Barton Myers
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Three Examples in Building Adaptation

Luis Hoyos

The American architect Barton Myers, an unlikely recipient of the moniker preservation architect, is best known for his performance halls and his finely crafted steel houses. A careful examination of his work on existing buildings reveals an architect who has quietly and without a fuss pursued a career that includes master planning and new architecture as well as the adaptation of existing buildings and additions to historic buildings with a sure hand. His building adaptations show a deep knowledge of architectural traditions and an even greater enthusiasm for an urban environment that accepts the past but is unafraid of change.

This essay looks at Myers’s work in building adaptation through three examples: an addition to the Sacramento Hall of Justice, a nearly intact Beaux Arts former police headquarters listed in the National Register, and two adaptive re-use projects on non-landmarks: the Ice House, a 1925 industrial building in Beverly Hills turned into offices for himself and others, and Indian Paintbrush Productions, an industrial shell repurposed for creative office space. In the Sacramento building, Myers rigorously applies the Standards for Rehabilitation; the building remains listed in the National Register. In the two adapted buildings, he operates with greater freedom, taking advantage of the usable bits of structure and enclosure to return them to productive use, completely reconfigured and thoroughly reimagined.
The four-story Beaux Arts structure was completed in 1917 from plans drawn in 1916 by the San Francisco firm of Shea and Lofquist following a master plan for the Sacramento civic center by local architect Rudolph Herold, who fought mightily for the project and is the author of the design for the City Hall (1911). The master plan was not followed although traces are evident in the structure of the blocks that make up the civic center. While many of the original period buildings have been demolished, the Hall of Justice survived. The building is a compact 140-by 65-foot rectangular block constructed using a steel frame covered in dressed stone, brick, and terra cotta cladding. The main elevation on Sixth Street faces west and shows a rusticated stone base for the first floor, a brick and terra cotta second and third floor featuring the characteristic colonnade that supports a full entablature capped by the attic for the fourth floor. The strictly symmetrical composition and the tripartite organization of the façade adheres closely to the basic beaux arts formula, yielding a handsome, well-proportioned building.

The original plans for the Hall of Justice show the way space was allocated: the Health Department took up the first floor, the Police Court was on the second floor and a 100 person jail occupied the third and fourth floors. As Sacramento modernized and the city required more space, the building ceased to function as originally planned and in 1972 the jail was moved to a new building. For some years the Hall of Justice housed a law library.

Barton Myers was born 1934 in Norfolk, Virginia, a colonial port city important to the early history of the country. His ancestral home was built in 1791 by his great-great-great-grandfather, Moses Myers. The Federalist period brick house containing beautifully detailed rooms is now a museum. This area is surrounded by many other historic cities and landscapes. His family was quite prominent. His grandfather, also named Barton Myers, was mayor of Norfolk from 1886 to 1888. Myers was educated at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis and served in the Air Force as a fighter pilot. He entered the graduate program in architecture at the University of Pennsylvania where he came into contact with Louis Kahn and worked for him from 1964 to 1966.

Kahn is recognized by architects and especially by preservation architects for his early masterpiece, the Yale Art Museum (1953), a concrete and glass structure that subtly but confidently adjoins two existing Gothic Revival museums. Kahn is credited with inventing a device that has acquired far-ranging use in preservation: the so-called “hyphen,” a transitional space or volume, usually recessive, which articulates the union between two disparate structures. In Kahn’s hands at Yale, it was a deft way of bridging the exuberance of the Edgerton Swartwout gallery of 1928 with its Gothic Revival design and the sober abstraction of his brick south

The Kahn influence runs through Myers’s work, something he readily acknowledges, and takes many forms. At the Seagram Museum in Waterloo, Ontario (1979–84), the new building is separated from the original barrel warehouse by a hyphen similar to that used by Kahn at the Yale Art Museum. Moreover, the horizontally striated façade of the new exhibit hall is organized in a manner that recalls the Yale museum. Other elements such as the massing and the window organization are quietly reminiscent of Kahn. Myers also draws from other influences such as industrial and residential building types in existence during his formative years in Virginia, as in his Ghent Square Housing (1978).

Myers conceived of the addition to the Hall of Justice as a modern yet respectful wing attached to the back of the building. He designed a 20-foot wide extension that adds about 15,000 square feet to the original structure and provides for flexible spaces that take advantage of plentiful natural light. The original building contains refurbished restrooms and exit stairs, freeing the new building of all clutter. Here again, there is a well thought-out transition between the old and the new. The new wing faces east, allowing for substantial glass exposure on the elevation. The four story mass is separated from the old building by a glazed hyphen. The floor elevations of the old building have been precisely extended into the new. A symmetrically placed stair accommodates vertical circulation between the floors.

The new wing is a modern distillation of the old building. An examination of the drawings reveal how adroitly the old façade has been abstracted into a new version of itself. Early sketches show a façade that is organized into base, shaft and top, there are ten “vertical elements” that stand-in for the ten engaged Corinthian columns of the original, here rendered smooth and without elaboration. Modern horizontal elements in steel and stone serve to wrap around the building marking and recalling the period elaboration of cornices, pilasters and openings of the old building at precisely the same elevation points. The top floor of the addition recedes just like the original.

