the Most Interesting as Contractor Tears Apart Then Reassembles an Historic Interior

It was, Joe Conroy said, like taking apart a giant jigsaw puzzle and putting it back together again.

The puzzle, in this case, involved removal of more than 3,500 individual pieces of glass, mirrors, tile and other interior elements from Scottie’s on Seventh, a fashionable restaurant in downtown Minneapolis; serializing and storing all of the items for more than four years while construction of a gigantic, enclosed downtown Minneapolis shopping center proceeded, then replacing them in their exact location after lathing and plastering work on the restaurant was completed.

For Joe Conroy, president of Conroy Bros., Minneapolis lathing and plastering contractor, the Scottie’s project wasn’t the largest contract his company ever undertook. Nor the most difficult. Nor the most time-consuming.

But, for certain, it was the most unusual, rather enjoyable, obviously intriguing and, occasionally, quite frustrating.

With an exceptional reputation as a specialist in ornamental plaster, tile and mosaic, Conroy Bros. was one of the largest subcontractors on the project. The prime contractor, Dayton’s Commercial interiors, Minneapolis, was selected to direct the removal, storage and reconstruction of the famous art deco interior of Scottie’s on Seventh in July 1979.

To place this overall project in perspective, though, consider:

1) The history of the site and structure;

2) An enterprising developer’s plans for a multi-million dollar office tower-hotel-retail shopping center
“Owners . . . wanted to retain the nostalgic flavor of the art deco architecture, and they were successful in obtaining a court order that required the establishment of a plan to preserve and reconstruct all of the interior elements . . .”

complex in downtown Minneapolis and

3) A court order that brought about the “jigsaw puzzle” contract.

For more than four decades the Forum Cafeteria—now the location of Scottie’s on Seventh—was a landmark in downtown Minneapolis. Opening in what once was the Saxe Vaudeville Theater (1911-12) and later the Strand Moving Picture Theatre (1913-28), the Forum owners completely removed the building’s balcony and stage in an extensive remodeling.

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**Special Features . . .**

Of particular interest when the Forum began business in 1929 was the spectacular art deco interior, which featured green glass walls with mirrored panoramas of Minneapolis’ legendary Lake of the Isles, Lake Calhoun and Minnehaha Falls. A pine tree design decorated etched glass chandeliers; pine branches and cones made a zigzag border design on walls and columns and a square snowflake motif bordered the ceiling.

To preserve this rare example of art deco architecture, the building was placed on The National Register of Historic Places in April, 1976.

Scottie’s on Seventh opened in June, 1976, and operated in this nostalgic setting until July 28, 1979 when a Canadian developer’s construction of the office center-hotel-shopping center complex was about to begin.

The idea for such a project was proposed to the Minneapolis City Council by the city coordinator in January, 1975. In August, 1977 the City of Minneapolis named Oxford Properties, Inc. as the developer for a development district bounded by Hennepin Avenue, Nicollet Mall; Sixth Street and Seventh Street South.

In October, 1979 demolition and construction began for 1,200,000 square feet of office space; 500,000 square feet of retail space including 90 stores and restaurants; a 700-stall covered parking ramp and the 32-story, 606-room Amfac Hotel.

Known as City Center, it was to become the largest downtown shopping center in the Upper Midwest as well as having the largest food serving capacity (20 eating choices) in any retail center in the country. In addition, the City Center is the largest mixed-use development in the history of the Twin Cities.

Owners of Scottie’s, however, wanted to retain the nostalgic flavor of the art deco architecture, and they were successful in obtaining a court order that required the establishment of a plan to preserve and reconstruct all of the interior elements of Scottie’s—just as they were in 1979.

In July 1979, Dayton’s Commercial Interiors was approved by Hennepin County District Judge Allen Oleisky upon the recommendation of the Heritage Preservation Commission to direct the dismantling, stor-
Conroy Bros. proved to be an excellent partner, having had a broad range of renovation projects, but none of it ever requiring the unusual specifications of Scottie’s on Seventh.

