



Boston's Liberty Hotel

BY CORY SEKINE-PETTITE

A 19th century jail
becomes a 21st century
model of preservation
and restoration

Balancing preservation with modern functionality is not an easy job for any restoration project, but when converting a 19th century prison into a 21st century, luxury hotel, the situation is unusual if not unprecedented. In 2002, a design and construction team led by Cambridge Seven Associates (C7A) of Cambridge, Mass., began a five-year process to restore the defunct Charles Street Jail in Boston into a place where the guests come willingly and thoroughly enjoy their stay.

The old jail

The old jail (as opposed to a penitentiary), located along the Charles River in Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood near MIT and Boston City Hall, was opened in 1851, and was in active use until 1990. Gridley James Fox Bryant and Rev. Louis Dwight designed the original cruciform structure, which features load-bearing brick walls with a granite veneer (4 inches thick), as well as a 90-foot-high central rotunda and cupola. The walls themselves are anywhere between 4 and 8 wyeths of brick with the last wyeth being the exposed interior finish. A unique aspect of the way the jail was originally constructed is the fact that the cell blocks were in

(above and opposite page)
This charming, luxury hotel used to be a notorious jail.
Photos provided by Weber Shandwick Worldwide





(above and opposite page)
The brick interior and granite exterior have held up remarkably well for nearly 160 years.
Photos provided by Weber Shandwick Worldwide

PROJECT TEAM

Lead Architect:

Cambridge Seven Associates

Preservation and Historical Architect:

Ann Beha Architects

Landscape Architect:

Michael Van Valkenburgh Assoc.

Structural Engineer:

Weidinger Associates

Forensic Engineer:

Simpson Gumpertz & Hager

Mechanical Engineer:

SEI Companies (now part of Flack + Kurtz)

Designer:

Alexandra Champalimaud & Assoc.

Developer:

Richard Friedman and Carpenter & Co.

Masonry Contractor:

Phoenix Bay State Construction Corp.

Material Suppliers:

The QUIKRETE Companies; Endicott Clay Products

the middle of the wings of the jail, and those brick walls provided the structural supports for the roof.

In its heyday, the Charles Street Jail was a leading example of the Boston Granite School of architecture; Bryant was widely known for his granite buildings. The building also was known as an international model for prison architecture. Locals recognized the jail for some of its famous (or infamous) inmates, including former Boston Mayor James Michael Curley; the Boston Strangler; and former conman Frank Abagnale, whose deeds were chronicled in the movie “Catch Me If You Can.”

The 175,000 square-foot facility was designed to hold one inmate per cell, but was eventually forced to double occupancy. As the physical conditions grew worse, with peeling paint, outdated plumbing and increasingly overcrowded cells, the jail was forced to close in 1990.

The \$150-million rehabilitation

As the city grew up around the old, granite structure, the Charles Street Jail remained unoccupied and unkempt – an anachronism among a densely developed and thriving city. But in 2000, the property owners (the adjacent Massachusetts General Hospital) issued an RFP to developers. Richard Friedman and Carpenter & Co., along with C7A won the bid to rehabilitate the jail. Their idea: Convert the building into a four-star luxury hotel and add an adjacent 16-story, 75,000 square-foot tower to house most of the hotel’s 300-plus suites (280 rooms in the tower).

“What really intrigued me about this [project] was the chance to take a building that truly was spectacular architecturally, that had such a negative connotation to it because it had been a jail, and ... make it available and visible to the public ... turning a negative into a positive,” said Gary Johnson, a principal at C7A and lead architect on the project.

The transformation of the site was the work of C7A collaborating with historians, conservationists and masonry restoration experts to ensure that the end result was a careful balance between preservation and modern functionality. The team salvaged existing granite and incorporated it into exterior landscaping and the connection between the new tower and the old building. Because the tower

was composed of new brick (from Endicott Clay) and not granite, a smooth transition between structures was created using re-fabricated granite sized to align with the brick on the new building. Further, the contemporary materials used on the tower (which also includes glass and steel) relate to the architectural character of Charles Street, including the two neighboring hospitals.

During the rehabilitation, the construction team took down the 18-foot-high brick wall surrounding the property (remember, this was a jail) and as Johnson put it: "For the first time in 160 years people could actually see the building from the top of its new cupola, which we put on, to its base. And I think that for the first ever, people actually looked at the architecture of the building and realized how absolutely gorgeous the granite work on that building was. I'm proud of the fact that we were able to bring this old building back to life."

