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# The Times of My Life

RANDY SCHRIMSHER

Looking at the Huntsville Times Building, I am reminded of an article I once read in a preservation magazine. A man was undertaking his first historic renovation. Daunted by the magnitude of the project and its spiraling cost, the owner resolved to find a manageable solution. He worked on one window at a time. One window per month, twelve windows per year. Eventually, with patience and perseverance, he finished the project. It was good advice for those of us bitten by the preservationist bug, though I never considered myself as the one-window-per-month kind of guy.

My experience with the Times Building began on a sunny May day in 1984. I left my downtown office to walk home for lunch, and my route fortuitously took me by an auction on the corner of Greene and Holmes streets. The Madison County Commission was selling the Times Building, and a smattering of lookers and pickers were spread out waiting for the auctioneer to begin. I thought I would hang around to see what happened. The next thing I knew, I held the high bid—for the bargain sum of \$286,000.

I do not typically engage in spontaneous building purchases, but as a Huntsville native, I was familiar with the history and architecture of the Times Building. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980, it was the first high-rise, Art Deco building in downtown Huntsville, built in the late 1920s to a design by the renowned architectural firm of R. H. Hunt Company of Chattanooga.

J. Emory Pierce wanted a grand building to house operations for his *Huntsville Daily Times* newspaper. He was also a pragmatic man, and the Times was structurally over-designed for the period, employing noncombustible, state-of-the-art fireproofing to protect the heavy presses, chemicals, and giant rolls of paper. The building's floors and ceilings are solid concrete, and the exterior rests on a granite base below walls decorated with cream-colored glazed tiles and bricks. Some of the

terra cotta tiles bear the newspaper's HDT emblem and others, above the building's main entrances, form magnificent eagles in the Art Deco style. Inside the Times, the foyer and all elevator lobbies have dusty rose marble wainscoting with terrazzo and tile floors.

In a quirky testament to Pierce's eccentricities, elevators in the twelve-story tower rise only to the eleventh floor. The story goes that the Times Building, designed with eleven floors, was promoted as Huntsville's

tallest high-rise. Once construction was under way, the Russel Erskine developers announced they were building the city's tallest structure with twelve stories. Not to be outdone, Pierce immediately added a twelfth floor, but the Times' elevators were already ordered. So, lift access extends only to the eleventh floor and a flight of steps continues to the twelfth.

The Times Building was not my first venture into historic properties. I was working for my father's construction company in 1980 when I purchased a dilapidated Victorian house in the Old Town Historic District on Walker Avenue. The project led me to drive by the Struve-Hay Building on the southwest corner of Jefferson and Holmes streets. The Victorian building, sadly boarded with plywood, looked like many of downtown's turn-of-the-century buildings in various stages of neglect and disrepair. But, as I drove by the Struve-Hay each day, I saw the building's great bones. Like a smitten young man, I eagerly eyed its architectural details. With my father's help, I purchased the property in 1981 and began its renovation. That job led to more preservation work downtown, and we soon acquired and renovated



*One of the terra cotta panels used to separate the windows between floors. This design was used on the two-story base; HDT, for Huntsville Daily Times, is encircled and bedecked with rippling ribbons and swags of fruit and flowers. Photograph by Scott McLain*

the two-story Terry-Hutchens complex on Jefferson Street and the structures on Washington Street now occupied by the Washington Square restaurants and the Heritage Club.

At the crux of this preservation run-up in the early '80s was the newly-approved federal preservation tax credit, one of the most significant pieces of legislation that enabled countless buildings to be saved and reused. The tax credits were dramatically altered in 1986, but at the time they were first enacted, they leveled the playing field for developers seeking to work on historic properties. I cut my teeth on the myriad historic intricacies and regulations affecting the Struve-Hay Building and learned to navigate and appreciate the complex and often restrictive regulations that surround all preservation projects. None of my work would have been possible without the guidance of Harvie Jones, Huntsville's authority on historic architecture. I learned a great deal from Harvie and when I purchased the Times Building, I sought his advice and that of the Alabama Historical Commission.

