

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: PRE-WAR PUBLIC POST OFFICES OF THE
 TREASURY DEPARTMENT AND THEIR
 PRESERVATION IN THE NATION’S CAPITAL

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Economic prosperity, growth of the city, and the seat of government demanded new public buildings in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the District of Columbia and the same elements are the impetus for their preservation. One group of these buildings, the post offices, was built for an additional purpose that should be conveyed due to their distinctive history and architecture, as the buildings are preserved and rehabilitated. All of the large post office buildings in the District of Columbia constructed by the Treasury Department and Office of Supervising Architect of the Treasury are still standing, a situation that speaks to their appeal and adaptability.

Changes made in conjunction with the continued use of these buildings have had varied results and successes. Such facility management decisions will continue to impact the future of these monumental buildings making a statement for the federal government and defining the city and its streetscapes. The current state of these buildings suggests that the various treatments of the postal buildings in Washington, D.C. could provide insight into best practices that can be followed in addressing the numerous post office and federal buildings throughout the country.

This thesis will examine avenues of how or if oversized postal buildings can be preserved or rehabilitated without impacting their historical integrity and losing postal department history. Four postal buildings have been chosen as case studies to evaluate the importance of the retention of historic character of interior spaces, the civic nature of the building's exteriors and the effects the rehabilitations have had on their historic fabric and current use. This thesis will also present how the four post offices were rehabilitated for different uses and the attributes that were successful, as well as review the history of federal building construction and post office history to establish the importance of preserving this prominent and monumental building type.

My findings show that it is possible for the rehabilitations of the post offices in Washington, D.C. to be used as examples for other post office projects around the nation. The differences in size of the buildings are minor in comparison to the similarities in the types of spaces the buildings hold. The defining of primary and secondary space in post offices is a critical first step. The original intent and historic integrity of the primary spaces, lobbies and entrances, executive offices, and other public spaces, can be captured by preserving and restoring these spaces while the secondary spaces can be used for

rehabilitation zones. The workrooms and light courts in post offices can be a challenge, but their differences in size and shape can allow for creative uses. The case studies show that the workrooms have been adapted to new uses, in two instances food venues. One project demonstrates an exchange in the loss of the light court and restoration of an altered primary lobby space, a remedy that other projects may have to incorporate. Another project demonstrates the ease in which modern federal office space can continue to occupy post office buildings. The light courts over the workrooms in three out of four of the post office rehabilitations were also incorporated into the new use, a treatment that should be considered for other post offices. These rehabilitations brought life back into the post offices and with the restoration/preservation of the public spaces portrayed the architectural character of these buildings.

The post office building type is less common than those of industry or commerce, and their preservation is an important factor to consider so that the civic architecture of the United States is not lost. These buildings represent the place where citizens most often conducted business with the federal government and the formal setting of these interactions conveys an important sense of time and place that must be rehabilitated for further use. The post offices are “architecture”, not just buildings, and for this reason, these buildings should be rehabilitated and kept in use. The options for a historic public post office include rehabilitation for public use, private use, or a combination.

Rehabilitation projects can preserve the integrity of primary spaces that convey the building’s original purpose, but also adapt some secondary spaces. If the building is to be leased, consideration of non-federal occupants to create a mix of tenants and enliven

the buildings should be researched to allow for the building to remain in the federal government's inventory.