The old jail's 90-foot-tall atrium – complete with catwalks – offered a perfect location for the lobby; meeting rooms; a ballroom; and three restaurant/bars, which play on the building's history with names like Clink and the Alibi bar. Patrons reach the lobby from street level by taking an escalator up, ascending into an expansive, well-lit space that is meant to be an uplifting experience.

Johnson said the condition of the building when the team started was remarkable. The exterior of the building only needed to be pointed and cleaned. Inside, he noted that the solid brick construction – without even a cavity – never ended up having any kind of



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BY THE NUMBERS: MATERIALS

The masonry work was at the heart of the five-year restoration. More than 350,000 bricks were laid with 100, 80-pound bags of QUIKRETE Mason Mix Type N and 280 bulk bags (3,000 pounds each) of QUIKRETE Type N Aspen Tan mortar. More than 20 masons completed the brick and stone work during an 18-month span, using a total of 848,000 pounds of materials.

AWARDS

Interior Design and HOTELS Magazine
Gold Key Award for Excellence in Hospitality Design
2008 Award for Best Hotel Design

Interior Design and HOTELS Magazine
Gold Key Award for Excellence in Hospitality Design
2008 Award for Lobby / Reception

International Masonry Institute
2008 IMI New England Regional Golden Trowel Award

Boston Preservation Alliance
2008 Preservation Achievement Award

Massachusetts Historical Commission
2008 Preservation Award

Wallpaper Magazine and Fortune Magazine
2008 Runner-Up, Best Business Hotels

National Housing & Rehabilitation Association
2008 J. Timothy Anderson Award for
Excellence in Historic Restoration - Judges Award

Victorian Society in America
2008 Preservation Award

Bostonian Society
2008 Preservation Award

Buildings Magazine
2008 Modernization Award

dew point issues within the walls. To be certain, C7A brought in a forensic engineering team from Simpson Gumpertz & Hager (Boston) to determine what the walls has been doing and how the team could control it better for the future of the structure. "At the end of the day, their advice to us was to leave it just the way it is – do not insulate it – which we did not do," Johnson said. "Leave it so that the moisture could come right through the wall, which we believe it does, and we oversized some of our mechanical equipment to take [the moisture] out of the atmosphere once it was inside the building."

Speaking about the brick walls, he added: "The exposed brick walls are really quite beautiful in the utilitarian way they were put up. The brick walls were never put up to be an interior finish for a luxury hotel; they were put up literally to hold the building up to support the granite. Only prisoners were going to see them, so they were rough and ready; not terribly beautifully laid, but the textures of them nonetheless are quite beautiful."

Project challenges

With such a large rehabilitation and transformation project, challenges are expected. The only question is how many will occur. With the Liberty Hotel, there were a number of them. In Johnson's view, the major difficulties were construction-related. "It had to do with maintaining the integrity, character and structural aspects of the existing building," he said.

Johnson explained that the unique way the jail was originally constructed – with the cell blocks in the middle of the wings of the jail, providing structural support for the roof – was a challenge to deal with since plans called for the removal of most of the cells to accommodate the lower level of the hotel. "The cells were constructed in such a way that they were in the very center of those wings with



(right)
The Clink bar has become a popular watering hole.
Photo provided by Weber Shandwick Worldwide

four-and five-story atriums facing to the exterior walls of those wings,” he said. “What we needed to do was create real floors in these buildings without the atriums. First we had to support the roof, take the cell blocks down, insert new floors, build the whole thing back up and re-support the roof without anything moving. ... Structurally, that was one of our biggest challenges.”

Another obstacle overcome, Johnson said, was maintaining the historical integrity of the building, while still threading new mechanical, electrical, fire protection and security systems through the old building with none of it being visible. “There was a great deal of coordination and effort taking place there too.”

An additional challenge of note during the five-year construction was the Massachusetts climate, which can be quite harsh during the winter months. For example, to keep mortar from freezing, masons were careful to keep temperatures above 40 degrees using enclosed scaffolding and running heaters constantly. Further, the hotel is close to the street, which meant for a compact mixing site during construction. Thus, contractors employed QUIKRETE bulk mortar and the Spec-Mix silo system.

“We wanted to work with The QUIKRETE Companies, because the Spec-Mix silo system accommodated our limited work space and helped save labor costs without need for shoveling sand piles,” said Joe Goncalves, general field superintendent at Phoenix Bay State Construction Corp., the masonry contractor for the project.

