PROUD Public Icon

The first major restoration of the State House is a tribute to the past, the present, and posterity. By Elizabeth S. Pajden

Although framed in scaffolding for much of the restoration, the State House was kept fully operational. Inset: Charles Bulfinch's design is the quintessential civic building.
Visitors gazing up at the netting around the column capitals at the Massachusetts State House in 1999 may have thought that the landmark was as much pigeon attraction as tourist attraction. It's unlikely that many would have guessed that the netting was intended to keep passersby from being clobbered by falling chunks of aluminum and stone.

Today, thanks to a three-year, $44 million program to clean, repair, and preserve the oldest large-domed public building in the country, the only clobbering going on at the State House is from the usual political skirmishes. The project, just finished, was the first comprehensive restoration of the building since it was completed in 1798. A public celebration, featuring the relighting of the dome, will be held tomorrow at 5:30 p.m.

The original building was designed by Charles Bulfinch, America's first native-born architect, and was one of the most influential buildings of its day. "The State House contributed to what has become our common vocabulary for great public buildings," says Joan Goody of Goody, Clancy & Associates, the Boston architectural firm that led the preservation effort. "The dome, the arches, the portico, the hill with the lawns below -- it all means civic icon today."

Preservation work is often thankless, as anyone who has decided to replace a roof instead of building a deck knows. Preservation architects rarely garner the celebrity of cutting-edge designers like Frank Gehry; the public tends to think of them as mousey historians. But the architects and conservators who work on historic structures are the crime scene investigators of the built world -- forensic specialists who combine new technologies with a knowledge of chemistry, physics, and old-fashioned detective work to determine what has led to a structure's demise.

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The culprit in much of the deterioration of the State House was the usual suspect: water. Leaks caused stonework to move as much as 3 inches due to the expansion of ice and rusting steel. One wall had actually started to peel away, and a retaining wall on Hancock Street leaned almost 12 inches out of plumb. Acid rain caused the sugaring of marble balustrades, a chemical reaction that turns stone into sugarlike granules.

Those were just the problems conservators could see. Much of the restoration required pulling the building apart in order to fix hidden problems. "The deterioration of the building was a disgrace," says Andrew Natsios, former Massachusetts secretary of administration and finance and now administrator of the US Agency for International Development, who acknowledges that the project became a personal obsession. Natsios took on the job of convincing skittish legislators of the importance of preserving the building and honoring history. "We wanted the restoration of the oldest symbol of the state to be finished at the same time as the newest symbol"—the Leonard P. Zakim Bunker Hill Bridge.

The State House has been subject to all sorts of tinkering since it was first occupied more than 200 years ago. Almost immediately, legislators worried about leaks as well as fire, replacing the dome's gray-painted wood shingles with copper in 1802; the gilding was added in 1874. In 1825, in response to changing fashion, the red brick walls were painted stonelike gray, then repainted yellow 30 years later.

But legislators soon had more pressing concerns. By the mid-19th century, as their concerns grew, they demanded that repairs be made. The 1874 gilding was removed and replaced in 1897. Leaks and their effects were a constant worry for the next century, and in the 1920s, engineers had to be called in to repair a clock tower that had been leaning for years.

An original marble capital bears the residue of wax used to produce molds from which replacements were fashioned.
numbers grew, they began to run out of space for themselves and for document storage. By the 1860s, there was wide support for building a new State House, an effort halted only by the slide of the post-Civil War economy.

By the end of the century, however, public sentiment had changed, and there was national opposition to a plan to demolish the building. Instead, the Brigham annex was completed on the north side, faced in yellow brick to match the yellow paint of the Bulfinch building. In 1914, work began on the marble east and west wings, and the Bulfinch building was repainted white to match. It was not until 1928 that the paint was finally stripped from the original structure, and the red brick restored. The most recent addition, a parking garage under Ashburton Park, was built in 1990.

Today the State House gleams, and nearly invisible netting over the portico keeps birds out, not building fragments in. Bulfinch attempted to give his masterpiece “an air of magnificence without departing from economy,” but he also gave the young republic an enduring symbol of shared aspirations.

Now, as we worry about public spending and grumble about politicians, civic structures that remind us of our past and of our obligations to the future are even more important. Bulfinch was right – the public deserves nothing less than an air of magnificence.

After all, the State House is our house.