I knew the Times Building was structurally sound. What I did not know was that its bargain sale price turned out to be smaller than its annual operating cost. The Madison County Commission had been using the Times as an annex to house its food stamp office and other public agencies. Extra space went to non-profit organizations for little or no rent while the county continued to absorb the utilities. The building had a central boiler, no central air conditioning, and two manual elevators with two full-time operators. A rumor quickly spread through the community that the Times sold for such a "low cost" because it was full of asbestos. So, when I officially took possession of the building, it was essentially a non-income producer with a high operating expense in need of modernization and an asbestos check.

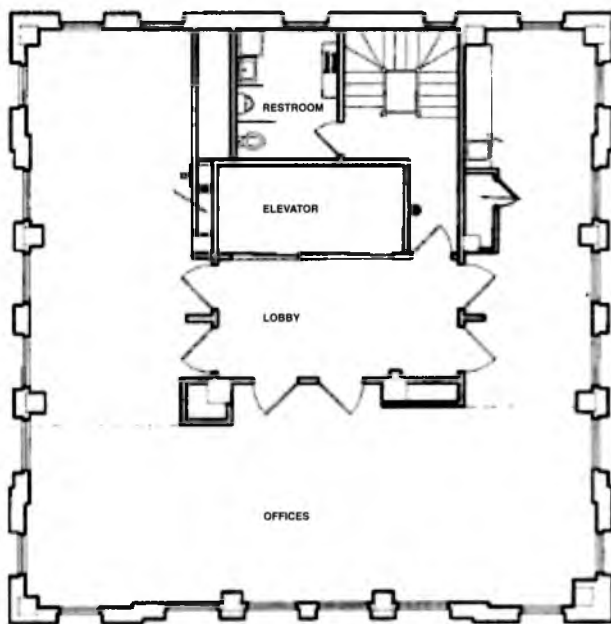
First, I stabilized the building. Inspectors found only minor amounts of asbestos in some of the floor tile and portions of the pipe and boiler insulation, all of which were easily removed. The roofs were in poor shape and, subsequently, there were moisture problems. I replaced the roof and re-grouted and cleaned the exterior tiles on the building's façade. After removing unsightly window air-conditioning units

and disconnecting the boiler, construction crews worked to return the Times to its original shell, preserving all of the building's original details and framework. This involved ripping out extensive modifications, including dozens of cheaply paneled work cubicles in the 12,000-square-foot basement that, interestingly enough, reportedly housed a bowling alley in an earlier day.

Once the building was gutted of its modifications and secured from the elements, the Times, in its original shell, was in

remarkably good condition. The original floor plan allowed for six storefronts on the first floor, naturally lending itself to office or retail use. The tower floors, at 2,000 square feet each, had beautiful 360-degree views of the city and mountains. Here, I envisioned residences in the form of luxury condos.

Starting on the first floor, I began the renovation phase by focusing on the street-level storefronts. I refurbished several of these into office suites with individual restrooms and kitchenettes. New plumbing, heating, and mechanical systems were placed on separate meters. A series of skylights were uncovered and those that had been removed were replaced. The filtered light made a dramatic impact on the interior spaces, and it was validating to see that the original architect clearly had the right idea. Bill Peters Architects leased two of the spaces and retrofitted the interior with an upscale, urbane look befitting his rapidly growing firm.



*Typical Tower Floor Plan. Courtesy McLain Real Estate*

I worked on residential designs for two- or three-bedroom condos in the tower. Each unit would encompass the entire floor with its own secure elevator access. But the building's single interior stairwell did not meet the city's building code, and the cost of a second stairwell made the residential plan unfeasible. It appeared the most logical use for the tower remained as offices, but there was little outside interest in these upper floors as commercial property. Downtown was still struggling to attract businesses that preferred newer construction and expansive parking lots in the high-tech Cummings Research Park area. Without prospective tenants for the second through the twelfth floors, it was not economically feasible to keep the tower open, and I decided to temporarily close and secure that part of the building.