What announces this as something new is the introduction of a northeast glazed corner that is all about structure and the possibilities of steel: beams cantilever, in a move reminiscent of Carlo Scarpa, over a parking garage entrance while holding plate glass sheets and marking the floor elevations of the adjoining stone and terra cotta façade. This is a nearly weightless, expertly detailed passage and one that fulfils that idea that the best additions establish a dialogue between the old building and the new. Inside, the spaces are left clean and unfinished. The placement of steel columns allows for future improvements and guarantees that the new spaces will be able to see the old east-facing beaux arts façade directly.

This very important decision echoes Myers’s design for the Stage III addition to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto where he added a glazed sculpture pavilion that also organizes the internal circulation of different parts of the museum. The structure of the pavilion lines up with the rhythm of the historic building’s finely detailed pilasters. Myers’s Manchester Art Gallery design of 1994 is
another, sadly unbuilt, example of a skillful joining of a period building and a modern addition.

Architects get into all kinds of trouble when asked to add to old buildings. An understandable impulse is to be overly cautious; after all, the preservation standards require that one not overwhelm the original building. Such is the case with Norman Foster’s addition to the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska. The Walter and Suzanne Scott Pavilion (1992–94) adds 58,000 square feet in a well-behaved but exceedingly bland prism that carefully acknowledges the original Art Deco in shape and height, banishing all creative expression to the insides. The same architect in 1991 designed the Carre d’Art Musée d’Art Contemporain in Nimes, France, an art museum that faces the best preserved Roman temple in Europe. In this instance the architect abstracts the original proportions of the preserved ruin, expressing them in modern steel and glass volume that does not overwhelm but causes a lively interplay between the two buildings.

Myers deeply rooted respect for the past does not seem to get in the way of a modern expression. His knowledge of preservation and urbanism allows him to add to the original in a thoughtful and exciting way. The addition makes the viewer think about craft and the devices architects deployed during the Beaux Arts period versus the ways contemporary architects confront abstraction and representation in our time.

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Sacramento Hall of Justice:
façade detail

9350 Civic Center Drive,
Beverly Hills California; nighttime view revealing old bowstring trusses with new steel parking deck above, 2001; Barton Myers Associates
The Ice House was built in 1925 as an ice and cold storage facility in what became known as the “industrial triangle” of Beverly Hills. The area contains low-rise office and quasi-industrial spaces, studios and workshops. It has seen substantial change as the new Beverly Hills Civic Center (designed by Charles Moore with Urban Innovations Group) was completed in 1990. The original Ice House building was a cast concrete structure with very few windows. The main elevation fronting on Civic Center Drive was a simple pattern of cleanly punched-out windows.

In examining the archival documentation for the Ice House project one is struck by the volume of Myers’s sketches, crayon on trace paper alternatives, numbering in the dozens, trying this approach or that, illustrating his expert draftsmanship. The old building accommodated the office conversion that held the Barton Myers practice for some years. The final front façade solution involved the addition of a structural screen that serves to properly address the building while being completely reversible, something that preservationists value.

While the building is well worth preserving it is not a landmarked building. It is a rare example of the city’s industrial past. Myers’s treatment of the Ice House is one of several examples of a restrained and elegant reordering of the inner working and appearance of a building. There are quite a few professional office buildings on Los Angeles’s west side that have aged and need rehabilitation but on balance have perfectly adequate bones and excellent locations. Typically, the systems are upgraded, the facades are completely reorganized (in Los Angeles, this may not be an option, rather an imperative) and the building is returned to productive use, avoiding
III–6 9350 Civic Center Drive, section showing bowstring truss through Intermedia Film office

III–7 9350 Civic Center Drive, east elevation, showing parking ramp

III–8 The Ice House: Barton Myers Associates office, library/conference room with view toward Beverly Hills City Hall

III–9 The Ice House, façade detail
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The recognition of a building’s “embodied energy” (the energy it took to build it) versus the energy it would take to do it all over again, makes this a great example of a sustainable practice.

The mixed-use building at 9350 Civic Center Drive adjoining the Ice House is an unusual example of building adaptation. The original building was a simple bowstring truss industrial building. The quirks of the city’s zoning entitlements made it an extremely attractive candidate for a makeover as the allowable building area exceeded that of a building designed on the site from scratch. Myers proposed a two-story office and rooftop parking garage. To accomplish this, he devised a steel insertion, a structurally independent building-within-a-building that would support the heavier parking garage, allowing the office space to inhabit the old (essentially visual, although it provides lateral support) bowstring truss.

Fronting the main street is a new steel and glass façade that is a bookend and is thematically linked to the preexisting Ice House. The north facing façade gently recedes to create a welcoming steel overhang that marks the entrance. There is an upper-story bridge connecting the parts. A frosted glass elevator and stair enclosure mark the corner and deftly transitioning to the Civic Center side. A series of simple steel-framed windows relieve what would have been a monotonous blank wall. The building is illustrative of Myers’s understanding of urban design and his willingness to fit into an urban context.

