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38th Annual Massachusetts

PRESERVATION AWARDS

OLD BERKSHIRE ATHENAEUM

PITTSFIELD

REHABILITATION & RESTORATION

Constructed in 1876, the High Victorian Gothic Old Berkshire Athenaeum stands in Pittsfield's historic downtown, where it held a special place in the community as a social and learning center for more than 100 years. William Appleton Potter designed the athenaeum early in his career, before eventually becoming Supervising Architect for the United States. Potter's design for the Old Berkshire Athenaeum included a prominent skylight and two large, stained-glass windows, multicolored courses of stones and slate tile, and a grand arch over the main entrance. When the city built a new library in 1975, Pittsfield residents feared the building would be lost. Then County Commissioner James Bowes worked to repurpose the building as a courthouse and registry of deeds, and those functions continue here today. For his efforts to save the building, it was renamed in Mr. Bowes's honor. The Old Berkshire Athenaeum is listed in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Park Square Historic District.

Since its construction, the building had been plagued with structural issues, and historic documents reveal repeated maintenance and major repairs to shore up bulges and address cracks and leaks. Strategies previously used to stabilize the building had included foundation work, roof replacement, and installation of steel beams. Five years ago, while completing a project at the adjacent Superior Court Building, lead architect Bill Gillen noticed that the Old Athenaeum was leaning back from the street, and he convinced the state's Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM)

to investigate the extent of the building's problems. Studies revealed that exterior stonework stood out from the building as much as five inches. While restoring the stonework, the project team discovered that the back-up wall had deteriorated to dust, leaving nothing to which they could anchor the stones. Work halted to reassess the building's safety and the weight of the roof on the façade. The team devised a new plan to shore up the structure with steel and build an entirely new back-up wall. As the stones were re-laid, concrete was poured into the cavity behind the wall. To preserve as much historic fabric as possible, extensive research guided the work, from selective demolition of individual stones to the placement of tracery around stained glass. The original mortar color and texture were also identified and replicated. DCAMM also took advantage of the project to upgrade electrical work and improve the building's accessibility. Impressively, the entire project was undertaken without relocating or closing the courts and registry, and the building's occupants did not lose a single workday. The extensive rehabilitation and restoration of the Old Berkshire Athenaeum ensures that this prominent and beloved building will continue to serve the community for years to come.

List of Contributors:

Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM)
Massachusetts Court System
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