

Commercial Retail: Special Considerations for Historic Restoration



About the author

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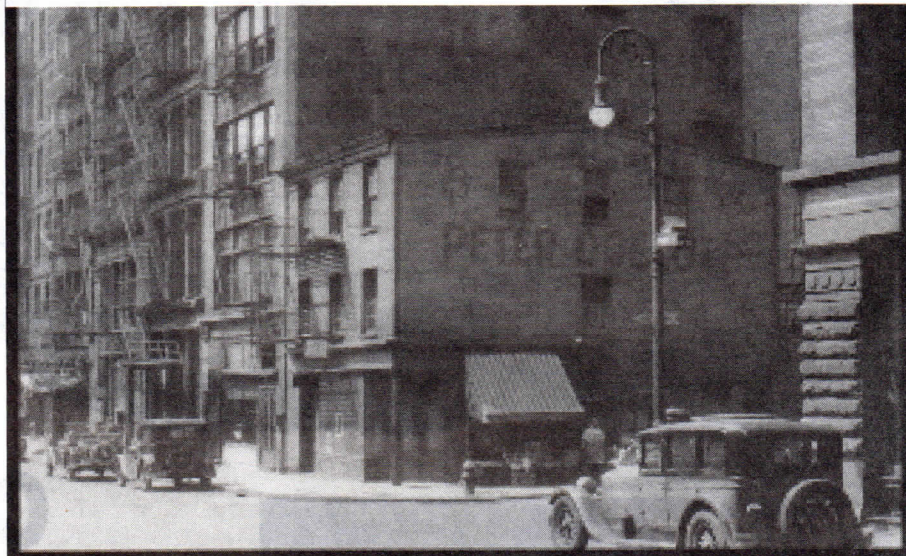
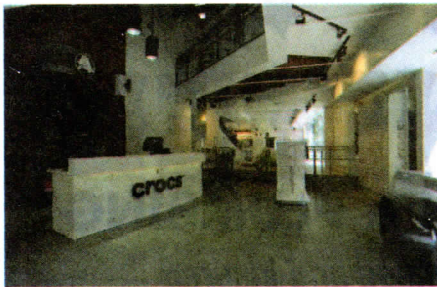
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On February 1st, 2009, ELAN General Contracting Inc., headquartered in San Diego, California, began a unique commercial retail design/build project 2,800 miles away in the fashionable SoHo district of Manhattan in New York City.

The challenge was to create a contemporary flagship retail store for Crocs, Inc. footwear in what was originally an 1818 Federal-style house. The three-story structure located at 143 Spring Street (at the corner of Wooster) had a rich 192-year history. Originally built as a single-family residence, it underwent substantial changes in form, use and occupancy over the years and in 1850 was expanded and converted to a commercial structure. The building underwent six renovations in all, with the most recent tenant being a neighborhood Bar-B-Q restaurant.

Two years of pre-planning and preparation by designers, architects and project managers had already taken place since lease signing to ensure transforming such an aged building into a basically new structure would blend both new and old in a look and manner that was suitable to the historic SoHo “Cast-Iron” District, which is now closely governed by the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Note the key word: “Suitable.” This is a primary consideration that any contractor, owner or tenant must be aware of, and must keep in mind, and will have to deal with when considering, planning or completing a commercial retail design/build project that

falls under the classification of “Historic Restoration.”

Experience and Expertise

“The approved plan called for completely removing and rebuilding the structural interior and demolishing an adjacent three story building on Wooster, which was to be replaced with a unique and visionary all-glass addition,” notes ELAN General Contracting CEO, Adrian Johnson. “To successfully accomplish this, and to navigate the extreme requirements of such a demanding historic restoration, we had to assemble a design/build team second to none.”

“It was important to pick the ‘right’ team,” he notes, “and having the building owner participate from the outset was a key ingredient, as well.”

Planning began with National Retail Designer, William Morgan, of Morgan Design Associates, who acted as project manager in conjunction with ELAN. “Historic restoration requires special considerations at virtually every step of the design/build process,” states Morgan, “and consultants well-versed in the areas of historical documentation, historical materials and assembly of these materials, along with knowledge of various Landmarks committee members and agendas, was a valuable asset all throughout the presentation, approval and construction processes.”

Two respected NY architects were enlisted to manage the design and planning.

William J. Rockwell, of William/Architect, headed historic research, was Landmarks Commission liaison for approval of design and materials, and prepared plans and specifications for both building exteriors. The NY architect of record was Donald W. Laukka, of L&M Associates, Ltd., Minneapolis, MN, who helped plan interior improvements and mechanical systems.

Morgan Design Associates also designed the unique attached glass building and its dramatic interior.