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A hugely interesting subset of the regular corporate office space market is the emergence of the “creative office market” caused by the proliferation of independent production companies. As most of the industry chooses to live on the west side of Los Angeles and the beach cities, there is an accompanying need to find office space that is attractive to creative types, convenient but relatively private.

Concurrent with the development of the modern office building in the 1970s and later (the kind of tall buildings you would find downtown) there was a push by less established companies to occupy adapted spaces—think of Frank Israel’s work for Propaganda Films in Hollywood (1988), Virgin Records in Beverly Hills (1991), and similar efforts by Eric Owen Moss for the Gary Group (1986) and 8522 National Blvd. (1986), both in Culver City. The style is characterized by exposed surfaces, the visually explicit display of building systems, and a structural expression that fulfills a technical necessity as well as an esthetic inclination. This “industrial chic” impulse is convenient (as it is unquestionably cheaper) and served to communicate that the company is not part of the dull prevailing order.

The Indian Paintbrush offices in Santa Monica are an example of the foregoing. The building is on a nondescript stub street of industrial sheds and converted offices. The original building was a completely anonymous shell occupied by a contractor. Most of the space was used to house construction equipment. There was a small office mezzanine.
As in the prior example, the building carried a sizable area entitlement and a great location. In addition, the building was not a landmark. Myers was free to use the brick shell as an outline as he proposed to insert a new steel structure and demolish the entire front to create a new steel and glass façade.

The new insertion is a one and partially two-story steel and wood building with concrete floors and substantial glue-laminated beams. Myers’s office worked with the renowned engineering firm of BuroHappold. The building required considerable structural upgrades to meet the current code. Indeed, a large braced frame—a metal “x” shape that prevents movement and thus makes a building safe—is given a prominent place in the design. All structural work was left exposed. The building is essentially all steel where the original mezzanine was and becomes steel and largely wood as one progresses onto the main work space. The orthogonal steel structure is painted a metallic grey color which works well against the remaining brick walls, the wood and glass cubicles and offices and the industrial lighting and occasional skylights. The overall feeling is of being inside a finely crafted yet forgiving machine. The interior is bright and warm with large expanses of exposed wood structure. There is a studied informality to the lack of visual privacy and the selection of well-designed but not opulent (by Los Angeles standards) furnishings.

The building is organized in a simple disposition of private offices on the edges and a semiprivate pool of office cubicles in the large multistory production space. Most offices are under a wood framed roof structure made of very deep glue-laminated wood beams that allow for large spans without columns and the addition of skylights where needed. A steel stair and elevator grouping is placed centrally, gathering all the main circulation and the access to the mezzanine meeting and staff kitchen space that features a retractable glass window array. The eye is drawn to the visually complex textures, the steel beams hold up the corrugated steel floors and the precisely detailed stairs. The whole effect is quite stunning.

Perhaps in recognition of the unconventional nature of work in the film industry (everybody keeps strange hours, nobody wears a tie, etc.) there is a wonderful rooftop belvedere for office gatherings, alfresco lunches, and breaks from work. Here the steel structure holds up moveable canvas awnings. The raised floor is wood and there is moveable furniture. The space affords pleasant views of the surrounding cityscape. All this informality belies the attention to detail and the hard work it takes to produce a building as disciplined as Indian Paintbrush. Consider there are no cavity spaces of any kind, no drop ceilings, and very few places for clutter to grow. Everything is exposed, so everything is apparent. A building like this has to be painstakingly coordinated in spatial intent, structure, systems and furnishings for it to come together in a harmonious whole. This is no small achievement and it required the architect to carefully compose the building’s elements, mindful of the size of the structure, the best size, shape and location of air handling equipment, where to allow conduit runs, how to specify the lighting and myriad other decisions.
One walks away from Indian Paintbrush thoroughly convinced: here is a finely crafted building that meets the needs of the client, who, unprodded, repeatedly attested to Myers's attention to their wishes in every way, while advancing a designer's agenda that is both technical and aesthetic. This building continues the Los Angeles tradition of working efficiently with the elements at hand: brick, wood, glass and steel. It is a masterful example of building adaptation and a testament to Myers's ability to work within the technical and budgetary constraints of adaptive reuse.

In his indispensable survey of building adaptation, Paul Byard pointed out the fluid nature of preservation in architecture. “New buildings restate the meanings of old ones all the time, sometimes by replacing them, sometimes by reworking them to add or subtract expressive material.” Exactly right. He goes on to point out how enriching the interaction of what he calls “combined” (old and new) work can be: “where old and new designs are put together deliberately so that they will be understood together and judged by what they do to each other and in combination.” As the three cases examined here show, Barton Myers inhabits this sensibility and has found a creative way to present the old and the new in unfailingly dynamic and exciting ways.