Old Capitol: The Succession of Commitment to Our Cultural Space

Peter P. Goché
Old Capitol
THE SUCCESSION OF COMMITMENT TO OUR CULTURAL EDIFICE

JURY COMMENTS: Beautifully and lovingly executed. Appropriate care and attention to detail in an effort to preserve and enhance an existing character. Successfully maintained a heritage while overcoming tragedy.

A building disowned by its architectural and governmental authors stands anew, an emblem of civilization's most wonderful creation— the institution of education.

Below: New structural matrix and fire suppression system inside dome.

Our role as contemporaries in the lineage of American architecture is to preserve the historic fabric that links our environment to its people. The challenge of doing so is to at once maintain the authenticity of our vintage building stock while thoroughly embracing modern at-grade construction techniques. I believe it is an architect's greatest responsibility to resolve this inherent duality between human aspiration and lasting design integrity. Once complete, what remains and is contained are the indelible traces of repeated human celebration. The Old Capitol in Iowa City, then, is exemplary of such repetition. Its multiple preservation campaigns including the most recent fire restoration should be seen by our discipline as a testimonial to the unwavering commitment of a people and its institutions.

Old Capitol was designed by John Rague, an architect trained in the Greek Revival Style. Shortly after construction began in 1839, Rague resigned due to a dispute over the quality of local limestone. The building was operational by the end of 1840 and served as the identification of Iowa Territories. It became Iowa's first State Capitol in 1847 with Iowa's admission to statehood. In 1857, Old Capitol became the first building owned by the University of Iowa when the state government was moved to Des Moines. A major restoration effort to reconstruct and fireproof the building's structure was conducted in the 1920s by Proudfoot, Bird and Rawson Architects of Des Moines. By the 1970s, a new set of safety criteria had emerged in the evolution of building preservation philosophy and the University of Iowa launched yet another building update campaign conducted by Ferry and Henderson Architects of Springfield, Illinois. The building currently serves as an administrative facility for the University of Iowa.

On November 20, 2001, the gold leaf dome and related structures were destroyed in a fire which coincided with the abatement of hazardous materials in preparation for another set of building upgrades. The destruction of this building's emblematic feature marked the beginning of the facility's third major restoration. This fire restoration would be conducted by OPN Architects, Inc. of Cedar Rapids, and restoration consultant, Einhorn Yaffee Prescott, Architecture and Engineering PC of Boston, Massachusetts. The project scope consisted of "fire related" and "non-fire related" work. Fire related items included the reconstruction of the dome/cupola/bell tower, roof replacement, and smoke and water damage repairs. Non-fire related...
items included tuck-pointing, reconditioning the main stair and ADA compliant restroom renovations. All work was completed in the spring of 2006.

This restorative effort is emblematic of the ongoing commitment of the University of Iowa, the Board of Regents and countless generations of people associated with Iowa’s original symbol of statehood. Dedication of this magnitude deserves honor. Equally, an architectural practice that engages in this classification of work deserves praise, for by succession OPN, Inc. was afforded the opportunity/responsibility to maintain a piece of our heritage; to extend its personal field of study and, therefore, coauthor the continuation of our state’s legacy.

—Pete Goché is a cultural inclusionist native to rural Iowa.