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Historic Preservation

Posted on: December 6, 2010 | From: ARCHITECT December 2010

Morgan Library & Museum McKim Building

New York/Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners

By Sara Hart



Even in a city chock-full of world-class cultural institutions, the Morgan Library & Museum stands out as an encyclopedic repository of art and artifacts. Its core holdings were amassed by financier John Pierpont Morgan, who collected so many manuscripts, old master drawings, and early printed books that in 1902, construction began on a private library designed by Charles Follen McKim of McKim, Mead & White. In 1924, Morgan's son turned the collection into a public museum that has expanded steadily over the decades, with several additions to accommodate the ever-growing holdings.

The Morgan's quiet evolution got noisy in 2006, with the unveiling of a 75,000-square-foot expansion designed by Renzo Piano, in collaboration with

Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners (BBB). Three new pavilions rendered in steel and glass integrate the Morgan's three existing landmark buildings. But as the applause died down, the museum eyed McKim's Italianate marble palazzo: "Mr. Morgan's Library" had not benefited from a full interior restoration in its 100-year existence.

Construction began in June (after two years of meticulous planning) on the rotunda, library, study, and librarian's office. The project included a new lighting strategy; restoration of period furniture, fixtures, applied ornamentation, and murals; new casework for revolving exhibitions; and electrical and mechanical upgrades.

BBB helped determine the scope of work and the process for implementation. The firm's oversight and design role were key to getting the project reviewed by the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission. Structural intervention was limited to the rotunda's oculus, but BBB also oversaw the reinstallation of original chandeliers, which had been in storage for decades.

One thing those chandeliers didn't need was a retrofit from gas to electric power. Morgan was a patron of Thomas Edison and an early adopter of electric lighting: his home and library used the then-new technology. So it is only fitting that lighting was critical to the centennial restoration. "The goal was to dramatize the architectural features and artwork without being theatrical," explains museum deputy director Brian Regan. "We were intent on creating a nuanced visual experience in which the artifacts resonate."

Designed by the Renfro Design Group, a local lighting design firm with specialized knowledge in restoration projects for museums and libraries, the scheme uses incandescents, fiber optics, halogens, fluorescents, and LEDs. Radiosity and ray-tracing techniques were used to calculate and diagram various scenarios, but in the end, physical mock-ups were key to selecting the best solution. Sections of rooms were evaluated with input from the curators, who paid special attention to materials vulnerable to high levels of damaging rays.

Now complete, the restoration showcases the original craftsmanship: details lost to grime and shadow again appear in sharp relief. Mr. Morgan would be pleased.

Project Credits

Project Morgan Library & Museum McKim Building, New York
Client Morgan Library & Museum—William M. Griswold (director); Brian Regan (deputy director); Jennifer Tonkovich (curator, drawings and prints); Thomas Shannon (director of facilities)
Architect Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners—Frank Prial, Cleary Larkin

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Structural Engineer Robert Silman Associates
Electrical Engineer JFK&M Consulting Group
Electrical Contractor E-J Electric Installation Co.
Lighting Designer Richard Renfro, Renfro Design Group
Exhibition Designer Stephen Saitas, Stephen Saitas Designs
Size 14,700 square feet
Cost \$4.5 million

Materials and Sources

Carpet Nazmiyal nazmiyalantiquerugs.com; Costikyan costikyan.com
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