



A balancing act for architects

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Scott | Edwards Architecture's renovation and expansion of the Oregon City Public Library fused a 14,000-square-foot addition, at right, onto an historic masonry structure, at left. (Sam Tenney/DJC file)

Updating a historic building to accommodate modern uses requires teams to balance a variety of competing interests. While accounting for a structure's historic nature, architects often seek ways to improve energy and seismic strength.

Many firms have become accustomed to tackling such challenges. Any such situation can present a trade-off, according to Joan Jasper, a **Scott | Edwards Architecture** associate.

"With each decision, you weigh the advantages and disadvantages, and you learn to live with those," she

Improving safety, for instance, has obvious advantages. And the well-publicized likelihood of a sizable earthquake hitting the Pacific Northwest within the decades ahead has spurred many building owners to take precautionary measures. But cost can be a significant drawback.

Sarah Cantine, an architect with Scott | Edwards Architecture, knows about that. Her firm was tasked with renovating the **Louise Building** – a 92-year-old structure, on Northeast 162nd Avenue, that is listed on the **National Register of Historic Places**. Bringing the building up to current seismic standards added nearly \$500,000 to **Albertina Kerr's** planned \$2.7 million renovation.

"In terms of the biggest issue (for renovations of historic properties), it's seismic upgrades," said David W. principal at **Hennebery Eddy Architects** and former chairman of the **Portland Design Commission**. "Seismic upgrades alone can be the difference between a project moving forward or not."

But Albertina Kerr was determined to see the Louise Building accommodate office space and areas for accessible children with special needs.

"They felt very strongly about the historic nature of the building," Cantine said. "In order to renovate it right, you have to love the building."

Deciding how to improve the earthquake resistance of the two-story former orphanage and home for ^{unw} mothers was a time-consuming process. The team eventually chose to create entirely new interior walls to replace the unreinforced masonry.

"The bricks are basically there for show," Cantine said. "Shotcrete could have been used, but it doesn't really work well with two-story buildings."

Also, historic structures oftentimes are in poor condition, and that was the case for the Louise Building. It has leaks and other maintenance issues that had been neglected for years.

"It had really fallen into disrepair," Cantine said. "It was rough. Fortunately, it translates really well to office use."

That compatibility for change to a new use was a big advantage for the Louise Building project and one that owners overlooked, according to Wark. Evaluating a historic structure for potential use before embarking on renovation can save owners a lot of time, money and aggravation.

"If the proposed use is incompatible and forces a change to the structure, that isn't the most efficient use of money," he said.

Another challenge for architects taking on renovations of historic buildings can be locating materials to match existing ones. That can take enormous effort even if there is no change to use of the structure.

"What we are really looking for is high-quality materials," said Carin Carlson, a commissioner on the **Portland Historic Landmarks Commission**. "That is something a lot of people struggle with."

Comfort and energy efficiency are also major factors that come into play. Windows can often be difficult to replace.

"The commission doesn't typically approve vinyl (window) products," Carlson said. "We have yet to see a (window) that really worked for a historic building, which really matched and was compatible with the previous historic windows."

Oregon City ran headlong into those issues when it decided to renovate its public library, which is on the Register of Historic Places. City officials wanted to nearly triple the size of the 5,000-square-foot building. The renovation required an entirely new addition. That meant finding materials that would not only pass muster with Oregon officials, but also with the National Park Service.



A renovation and expansion of the Oregon City Public Library completed last year blended the old with the new, with a former exterior masonry wall becoming part of an interior wall.

atrium that joined the historic structure with the new addition. (Sam Tenney/DJC file)

“We put on storm windows,” Jasper said. “We created a custom window to improve the comfort level.”

For the Louise Building, the design team faced a similar problem.

“Changing the windows is a big thing,” Cantine said. “We wanted to maintain the look, so we added another glass on the inside (of each window). You are playing this balancing act between trying to meet energy code and maintaining the look of the building.”

When buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the level of scrutiny becomes even greater.

“What (the National Park Service) asks is that, no matter how large or small the renovation, it is in deference to the original structure,” Jasper said. “There is quite a bit of interpretation to that.”

For the \$195 million renovation of the **Portland Building**, the project team plans to install over the exterior a new screen. However, it could run afoul of the National Park Service’s requirement that any renovation keep in mind the original design.

While the new screen would closely resemble the existing facade, it wouldn’t be an exact match; tiles would be nearly double in size. Also, mechanical equipment on the roof would be significantly larger. Those changes were approved by the City Council recently in a public hearing.

The National Park Service warned that such a plan could so substantially change the structure as to cause it to be removed from the national register. The design team determined the risk was acceptable in order to address numerous problems with the building.

It was a hard pill to swallow for the Historic Landmarks Commission, which ultimately approved the plan.

“If it is delisted as a consequence of an operation that we authorized, I would say we failed in (our) obligation,” Commission Chairman Kirk Ranzetta said during a review hearing in June.

Despite all of the challenges, help does exist for teams looking to renovate historic buildings. For those on the national register, tax credits are available. Those on local lists can potentially gain zoning allowances that allow for more commercial space than would be allowed normally.

“The federal tax incentive is probably the biggest benefit (of national register listing),” Carlson said. “You have to be a local landmark in order to get the local incentives. Because we haven’t seen high usage of incentives, we haven’t seen much local landmarking for many years.”

Wark added that one aspect that architects keep in mind when working on historic buildings is that all repairs are temporary.

“We have to be able to pass on a property,” he said. “In 25 or 30 years, another owner, another team will come in with another program for the building.”

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