It was not until 1999 that the Times' tower floors began to attract attention. SIRSI took the bold step and relocated its high-tech company in one of downtown's historic buildings on Washington Street. The owners were British, and they appreciated the charm and craftsmanship of the older structures. That led another high-tech startup to move into the Times' second floor and renovations began anew. I was already working with Huntsville's planning director Dallas Fanning to implement the city's downtown streetscape plan around the Times. This included renovating and widening sidewalks, planting trees, and providing additional lighting. I agreed to pay my share of the cost if the city would move up the timeline, and Jerry Galloway, director of Huntsville's community development division, was instrumental in making that happen.

Up until this point, most of the renovation work on the Times had been fairly straightforward. Now that I was working on the sidewalks and the second floor, new challenges arose to meet city codes and preservation standards.

The Alabama Historical Commission requested that the Times' elevator lobbies be maintained in their original form and finishes. This included the marble wainscoting, plaster moldings and walls, terrazzo floors, and office doors with textured glass lights. Repairing the plaster was easy, as was reproducing the large mahogany doors at the street-level entrances. The problem arose with the glass panels on dozens

of interior office doors and hallway partitions. The city wanted them removed because they could explode in the event of a fire. But the historical commission wanted them preserved. To meet fire code, a sprinkler system had to be installed that would deluge the glass with water in case of fire. The single existing stairwell also needed upgrades to meet the fire code's four-hour rating, and another stairwell needed to be added from the basement as an alternative exit. All of these were costly, if not difficult, tasks in a solid concrete structure.



*On the upper floors, the last occupants left their business names neatly painted on the translucent glass door panels. Photograph by Linda Allen*

Characteristic of its period, the Times' retained two fully functioning manual elevators with cage-like doors and hand-operated levers. They had charm and personality and worked faithfully. But in a commercial building, people need to move quickly and safely, and codes no longer permit their use. With tenants moving to the second floor, I replaced one of the two elevators with a modern system.

Bill Peters Architects assisted with interiors for the second floor renovation and subsequently for the tower. The firm wisely decided to leave part of the ceiling exposed in the office suite hallways and selected light fixtures that complemented the building's Art Deco period. By the time the second floor renovations were complete in January 2000, the Times offered 10,000 square feet of new executive offices and suites. Also, by extending the sidewalk farther into the street, the basement opened up to accommodate a second exterior stairwell. The lower level, with its ten-foot ceilings, now welcomed natural light through its own set of storefronts. The location is the ideal setting for an upscale restaurant, café or jazz club.

By 2004 work began on the tower's third through seventh floors. The solid floors,



*The stairwell winds like an angular snail the height of the building, from basement to twelfth-floor. Photograph by Scott McLain*

ceilings and walls made it challenging to update the electrical and mechanical systems, and I credit Hulan Smith in the city's inspection department for working diligently with me on this phase of the project. To keep the integrity of the building intact, we decided to expose the ductwork and allow the ceilings to remain at their existing levels. Electricians were able to reuse the original conduit poured into the ceiling for the lights, but they placed special electrical and telecom-

munications buses at the floor level so wiring would not have to be channeled into the walls. We added kitchenettes, creating upscale office suites on every floor.

The tower's wood framed windows had deteriorated badly, and while I believe in refurbishing the originals in a historic structure, as I did on the first and second floor of the Times, I thought the tower would be better served by installing exact copy reproductions with insulated glass. The state historical commission, however, disagreed, and I complied with their wishes, restoring each window through the seventh floor.

The restrooms were left in their original stairwell locations and renovated with tiles in the Art Deco fashion; however, we made them unisex instead of alternating men's on one floor and women's on the next, as was customary in years past.

