

Converting the Cobb: Downtown office building being turned into living spaces

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The Cobb Building, located at the corner of Fourth Avenue and University Street, is known for its stately windows, terra-cotta Iroquois Indians and Beaux-Arts façade. The 11-story building, completed in 1910, is being converted into apartments and condos. Its nearest skyscraper neighbors are the Seattle Tower and the Washington Mutual Tower.



Workers Larry Hartman, left, and Jack Copp work on the windows in the Cobb Building. All 462 windows in the building are being restored.



Brass art-deco elevator doors, likely installed after the building was completed in 1910.



ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

The conversion of the Cobb Building from medical and dental offices to apartments and condos for city dwellers will include a seismic upgrade and almost completely new innards.



Some notable historic conversions in downtown Seattle:

The Lowman Building: Scheduled to open later this month, this 1907 neogothic office building has been turned into 89 moderately priced studios and one-bedroom apartments. Tenants' income can't be higher than 60 percent of the area's median income.

The Cobb Building: One of the nation's first skyscrapers dedicated to medical and dental offices, this building's trademark is the terra-cotta Iroquois repeated on its facade at Fourth Avenue and University Street. The Cobb is in the midst of being rebuilt into luxury apartments.

Alaska Building: Seattle's first steel-framed skyscraper when it was built in 1914, the 15-story Alaska Building was recently bought by a development team that intends to convert it into 100 apartments, retail space and offices.

Seaboard Building: This ornate 1909 former bank headquarters, in the heart of Seattle's retail district at Fourth Avenue and Pike Street, was converted in 2001 into condos on the upper floors and office and retail space below.

The Arctic Building: This south downtown landmark was built to house a social club for Seattleites who had made their fortunes in the Yukon gold rush. Known for the 29 walrus heads peering out from the third-floor facade, the building is becoming a 117-room boutique hotel.

It takes as many as four workers to restore the 96-year-old sash windows at the Cobb Building: one to re-hang the sashes, one to re-putty the antique glass, one to prep the wood, one to paint.

But when the workers are done, new residents of the Cobb will look out from stately windows that would never be built today — 4 feet wide, tall enough to stand in, reaching almost to the ceiling.

The Cobb, best known for the terra-cotta Indians peering down from its Beaux-Arts facade on Fourth Avenue, is about to become the latest downtown Seattle office building to be reborn as a home for city dwellers.

Seattle has seen a steady march of antique offices converted into downtown housing since 2000, and some think the trend could accelerate. In a soft market, many older office buildings are struggling to attract tenants, while, with low interest rates, the market for downtown condos remains hot.

"There certainly has been an upswing in conversions," said Karen Gordon, Seattle's historic-preservation officer. "We've certainly seen more larger buildings, and more buildings in the downtown retail core."

Among the recent projects involving landmark buildings:

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- In a project about to be completed, the 1907 Lowman Building in Pioneer Square, with its distinctive gabled roof, is being converted into 89 moderately priced apartments.
- Another Pioneer Square landmark, the 15-story Alaska Building, was recently bought by developers who intend to turn one of the city's first skyscrapers into a mixture of apartments, offices and retail space.
- The Seaboard Building, at Fourth Avenue and Pike Street, was turned into luxury condos and offices in 2001 in a project that Gordon says began the most recent wave of conversions.
- The Arctic Building, which once housed a club of Seattleites who'd become rich in the Yukon Gold Rush, is becoming a 117-room hotel. The building is best known for the 29 whimsical walrus heads peering out from the third floor.

Despite their beauty, many historical buildings have become a tough sell as office buildings because most have relatively small floor areas. That's a problem for large tenants, who have to spread out over many floors and spend a lot of time on elevators.

High construction costs

Converting old offices to housing is hardly a financial slam dunk, developers say, because renovations cost as much as, and in some cases more than, demolishing and starting fresh.

Developers say such projects are possible only with a federal tax credit that can cover 20 percent of the cost of renovating a historic building.

Developer Matt Griffin, who renovated the Seaboard Building, said he decided to take on the project, in part, because he and wife wanted to live downtown in a place with more architectural character than a new building.

Financially, the Seaboard "didn't do well," Griffin said, partly because he shied away from making the building all residential. He used lower floors for office space that came on the market just as Seattle's office-space market plummeted in 2001.

"If I had it to do over again, I would have done all condos," said Griffin, whose Pine Street Group built Pacific Place and is developing the new WaMu headquarters and Seattle Art Museum expansion.

The Cobb project originated with a landlord trying to figure out what to do with an elegant but aging building.

When the Cobb was built, it was one of the country's first high-rises designed to house medical and dental offices, and it thrived for most of the 20th century.

But by 2000, the building had "essentially reached the end of its useful life," said Quentin Kuhrau, senior vice president of development at Unico, which owns the Cobb.

"All the systems of the building were in a pretty bad state of disrepair," he said, and the Cobb also needed a seismic upgrade to meet modern earthquake-code requirements.

With downtown Seattle's office vacancy rate over 20 percent, it didn't make sense to renovate the Cobb for offices.

But condos weren't an option because the land underneath the Cobb is owned by the University of Washington, which has owned it for more than a century and leases it to Unico. Generally, the land underneath condominiums is owned by the association of condo owners.

The UW and Unico studied several options for the Cobb, including demolishing the building and starting new, before going ahead with the renovation.

Seismic upgrade

The reinforced-concrete building made it through several earthquakes, but the seismic upgrade was a major project.

One solution, called X-bracing, involves running a pattern of steel beams inside the walls. But the braces change the feel of an interior and can obscure views.

Unico, wanting to preserve the graceful old windows of the Cobb, chose an alternative to X-bracing: A separate reinforced-concrete tower that will fit inside the Cobb's L shape.

The new structure, tied to the old building, will give the Cobb the stiffness it needs to resist the twisting forces that the building would take in an earthquake. The new tower also will fit one apartment unit on each floor, helping to offset some of its cost.

The Cobb is getting all new wiring, plumbing and heating systems and rebuilt interiors. All 462 original windows are being restored.

Unico isn't worried about finding tenants, with 40,000 to 45,000 office employees who work within walking distance of the Cobb. And with Benaroya Hall, the Downtown Library and several theaters nearby, there should be plenty of nighttime street life.

"The biggest bet we are making is, can we get a premium rent?" Kuhrau said. "Will a renter pay to be at a premium location?"

Despite the financial stresses, antique buildings can have a buried-treasure quality, with finishes and architectural touches impossible to find in today's new construction.

At the Cobb, for example, the original circa-1910 brass elevator doors still shine in the first-floor lobby.

The Alaska Building's most historically important feature is invisible: It is credited with being Seattle's first skyscraper built on a steel frame. But its stairways are elegant, made of Italian Carrera marble with wrought-iron banisters.

Kent Angier of Kauri Investments, which is doing the Alaska conversion, said Seattle could see more office-to-housing conversions.

"The building has to make sense," he said. "We took a hard look at the Alaska Building at the outset. It did make sense, but there have been others that did not."

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