



Old Federal Building renovation aims to preserve history, but serve into the future

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By Dave Murray | The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS – David Eisler steps on plywood overing the floor of the Old Federal Building and speaks of postal workers sorting mail, a judge deciding the fate of professional baseball players and even a young congressman named Gerald R. Ford working in a third floor office.

But his hands gesture and wave at spaces that next year will be filled with sculpture and classrooms – and features that would be very much recognized by someone who had visited the building when it opened a century ago.

Eisler, the Ferris State University president, recently lead a tour of the building that is undergoing a \$31 million historic renovation he said will highlight it's past and make it an important part of the school and the city far into the future.

The building, 148 Ionia Ave. NE, is poised to become a 91,000-square-foot addition to the Kendall College of Art and Design after previous lives as a court house, post office, government office building, the Grand Rapids Art Museum and ArtPrize's "Hub" since its 1911 dedication.

Eisler said the building will ease a significant space crunch at the adjacent Kendall College of Art and Design, which has grown from 520 students to 1,400 since since the school became affiliated with Ferris in 2001.

The project, scheduled to be completed by March, is a result of a public-private partnership of Ferris, the Grand Rapids city government and The Christman Company, using assistance from a variety of county, state and federal sources. The university is looking to raise the final \$7 million for the project.

"It's really something that all these groups could come together to make this happen," Eisler said, while walking through a first-floor area that used to be a post office sorting room. "There is so much history here, and we want to preserve it."



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Ferris State University President David Eisler, left, and Patrick Zawacki, project manager for the Christman Company, tour the former Grand Rapids Art Museum being renovated for the University.

Eisler pointed to holes in the ceiling where supervisors could peek out and keep an eye on the workers below, discovered by crews removing some of layers of paint and modifications added over the decades.

Walls in the room reveal blackened concrete, the result of a natural gas explosion in the 1930s.

Christman project manager Patrick Zawacki said the challenge for designers was to keep as much of the building's historical features intact while making it capable of handling modern technology.

Like many government structures of its era, the federal building was built to last. But thick brick and plaster walls are difficult to remove and work around.

The historic designation requires places strict limits on what can be changed. Marble and terrazzo floors and stairways are covered to keep them protected until the final stages of work. Wood details are being stripped and refinished after years of touch-ups.

The building has two historic elevators – one is in use now, for riders unafraid of loud screeching.

Zawacki led visitors to several of the 11 large safes scattered throughout the building, ranging from the size of a small closet to the size of a small room. Doors are adorned with the United States seal, and printed on the bottom inside is "Herring-Hall-Marvin Safe Co., Hamilton, Ohio," dated 1909.



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The former Grand Rapids Art Museum being renovated for Ferris State University.

He said the safes will no longer be used, but the doors will remain in place, polished to look like new, as will a holding cell.

Windows will be updated and sealed, but Zawacki said the weight and chain systems in each will be cleaned and preserved, even though they'll be unseen behind walls.

Remaining in view, however, as brass hooks attached to exterior window frames, designed to allow window-washers to attach safety belts and lean back as they polished panes.

Spaces that once served as court rooms and chambers will find new life as galleries and meeting rooms. The courtroom where baseball's reserve clause was upheld in 1914 has high ceilings and a stage.

Remaining is a large plaque describing the case, which continued the practice of binding a player to a team for as long as the team wanted him. The clause remained in place until the 1970s.

Eisler said the building's dedication a century ago was a major event, drawing Theodore Roosevelt's daughter Alice

Longworth, then one of the most famous women in the country.

"We hear so many stories people have about this building," he said. "We have a real opportunity here to make this building not just something special for the college, but for this entire community."

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