New Ceiling Panels Make History

When a historical building was renovated, these panels provided modern function and old-fashioned ambience.

The high ceilings, elaborate marble and woodwork were restored in the common areas of the old post office building.

When the United States Courthouse and Post Office building opened in 1887 as the first federal building in Columbus, Ohio, it was a tangible symbol of the city’s growing influence. A vital part of the city’s life for nearly a century, the structure is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Built when Columbus produced one of every eight horse-drawn vehicles manufactured worldwide, city growth made it necessary to add a third story to the building before the structure was even begun.

As designed in the 1880’s, the original United States Courthouse and Post Office was an outstanding example of the Romanesque Revival style of architecture. A turn-of-the-century alteration transformed its style into High Victorian Gothic.

In the original structure, the grand entryway consisted of three arches positioned in a bay protruding from the center of the building. The original floors were constructed of dove blue marble decorated with pale pink Knoxville marble dots. The federal courtroom was located on the third floor and was highlighted by carved oak wainscotting, oak doors, and an ornate 25-foot-high ceiling.

By the early 1900’s, the original building had become too small to house the increased federal functions needed to serve the thriving Columbus area. A large addition was proposed and approved by Congress, which appropriated $650,000 for the task.

The building’s enduring architectural significance stems from aesthetic alterations designed for the expansion by Supervising Architect James Knox Taylor. Begun in 1907 and completed in 1912, the addition more than doubled the size of the building to nearly 100,000 square feet. The changes were so spectacular that President William Howard Taft journeyed to Columbus to rededicate the building.

But as the original building approached its 100th birthday, the once-proud edifice had become a deteriorating structure without purpose or, it seemed, a future.

A Columbus law firm, determined to save the historic building, conceived...
a major restoration and renovation project. The firm engaged a battery of experts: master stone masons, carpenters, architects and historic preservation specialists.

In renovating the building, the chief objective was retaining historic detail while bringing the structure up to modern building code requirements. Architects from Chicago oversaw the renovation, while the owners were “very particular” about methods and products used.

Architectural Ceilings

Retaining turn-of-the-century ambiance while conforming with building codes involved installation of architectural ceilings in certain areas of the building. These ceilings were required to be functional by hiding wires, sprinkling and lighting systems, while blending in as much as possible with the historic decor. The ceiling panels chosen were mosaic acoustical lay-in panels manufactured by the Celotex Corp., Tampa, FL.

“We were looking for something attractive and functional,” said project architect Phil Begley. “The closer we could get to the look of the original plaster ceiling, the better.” The Celotex
In choosing ceiling panels, high light-reflectancy was an important consideration, as much of the lighting in the renovated building consisted of indirect, or "up," lighting.

panels blended in with the design due to their fine texturing that gives a soft, subtle and clean surface appearance.

“Light reflectance was an important consideration when the ceiling product was chosen,” said Everett Jones, project executive for the contractor, Turner Construction. “A lot of uplighting and indirect lighting were called for. A high reflectance in the Celotex ceiling tiles helped reduce the amount of wattage needed to adequately light a room. We’re happy with the way everything turned out.”

The downtown central area of Columbus has seen the demise of several large and historic Romanesque and Gothic Revival buildings, including the Board of Trade, the Inter-Urban Station, the Wheeler Building and the Old City Hall. Only the United States Courthouse and Post Office survived. But by integrating history with a thoroughly modern law office, the 1880’s and the 1980’s productively coexist.