One area of initial concern before rehabilitation began was the prospect of plowing through the regulatory process since the Charles Street Jail is on the National Register of Historic Landmarks. Plus, the site falls under multiple preservation jurisdictions. However, to Johnson’s surprise, every group consulted was in favor of the change-of-use permitting.

INSIDE THE LIBERTY HOTEL



Within the historic building there are 18 guestrooms, as well as meeting rooms, a grand ballroom, restaurant and bar. Work crews made extensive efforts to preserve existing brick, which was eventually used to rebuild the Scampo restaurant, Italian for “escape,” and Alibi lounge, formerly the “drunk tank.” Portions of this project phase, in particular, were tedious. For example, to make doorways bigger, crews had to remove entire walls, which made the structure shift. All the while, workers took care to preserve old hardware and original wrought-iron bars, now adorning the three-story arched lounge and lobby windows. Among the other features preserved were remnants of jail cells within the hotel lobby bar and the historic catwalks that wrap around the central atrium. Additional information on the hotel can be found at www.libertyhotel.com.



As part of this project, C7A and Ann Beha Architects designed a new ambulatory care facility for Mass General hospital adjacent to the hotel. This project involved demolishing and reconstructing one wing of the jail.



(above)
Cleaning the granite during restoration.
Photo provided by Weber Shandwick Worldwide

(below)
Once renovated, the old atrium would
become a beautiful hotel lobby.
Photo provided by Weber Shandwick Worldwide

Historic preservation

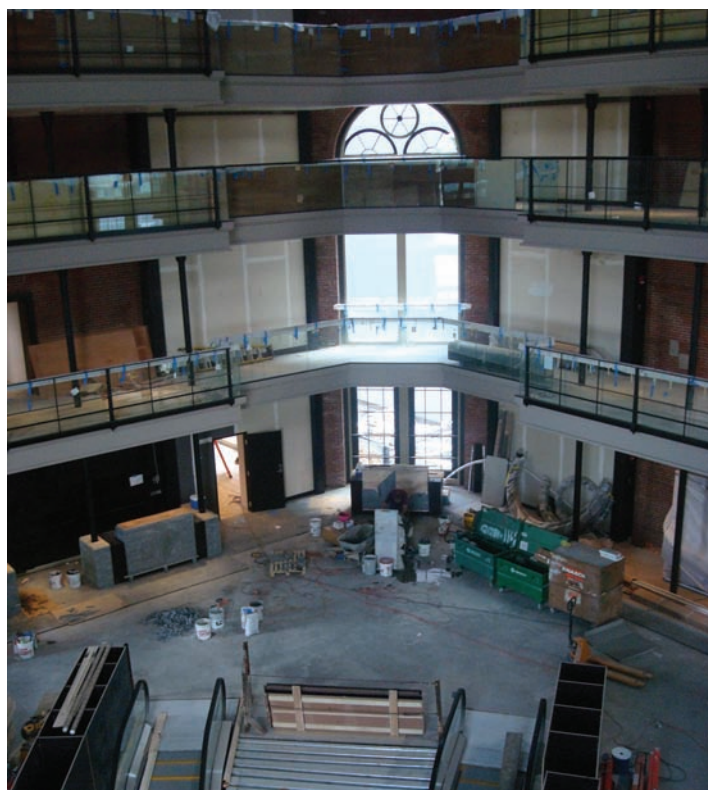
C7A and its historic preservation partner in this project, Ann Beha Architects of Boston, reached out early to the historical societies and preservation groups. “We wanted this to be a model project for historic restoration and adaptive reuse,” said Johnson, who actually prefers the term *transformative use*. The groups consulted consisted of the Boston Landmark Commission; Massachusetts Historical Commission; and The National Park Service, which was involved because the developer applied for and received historic tax credits. They were consulted on the reuse of the old jail, as well as the design and placement of the new tower.

These groups helped to determine what aspects of the “jail quality” of the building to keep and what could be changed or removed, according to Johnson. “They were very clear that the exterior of the building and the wings of the jail were the most important thing to save. They were also very much interested in how much we preserved on the interior; but they were very cognizant of the fact that you couldn’t make a luxury hotel out of old cell blocks.”

“We kept as much of the jail as we thought made sense in terms of creating a unique hotel environment, but we had to remove [most of] the cells,” he continued.

For this project Ann Beha was responsible for the exterior restoration, a new roof, redesign of the cupola, all the masonry cleaning and repair, and some work on the windows. Pamela Hawkes, FAIA, is a historic preservation architect for the firm and was the principal in charge of the project. There were a lot of details worked out in the field for this project, she said. A lot of hands-on attention.

