This Building Will Definitely Be Noticed

Seven decades after its construction, a long-dilapidated, industrial building has been converted into a facility to serve the information needs of the 21st century.

In 1992, USM President Richard L. Pattenaude wrote, "We are renovating an empty, unused structure to gain a new library, modern enough to afford Maine citizens and 10,000 students comprehensive access to information in numerous forms, from extraordinary sources.

"We are providing space for our antique maps, our quickly expanding collection of library material, and study locations for students. We are doing all this within the financial constraints of a $3.9 million construction budget funded by a publicly approved (1988) bond and the design constraints of a 74-year-old industrial building." said Pattenaude.

The architects, JSA, Inc. of Portsmouth, N.H., working with University and city officials, faced the challenge of designing a plan that would honor the building's industrial heritage yet reflect the dynamics of a modern university. Moreover, they were working with one of the more dominant buildings along Portland's skyline, a building that could provide a gateway to USM's Portland campus and symbolize the city's renewal. It's a building, said Pattenaude, that "...argued against trying to have it fade into the background; it begged for stronger statement."

The interior is designed to respect the building's industrial character, leaving the original concrete structure, complete with its flared columns, exposed and intact. The building's concrete frame dictated that a durable, insulating skin or curtain wall be used on the exterior. A Kalwall system presented the most attractive option, in part because it provided a durable, energy-efficient insulation, and in part because it provided a diffused, indirect light to library stacks and reading areas.

Kalwall consists of an aluminum grid that has two fiberglass-reinforced face sheets permanently bonded under heat and pressure with fiberglass insulation between the face sheets. The dead air space between the panel's faces and the reinforced fiberglass make for an energy-efficient and highly durable exterior system.

Kalwall has been used on numerous buildings, including the wing of the Wellesley College Science Center. That project won an annual award from the Boston Society of Architects for its artistic and structural integrity.

The building's colors, the subject of considerable public feedback, were originally a lavender and teal scheme, but were changed to the present shades of aqua, rust and white to better relieve the plane surface and complement the structural grid pattern.

Architect Michael Tague of JSA Associates explained that the grid, "combined with the decorative brick, multi-colored panels and tower-capped corners further acknowledges the building's contextual and industrial heritage."

The University, said USM Librarian George Parks, who has worked on library building projects throughout the country, "has tried conscientiously, and in consultation with others, to produce a final package which we believe is fiscally, environmentally, functionally, and artistically sound."

James Warner of JSA told the Maine Times, "This building will definitely be noticed. The University will become much more apparent to the city as a result of it."

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