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history lesson

New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service regroups in a Puck Building renovation by Suben/Dougherty Partnership

By Diana Mosher
Photography by Seong Kwon

There's no question the Puck Building is one of New York's most celebrated addresses. Listed on the National Historic Register, this grand Romanesque Revival structure was designed by Albert Wagner and built in 1885 for the J. Ottman Lithographic Company. What's more, the building's steel frame construction, horizontal bands of windows, and skillful use of brick exemplify the Chicago School of Architecture. From a purely practical standpoint, the Puck Building is strategically located at the crossroads of four neighborhoods: Little Italy and Chinatown to the southeast, SoHo to the south, and Greenwich Village to the northeast. So the decision to consolidate NYU's Robert F Wagner Graduate School of Public Service here was an easy one. Renovating the space, however, required much more thought.

"The building's absolutely exquisite architecture outweighed what we had to overcome in the way of its physical limitations," says Susan Dougherty, a partner at Suben/Dougherty Partnership in New York. Still, the biggest challenge presented by this project was the building itself, which comprises two connected portions built in 1860 and 1880. The architects had to work their way around two huge, two ft thick masonry walls that disconnect the space. According to Dougherty, they run perpendicular to the length of the space and divide it into thirds. "We could not mess with those walls, obviously, because they hold the building up," she says. "We

The spectacular open loft space is filled with vestiges of its late 1880s origins, thanks to a design that successfully weaves the school's complex program without compromising the Puck Building's signature openness (left).

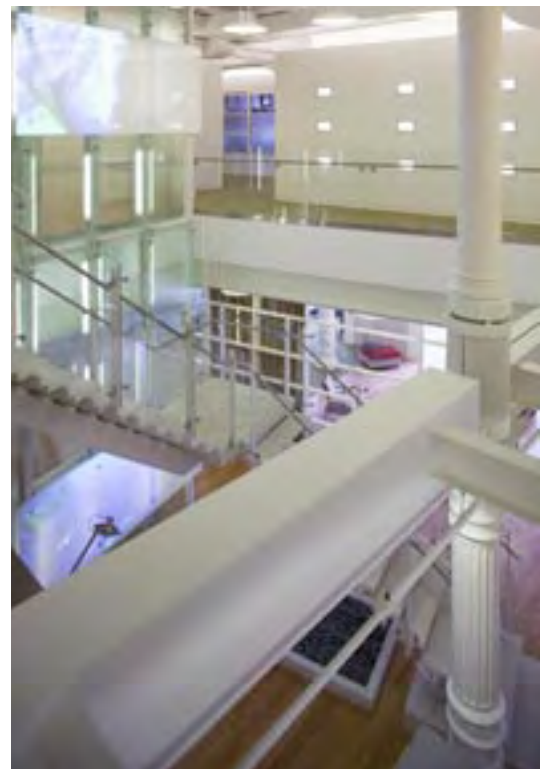
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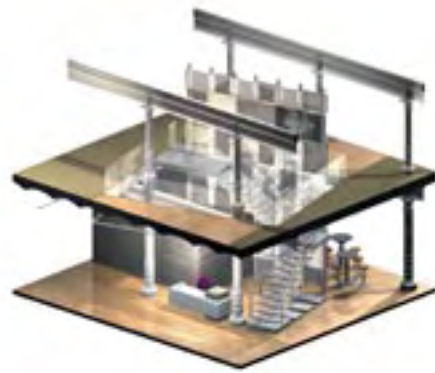


widened some of the openings a bit, and made it work for us. We fit the program in so that those walls became almost intentional in feeling.”

Another challenge was the fact that the two floors being renovated by Suben/Dougherty had never been significantly upgraded. Consequently, the original wood floors were out of level by eight inches over the course of 10 feet. “Tremendous slopes in the floor are fine when you’re a creative group parking yourself in a loft space,” says Dougherty. “But when you have people sitting on task chairs, you don’t want them rolling down a hill.” A raised floor evened things out while also providing a place for technology. But this eliminated the Dean’s beautiful wood floors. “So we glued wood flooring on top of the raised accessible floor,” says Dougherty, “which sounds absurd, but it gave back the wonderful feeling of the original aesthetic.”