For instance, in the rotunda there was a “wonderful set of roof trusses,” she said, and beautiful, round windows at the tops of the walls. This area was closed off in the 1940s because of the cost of heating and ventilating such a large space. Hawkes and her team opened up that space to what it looked like originally and added extra structural support to the existing wood trusses. “That area is now lit up and exposed on the inside; it’s really a fantastic space,” she said.



Another key factor in the preservation and cleanup – removing all the lead-based interior paint. Hawkes said: “Finding the appropriate ways to remove that given the scale of what we were doing was a challenge.” They actually were permitted to do something not normally allowed in restoration projects, which was to sandblast the walls. “With the scale of operations, that really was the only way to do it,” she said.

Speaking about the granite exterior, Hawkes agreed that it was in great shape when the project began, but this was no surprise given the history of that Boston Granite School of design. “There was a 20- or 30-year period where there were just these magnificent granite buildings around the city, and this [building] is one of them that has enormous stones,” she said. “It was really in great shape considering how neglected the rest of the building was.”

Her team cleaned the exterior stones and patched a few small areas, but she said there was really little that needed to be done to the granite.

Since its opening in September 2007, the Liberty Hotel has become a thriving, vibrant part of the community. “A lot of people asked me when it was completed, ‘Why did they spend so much money on a jail building?’ But when it was originally completed, it was really seen as a model for how people should treat prisoners. There was a lot of interest in trying to rehabilitate people. There was a real kind of civic pride ... that we’ve lost, certainly in our prison architecture and frankly in a lot of our civic architecture too,” Hawkes said.

See for yourself what a worthwhile project this is. Step into a taxi anywhere in the city and say ‘Take me to the Clink.’ Whether you’re just stopping by for the atmosphere or staying the night, you’re guaranteed to have a good time. And you certainly will be impressed with the architecture. **DMD**


A REDEVELOPMENT TREND?

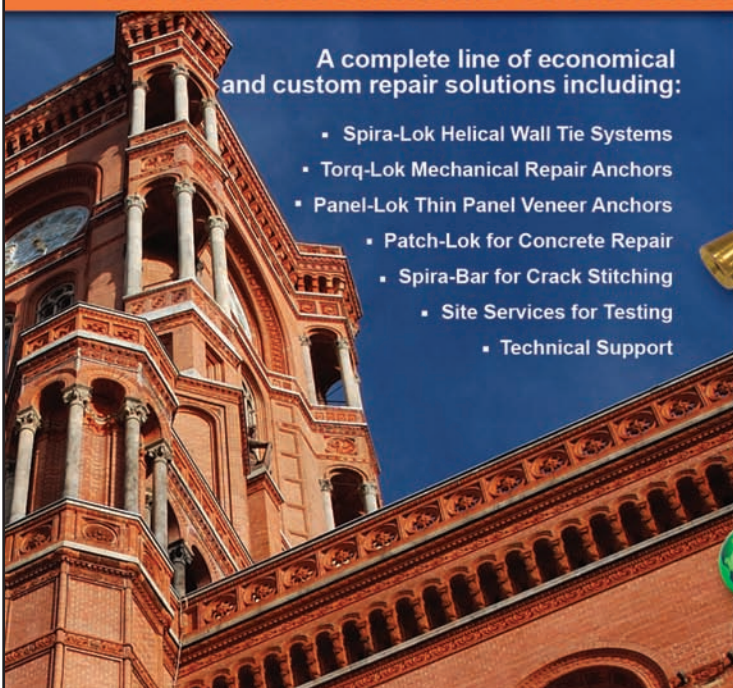
In the coming years, Johnson expects to see more transformative use of historic buildings, particularly in the Boston area where there is heightened interest in preserving existing structures. “I think a lot of people are interested in how industrial buildings and other types of buildings from this era can be repurposed. [This project] has become a good model of how to do that,” he said.

In fact, repurposing old buildings for use as hotels seems to be developing into a trend. C7A already is working on another hotel transformation project in Boston – the Ames Hotel (www.c7a.com/Portfolio/hospitality/the_ames_hotel.asp?pos=0). “There’s a lot of interest in using old buildings for hotels,” Johnson said. Further evidence can be found in other U.S. cities small and large, such as New York City; Milwaukee; Wichita, Kan.; and Milford, Penn.

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