

# Creating Harmony

## BETWEEN

# Old & New

The building that stands at the corner of Washington Avenue and Lawrence Street in downtown Montgomery has been a part of the landscape of Alabama's capital city since 1893, when it was constructed as a church. In 2002, when its most familiar recent resident, the Montgomery Advertiser newspaper, relocated to the burgeoning riverfront area, the building did not quickly find a new owner. As it remained vacant, longtime residents feared the structure would go the way of so many other long-empty properties and succumb to the wrecking ball.

But in 2007, City Councilman Dimitri Polizos went to bat for the historic building, convincing the Montgomery County Commission to renovate and expand the existing structure to create a new County Administrative Complex.

Today, the renovated building, which opened in early 2008, houses the County Commission administrative offices, conference room and the Commission Court. It also serves as a "one stop shop" for Montgomery County citizens, who can visit this central location to visit County Probate offices to pay taxes and purchase a variety of licenses and tags. Additionally, the new facility now houses the County Probate Archives.

2WR / HolmesWilkins Architects was selected to oversee the project. The firm was able to keep much of the existing structure because the "bones" of the building were made of concrete. When the Montgomery Advertiser purchased the Washington Avenue property in 1940, it had expanded and reinforced the existing building to house the gigantic press that would eventually run hundred of thousands of issues of the daily Alabama Journal (before this afternoon paper was discontinued in the early 1990s) and Montgomery Advertiser newspapers. The pressroom was constructed of reinforced concrete to hold the heavy press, as well as storage areas for the massive rolls of paper on which the publications were run each day.

"The biggest design challenge was working to unify an existing structure that had been added onto several times," said Natalie Fisher Toy, interior designer at 2WR / HolmesWilkins Architects. "Due to the many additions, the structure imposed limited ceiling heights and puzzling elevation changes on various floor levels. Another major challenge was manipulating ramps through existing column barriers to meet ADA standards," she said.

"What they did, during renovations, was they took that building and stripped it back to the concrete floors and the support walls,"



said Donnie Mims, County Administrator. “The only walls left were the walls needed to support the building. All the non-permanent walls were knocked out.”

The 14-month project included \$12.5 million in renovations to the original 75,000 square feet of the existing building, plus \$2.5 million of new construction to add a 172-space parking deck adjacent to the new facilities. The renovation was rolled into the County’s existing bond issue for a \$55 million expansion of the Montgomery County Detention Facility. The projects included acquisition and demolition of an existing Associated Press building at 116 S. McDonough Street and parking lot at 115 S. McDonough Street.

Montgomery County had actually purchased the old Advertiser building several years prior to the decision was made to renovate the structure, but was simply holding onto the building for its property. The building is located just across the street from the Courthouse Annex I building and in close proximity to the Montgomery County Courthouse and other annex buildings and County offices, so it made sense for the County to own that property as well.

When the County approved plans for the detention facility expansion in 2007, Commissioner Polizos began to champion the idea of adding

to the bond issue to renovate the Advertiser building. Renovations would be less expensive than new construction, and moving County Commission facilities and other County license offices to that building would free up much-needed space in the Annex I building for the existing offices that were being crowded, he argued.

“I was the only one of the five (Commissioners) that wanted to keep that building,” Polizos recalls. “I call that my project. I said, give me the opportunity to show you I could save you some money. Renovations can often be a lot less expensive than building new, and also a lot quicker than building new. Renovating the existing building provided a \$5 million savings to the County to keep it, renovate it and not tear it down,” he said.

“The Montgomery County Courthouse Annex No. 3 began with a feasibility study that helped the client spatially plan for a 20-year growth period,” Toy explained. “As a renovation project, the existing structure produced existing limitations to work around. However, the design goal was met with the use of demountable walls, signage, lighting, carpet, and millwork.”

In addition to keeping most of the building’s strong concrete structure, the architects also chose to incorporate the pressroom’s



concrete floors into the design by utilizing a stained concrete technique that would transform the plain grey slabs into a striking and beautiful flooring, rather than covering the slabs with carpet or other less durable materials.

“Concrete floors conserve resources by functioning both as a foundation and a finished floor,” Toy says. “In addition to conserving materials, concrete floors offer other environmental benefits...better energy efficiency and they help improve indoor air quality.”

They also provide affordable and long-lasting beauty. “We wanted a smooth, highly reflective, high-luster floor material that would carry light deep into the interior,” Toy said. “We wanted a floor material that that would surpass that of most floor covering materials, and we wanted a durable, low-maintenance floor that would handle heavy floor traffic. It will save money in the long run because you’ll never have to rip out and replace a worn, damaged floor.”

Staining is quickly gaining in popularity as the first choice for transforming concrete slabs. There are many choices that allow designers and builders to create unique finishes by combining colors and application techniques to existing floors. Concrete inherently

provides a neutral tone that is a blank canvas for applying color, and its porous nature makes it a natural to absorb the various treatments. Most common is an acid-based stain that penetrates the surface of the concrete and works in conjunction with its natural elements. The stain slightly etches the concrete and becomes a permanent part of the concrete. As a result, stained concrete will not fade, chip, or peel. It is a natural way to create a beautiful finish that stands up perfectly to high-traffic areas – a perfect choice for a County building visited by hundreds of citizens on a daily basis.

Mims explains, “When you come in the Lawrence Street entrance and you are standing at the foot of the stairwell, that was the pressroom for the Advertiser, and that press was over two stories tall. All that concrete work was poured in there to form the new office structures when we renovated. It had been a big cavernous room that had been full of the press, which was huge. You have to envision how the floor was built through that pressroom. Now, it’s hard to imagine that industrial workspace when you see the beautiful new entranceway.”

An added benefit is the security the concrete structure provides for



the County Probate Archives, which are now housed where the huge rolls of paper used to be stored next to the presses. The Probate Archives hold all the historical documents and records, even before Montgomery was a county, back to when it was a territory in the new state of Alabama.

“That building was built like a battleship,” Polizos said. “It’s like a fortress in there, which makes it very secure for the archives that are housed there.”

In addition to the renovations, the architects also created the design for the new parking deck structure that was constructed next to and adjacent to the building, in the area that used to be the Advertiser loading dock. This structure was created with additional concrete, using poured-in-place techniques to provide strength and longevity. The exterior brickwork on the new parking deck was designed to complement the existing historical building and add continuity to the building, so that it would function as one comprehensive structure.

“The most unique part of this design process is the final harmony between the old and the new elements of the building,” Toy said. “The emotional ties to the history of the building are still present, but the new design features mask the emptiness of the previously abandoned building.”

“I’m very pleased with the building,” Polizos said. He considers the building his legacy, adding a new chapter to the site’s long historic record. ■ Wendi Lewis

