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The Art of Compromise

A LEED Platinum rehab in Portland finds a balance between preservation and sustainability.

By Brian Libby
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Since opening in 1891, the First Regiment Armory in Portland, Oregon, has hosted everything from political rallies to Roller Derbies. But for the last few decades its castlelike turrets and parapets disguised a more mundane role warehousing kegs from the adjacent Blitz-Weinhard Brewery. In October it became the first historic-building renovation to earn a LEED Platinum rating from the U.S. Green Building Council—a transformation that illuminates just how tricky (yet ultimately feasible) it can be to strike a balance between the principles of sustainability and preservation.

Purchased as part of the Brewery Blocks in 2000 by developer Gerding Edlen—which would turn the former manufacturing site into mixed-use shops, condos, and offices—which seemed to be in an ideal location. But a host of would-be tenants backed out. Then, as if on cue, the city's largest theater company came looking for a new home. "We had a set of demolition plans, and I was just dying at the thought of it," recalls Stephen Domreis of GBD Architects, the Brewery Blocks designer commissioned along with Craig Mendenhall for the armory rehab. "Then in walks Portland Center Stage, and I thought, How are we gonna get a theater in here?"

The key, team members say, was to treat the interior theater as much as possible like a self-contained building. "We built a ship in a bottle," Domreis explains. With a café, interactive exhibits, and a landscaped "sliver park" to be completed this spring, the Gerding Theater also hopes to attract visitors even when there is no performance onstage. Toward this end, artistic director Chris Coleman likes the building's contrast of raw, weathered shell and sleeker modern interiors. "It feels handsome but not intimidating," he explains, "a place for an arts patron but also for somebody coming on a skateboard."

Although LEED rewards the use of historic buildings, meeting sustainability goals and preserving architectural integrity involved a complex series of interdependent decisions. For example, concrete floors helped provide structural support so additional steel bracing was not needed, thereby keeping the building's brick walls unobstructed and its massive old-growth-timber ceiling trusses viewable from the multistory lobby. "We used fewer materials this way, but that's not something you get a LEED point for," Domreis points out. But the concrete also acts as a conduit for the ultra-efficient radiant-heating and displacement-ventilation systems, canceling the need for ceiling ducts and using far less energy—something that did earn them six LEED points. The project was budgeted at \$36 million, but because it will be about 29 percent more energy-efficient than required by code, the more important figure ultimately may be its reduced utility costs.

Still other choices involved acceptable compromises. GBD fulfilled the LEED requirement for natural daylight and indoor air quality with 42 skylights, 17 of them operable for natural ventilation. But preservation strictures mandated that the skylights not be visible from the street. "You shouldn't be afraid to negotiate with the historic people," Domreis says of the solution. "When you're on the same block you'll never see [the skylights], but three blocks away you will. There's a reason why a historic building has not earned Platinum before, but I think the processes are evolving to complement one another."

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GBD Architects was able to adapt an historic armory for use as a theater by building the new structure inside the old one. Christopher Smith/courtesy Portland Historic Rehabilitation Fund



Christopher Smith/courtesy Portland Historic Rehabilitation Fund

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