



# CITY OF HOUSTON

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## Engineering News-Record:

The City of Houston began seeking a solution to several permitting issues in 2008. The building which housed the majority of the Code Enforcement activities was too small and without amenities for customers and employees. Other permitting activities were housed in widely distributed, diverse locations forcing customers seeking multiple permits to drive from location to location. The city envisioned building a new user friendly retail type facility designed to address these issues. While new building construction was being explored an existing 1920's building was identified. It was close to the central business district and large enough to house the majority of Houston's permitting activities, and so the city began to explore the feasibility of an adaptive reuse project. One favorable factor for the reuse project was an existing parking lot under the HOV lane of our freeway system only one block from the site. A long standing agreement with TxDOT grants use rights for those parking areas at no cost to the city. The lot provided sufficient, shaded, employee parking eliminating the need to construct a parking garage.

Lead architect, Bill Neuhaus of Studio Red Architects (SRA), was engaged to consult on the financial analysis and the feasibility of the building's reuse. When the city compared cost estimates for new construction and the reuse project; the reuse project was deemed the best, most cost effective approach. The SRA design team worked with city administration contacting the multiple departments that issue permits to begin programming and prepare needs assessment. Manhattan Construction Company (MCC) was also selected early on as the Project Manager at Risk rounding out the troika. Immediately weekly team meetings began with full participation from client representatives, SRA, and MCC to collaborate on the final design, sustainability, schedule and budget. Every detail was discussed and considered by this team – aesthetics, function, design, and constructability.

A major goal was to maximize the use of green building methods and design, since the building was to house the City's Green Building Resource Center which showcases green building practices, an amenity that serves public and staff. The city established a strict guiding principal: any "green" technology or materials used to increase energy efficiency beyond the ordinance required LEED Certified must have a modeled return on investment of less than ten years. The under floor, high efficiency HVAC system, thermally broken windows and building control system all met the criteria. Strictly following this principal, the building is currently tracking LEED gold rating. This approach has provided a whole new way for us to talk about the efficacy of LEED enhancements and sustainable building.

During schematic design another partner joined the design team; the lead artist selected by the group under the guidance of the Houston Arts Alliance, The city has a mandatory set aside for Civic Art expenditures. Mary Margaret Hansen shared the team's vision of a highly functional, cost effective facility that would be radically different from the usual municipal building. She joined the collaborative team to identify opportunities and artists for "artful interventions" throughout the building. This effort establishes a civic presence long missing from municipal buildings, an amenity for all of Houston.

In my experience, I found this entirely collaborative process unique; it has been a major factor in the overwhelming success of this project in a building that has met and exceeded expectations. It is a beautiful building filled with largely local art from an iconic exterior metal elevator tower wrap to murals, recycled metal assemblage, and photographs etched on metal, all integrated into the building design. There are employee showers for those who bike to work and a "white bike" program which loans bikes and helmets to employees for short trips during the work day. A vegetated roof is visible from the work spaces and the nearby freeways and office buildings. Soon the upper roof will be covered with solar panels and provide bases for four small wind turbines. The building is a teaching tool for the Green Building Resource Center.

More importantly, it is an efficiently designed workspace; a comfortable facility for our customers. It has a large and comfortable lobby and will soon include a coffee shop for the customers and employees.

As envisioned the building now houses over ninety percent of all permitting activities for the City of Houston in one single location. Permitting functions for seven different departments are now co-located allowing for shared common functions such as cashiering, printing, reception, customer service representatives, etc. We anticipate significant cost savings from these efficiencies also. It has become a true user friendly retail establishment.

Regards,



Andrew F. Icken

c: W.O. Neuhaus