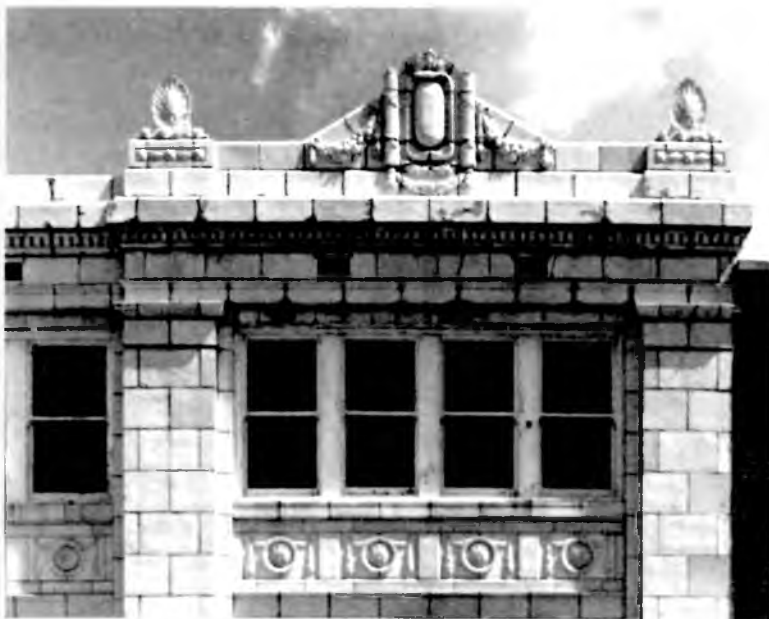
Fortunately, the main lobby retained a number of its original appointments. The lighting fixtures have been cleaned and rewired, an office directory in its original brass case hangs on the wall, and an eleven-story mail chute still drops mail into the lobby's brass mail box. Vandals ripped out the elevator floor indicators during the renovation, damaging the marble walls, but I was able to repair the stone with

an exact grain match from the same marble quarry in Knoxville that the original load came from 80 years ago. Otherwise, the lobby appears exactly as it did in 1928.

Now that the Times' renovation is about two-thirds complete, I cannot believe that it has taken twenty-one years to get to this point. My greatest satisfaction comes from seeing other downtown structures revitalized and having more people recognize that the preservation of these properties is worthwhile. There is a feeling of substance in these old buildings, too, nothing like the formulaic interiors that are prevalent in most new office construction.

While I am encouraged to see this renewed interest in downtown, I am amazed there is not more widespread appreciation for these historic buildings. Scott McLain toured the Times during the tower renovation and was so impressed he moved his real estate company to the second floor. The space is very hip with wonderful light and unbelievable views. Scott's real estate display at the Huntsville International Airport reflects his admiration for the Times Building by depicting his brokers in one of its un-renovated upper floors. Like most historic structures, the Times is a building you have to experience to appreciate.

I have invested about \$3 million to date in the Times' renovations, and I am not finished yet. Once the current spaces are leased, I plan to complete the eighth through the twelfth floors. So, like the man renovating one window at a time, I too have learned patience and perseverance through my life with the Times. Perhaps it will take another ten years to complete. It does not really matter. I have deeded the historic façade easement to the Alabama Historical Commission to ensure the building is protected forever. What greater legacy to Huntsville than to preserve the building that played a significant role in the city's history by housing for decades its most visible form of communication—the city's daily newspaper. There is not another space like it anywhere in Huntsville, and I am honored and pleased to play a role in ensuring its heritage.



*The two-story base reveals the structure's transitional stylistic status by displaying a more classical bent than do the design and ornament of the tower; this is most apparent at the west end of the base where a cartouche, nestled in garlands of produce, is flanked by upright anthemions. Photograph by Harvie Jones, FAIA, 1995. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, University of Alabama in Huntsville*