Avoiding a Horse Built by Committee

Dealing with various Landmarks committee members, who seem to have their own agenda and guidelines regarding what is appropriate for the neighborhood and the historic preservation of the property, is an on-going challenge from start to finish.

Historic restoration governing committees are generally comprised of many members, each with their own ideas and who are most often not well-versed in the areas of architecture and construction, and this can be very challenging.

It is said that a camel is a horse built by a committee. Avoiding such a fate and side-stepping potential budget-busting time delays requires a special awareness and attention to detail all throughout the project.

Start by obtaining a thorough understanding of the Landmarks approval process.

Budget additional time for presentations, as well rescheduling of presentations (which will happen), the cost of presentations and wait-time for approvals, if it is within your area of responsibility.

Also be aware that review boards can and do change personnel frequently and, with that, it is the responsibility of the design/build team to maintain a continuum of plans and thoughts as each new member of a board enters with their own new agendas and ideas. Build alliances through networking and referendums.

Resources and Experience Come into Play

You must also have plenty of resources, or locate sources for various restoration materials and/or the installation of these materials, as it is a specialty both in production (or reproduction) and installation.

Here are a few specific tips that will help keep historic restorations on track, on schedule and on budget:

- Use a well-versed expeditor that understands the processes involved for approvals, interim and final inspections.
- Know the time period and design classification of the building to be restored and

what the interest level of the building is to the Landmarks committee.

- Know the neighborhood and adjacent tenants and property owners.
- Have a thorough understanding of all required inspections, special permits, approved hours for construction activities, parking laws, structural erection requirements, DOB, DOT and other regulatory requirements, material disposal and material storage requirements.

All of these items are extremely regulated, complicated and can be expensive – especially in the downtown areas of major cities.

There are no Givens / But Some Truths

The number one consideration with historic restoration projects is how it will ultimately impact your budget. The answer: time is money... and a very knowledgeable expeditor is invaluable throughout the entire process of presentations, scheduling, budgeting, applications, inspections and sign-offs.

For starters, different areas of the country



and the complexity of the project will determine some of the additional costs involved. In New York, for example, one can anticipate about double the cost and timeframe for completion of such a project. Approvals alone can take from three to four months per presentation.

Depending on complexity, even something as simple as a Landmarks building façade review can add a minimum of six to eight weeks.

Costs can also easily double due to unforeseen structural issues, material acquisitions and installation, additional inspections, and Landmarks design interpretations and applications. A case in point, none of the existing decorative lentils above the doors and windows on the Crocs project were reusable. At one point, the exterior restoration was halted for a number of days while the best versions were carefully removed and sent to an area specialty shop, that made molds and cast historically accurate duplicates to replace the deteriorated lentils. None of which could be installed until approved by

the Landmarks commission. All while the budget clock continued to run. Ka-ching.

“Historic restorations are an area where typical costs can and do escalate quickly and significantly,” notes ELAN’s Adrian Johnson. “The reason is the many hours, and days needed for reviews, meetings, hearings, etc... this went on for almost two years in this case.”

“First meetings are to understand the owner’s wishes. Second meeting is to interpret what the commissions will allow, and from there on,” notes Johnson, “it is simply the process of volleying ideas back and forth between what authorities request and what they will allow... all while attempting the completion of a design/build that is challenging in and of itself.”

“Simply put, hope for the best and prepare for the worst,” he adds. “Variables can range anywhere from 10% to 100%. Certain assumptions can be calculated while others are like surprise birthday parties... you never know until you get there. Awareness and a good, experienced team are your best defense.”

The good news? It Can be Done

After more than two-years years of intensive work – filled with lots of surprises, numerous local and federal agency interventions, and with both neighbors and local press offering varied and strong opinions – on May 1, 2010, the project was completed to everyone’s satisfaction. The keys were handed over and seven days later, on Saturday, May 8, 2010, the gleaming new Crocs flagship store had a successful and well-attended grand opening as the latest gem in the trendy and fashionable Historic Cast-Iron District of SoHo.

An additional nice touch worth noting: In this instance, to commemorate the successful completion of such a demanding and intricate project, ELAN General contracting installed a beautiful brass plaque on the face of the building offering a brief historical overview dating back to 1818 and crediting those who played a role in the four-year restoration process. Inside, a large framed photo collage was created, and now hangs, with before, during and after photos.

“The contrast of the new and old... combining original brickwork with a sleek glass addition that reveals even more of the original house’s features at its north side... tells the story,” notes Adrian Johnson. “It truly demonstrates how buildings and neighborhoods endure... reassembled, restored and revitalized.”

For more information on this project visit <http://www.elangc.com/project-1.htm>