Multiple floors are connected at the open core by a communicating stair that creates opportunities for interaction between faculty and students (left). The sculpted glass wall provides a place for posting images and announcements regarding Wagner’s worldwide projects and initiatives (below).





An important functional design objective for this hybrid academic space, which has no classrooms, was to increase spontaneous interaction between faculty and students. “We had been in five different locations around Washington Square. We knew it would be more effective to function as a community if we could all be in one space,” explains Ellen Schall, dean of the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. Previously the professor space was divorced completely from the student space. “The consolidation allowed us to build something we had never had, which was a student lounge and team work areas,” says Schall. To encourage mingling between students and professors, the architects created a grand staircase.

Hopelessly sloped, the original wood floors were replaced by raised flooring that provides an even surface while also accommodating modern technology needs, but a wood finish over the new floor mimics the look of the original (right). Minimal accent colors ensure that the school's modernist aesthetic doesn't compete with the existing classical architecture (below).





Dean Schall's sophisticated taste drove the look of the space. She has a keen interest in Richard Meier's architecture, and she favors a sleek, clean, and modern aesthetic. "That would have been our choice anyway," says Dougherty. "We endeavored to fit modernist boxes within the beautiful 1880s architecture and classical columns. There are a lot of white walls—a decision driven by the desire to showcase the existing architecture. If we had gotten too wild and fussy with the new infill, it would have taken away from that?" Accent colors are minimal: soft greens in the carpet tile and in the fabric of the systems furniture, and a Chinese red on seating throughout the space. The views to the cityscape outside were also important "We wanted our urban setting to be apparent," says Schall.

The materials budget was very tight, so the architects relied on sheetrock, paint, engineered wood flooring and, for the fronts of the professors' private offices, aluminum, and glass. "We very much downscaled the private offices from what they were used to (they're now 9-ft. by 12-ft.). But with perks like windows to the exterior and beautiful wood workstations, everyone is happy," says Dougherty. A major charette with 70 people representing administration, faculty, and students helped ensure everyone would have a say in the design process.

"We wanted a space that would be easy to use" says Schall. "Something sophisticated, elegant, and soothing — but with pizzazz. All of our expectations were more than met. What we didn't anticipate" she adds, "is that we show up differently as a school because we have our own building. Our students always said to us that they wanted to walk into a building that said Wagner. We [already] were a large school. Now we're in space that matches our scope and ambition. **C**

who

Project: The Robert E. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. *Client:* New York University; Ellen Schall, dean; Ellen Lovitz, associate dean; Linda Wheeler Reiss, director financial planning; Marla Appelbaum, facility representative; John Rutigliano, director, planning & construction; Naomi Davies, deputy director, planning & construction. *Architect, lighting design consultant:* Suben/Dougherty Partnership; Jack Michael Suben, AIA, technology partner; Susan Dougherty, design partner; Michael Azarian, AIA, managing principal; Cynthia Tollo, AIA, project architect; Scott Huether, job captain; Alexis Dennis, designer; Elizabeth Maletz, designer; Jeffrey Lustig, designer; Amanda Kim, designer; Ankita Dwivedi, designer. *General contractor:* Plaza Construction. *Structural engineer:* Leslie E. Robertson Associates. *M/E/P engineer, daylighting, energy, fire, life safety:* Meyer, Strong & Jones. *Graphics, signage:* Pentagram. *Audio/visual:* Videofilm Systems. *Cost consultant:* Plaza Construction. *Security, code:* New York University. *Photographer:* Seong Kwon.

what

Reception seating: Davis, Herman Miller, Knoll Studio. *Guest seating:* Davis, Metro. *Task seating:* Steelcase, Herman Miller. *Conference room, multi-purpose room seating:* Herman Miller. *Café, conference seating:* Brayton International. *Lounge seating:* Brayton International, Metro, Knoll Studio. *Conference tables:* Vecta. *Reception table:* Davis. *Conference, lounge desks:* Wilkhahn. *Lighting:* Lightolier, Delray. *Carpet:* Monterey. *Flooring:* Tate. *Paint:* Benjamin Moore. *Millwork:* Patella. *Audiovisual:* Videofilm Systems.

where

Location: New York, NY. *No. of floors:* 2. *Total sq. ft.:* 46,000 sq. ft.