

Chairman's Award Narration - General Services Administration
Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Building Rehabilitation
Atlanta, Georgia
February 9, 2012

Dedicated in 1933, Atlanta's main post office was originally also the central processing facility for the entire Southeast. Designed by local architect Anthony Ten Eyck Brown, it is now known as the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Building. The rehabilitation of this important building is the project that the ACHP is honoring today with its Chairman's Award for Achievement in Historic Preservation.

Brown was an important Atlanta architect who designed numerous buildings throughout the southeast. According to noted historian Robert Craig in the New Georgia Encyclopedia, the Atlanta post office was "Brown's finest work of the 1930s, and the largest construction project in the city at the lowest ebb of the Great Depression ... The Post Office Annex effectively composes monumental masses, dramatic profiles, classical order, and delicate art deco ornament to create a masterpiece of modern classic architecture at the eve of the New Deal."

His Atlanta Post Office was, and remains, an imposing icon of the city. However, after 35 years, mail processing moved to a suburban location. The Postal Service completely vacated the building in 1980.

GSA then acquired the building, renovated it for office space, and it was rented to various federal agencies. As the area around the building fell into gradual decline, it became more difficult to keep tenants.

Realizing its importance to the city and its historic downtown core, GSA reversed this situation by resolving to make the aging building GSA's regional headquarters. Today, it houses 680 employees of the agency's Southeast Region.

Beginning in 2005, the \$63 million project reversed 70 years of deterioration, restored the building's interior, removed inappropriate modifications, and modernized building mechanical systems.

Working in an occupied building, the architects, contractors, and GSA cooperated closely, sometimes redesigning in response to discoveries.

Exterior work involved restoration of original stone cladding and steel windows. Failed fastenings required 6,368 stone blocks – each weighing one ton – to be removed, tagged, catalogued and reinstalled before repointing and cleaning could be accomplished. More than 600 original windows were stripped of lead-based paint, repaired, repainted and sealed. 106 of the most deteriorated windows required replacements, which were designed and fabricated to replicate the originals.

On the interior, the original mail sorting rooms were rehabilitated to create flexible modern office space while retaining terrazzo flooring and postal-era catwalks. The floor plans are designed to maximize natural light and a two story light well that had been closed was reopened to transform a dingy basement into a day-lit terrace level.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Building is among the first among many GSA projects underway that combine historic preservation standards with LEED Guidelines. This was done so successfully that while the goal was to obtain LEED Silver certification, the building recently was certified LEED Gold. The project's sustainable features include: extensive reuse of existing materials, new materials were composed of recycled elements and were locally sourced, an energy efficient lighting system and waterless fixtures.

With more than 480 historic buildings in its inventory, GSA seeks to demonstrate that they can be made efficient while preserving their integrity. In the process, they can benefit the public in many ways.

In 1988, this building was the first major federal structure named in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. In recognition of its namesake, GSA dedicated a permanent photo exhibit commemorating Dr. King's achievements. Another exhibit documents the building's construction and rehabilitation, while the restored postal lobby and historic stamp-themed design features throughout honor the building's original use.

We are pleased to highlight this project as a wonderful example of how the past can continue to inform and serve the future while contributing to the environmental and economic sustainability of the nation's cities.

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