Cost Figuring . . .

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing their collaborative effort was how to figure a proper cost for the project.

How do you estimate removing, storing and reconstructing more than 3,500 items with pin-point accuracy? What will it cost and how much time will it take to dismantle glass columns—very carefully, of course? How do you get the art deco off the walls without destroying it? How do you match the intricate, original plaster? How expensive will it be to recast the art deco design? What is the cost of installing scaffolding to work on the ceiling and have a bar interwoven around the glass columns?

“It all comes down to making a well-calculated guess-timate for time and materials,” said Don Alain, Conroy’s project manager. “You gather all the information you possibly can, take it apart piece by piece to obtain the best possible unit for figuring and making an educated guess. For example, you stand on a scaffolding and attempt to figure out how many pieces of tile or glass can be removed in a day. In the end you present a price that is high enough to protect yourself, yet reasonable enough for the owner to proceed.”

In Conroy’s case, a guaranteed maximum price was presented—and accepted. In addition, the project came in under budget.

Dick Craig, Conroy Bros., at Scotties
In the removal stage more than 700 measured-to-scale photographs were taken of the complete interior before dismantling took place in 1979. A model was built to the scale of ½" to 1' showing all interior components.

System Established . . .

An inventory grading system was established, and more than 3,500 individual pieces of glass (vitrolite) and mirrors were removed, cleaned, inventoried and stored in a bonded warehouse for almost four years. In addition, a world-wide search for replacement glass to match damaged glass successfully procured exact matches for the original colors-four shades of green, black, grey, ivory, and white. Terry Hall, a specialist in the restoration of art glass and architectural glass, directed this effort.

When the restorative work was begun in March, 1983, scaffolding initially was set up approximately seven and one-half feet below the new ceiling lines. The ornate plaster ceilings called for about 5,300 square feet of plaster, including decorative cornices and rope molding.

“Conroy Bros. really got the job done fast under unusually difficult working conditions,” architect Polachek said. “Their speed and expertise was impressive.”

Among other unusual components of the project:

- The original intricate plaster ceiling, which was covered with acoustical tile about 1940, was re-installed and painted with the original 1929 colors.
- Six large columns (18' high and 2' wide, weighing approximately two tons) were removed intact and replaced without any damage. Each eight-sided column was fabricated with 185 pieces of vitrolite glass.
- Sixteen mirrors—some 12' x 8'—were repainted and resilvered.
- The original plaster frieze, which was severely water damaged by roof leaks, was re-cast in plaster, re-installed and painted with the original colors.
- A special glass window, which had been covered over by construc-
tion, was re-installed to its original grandeur.

- Special black “glue chip” glass was fabricated to replace damaged original glass. (The “glue chip” process involved the application of horse glue, which adheres to the surface of the glass; it then peels away the glass surface, leaving a surface that resembles frost on window glass.)

- Original handrails, woodwork and metal grilles were saved, then re-installed and finished to match the original finish. All metalwork on light fixtures was cleaned and rewired to present code requirements.

- Interior furnishings supplied by Dayton’s Commercial Interiors have an art deco design to complement the mirrors, chandeliers and wall glass.

- Interior dimensions were accurate to within 3/8” of the original size of the restaurant: 105’ long, 48’ wide and 18’ high.

“In retrospect,” Alain said, “it was, for the most part, an enjoyable project. The challenges were inspiring and working with craftsmen in glass was unusually interesting. But time frames, related to lease requirements, were pressure-filled. Overall, the complicity of the project made it highly unusual.”

Completed in August, 1983, the new Scottie’s on Seventh is considered to be even better than the original building. It is now fireproof, all pieces have been cleaned, mirrors, re-silvered and broken glass replaced with exact duplicates. In addition, the restaurant has been upgraded to current building codes.

And, like Joe Conroy said, it really was a pleasure to see all of the pieces of the giant jigsaw puzzle in place.