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Mix and mismatch?

Some worry about quality of City Hall's facelift

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Encased in a silvery chrysalis, Milwaukee's City Hall is undergoing a \$70 million metamorphosis.

But beneath the steel scaffolding, controversy swirls: When its restoration is complete in November 2008, will the 1895 landmark look like the civic icon generations have known and cherished? Or will it look as if it has had a bad facelift?

Even preservationists cannot agree.

In one corner are critics such as H. Russell Zimmermann, a well-known restoration consultant, who says he is shocked by the differences between old and new materials. Zimmermann inspected the work recently, at the invitation of a public relations firm hired by the contractor, J.P. Cullen & Sons.

"They wanted me to write a puff piece," he says, "but I couldn't bring myself to do it. The colors of the brick and terra cotta don't match, and the mortar joints are three times wider in some spots than they should be."

Another preservationist, Matt Jarosz, agrees that some of the color differences are "pretty startling." Jarosz, who serves on the city's Historic Preservation Commission and heads the Historic Preservation Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, also worries that in the relentless push to keep the project on schedule, not enough original material is being saved. Chunks that the contractor considered unsalvageable have turned up in local antiques shops.

"I don't expect them to do it perfectly," Jarosz says. "And I realize that you can't save everything. But it's a significant enough building that you should make the extra effort to get it right."

Ald. Bob Bauman, who has also raised questions about the project in the past, said he's still not comfortable with it.

"It just doesn't look right to me," he says. An anonymous letter writer who has peppered preservationists

and the Journal Sentinel with close-up photos of the restoration work asks: "If this were your home, would you be satisfied with the matching of materials?"

In the other corner is the restoration team, led by Engberg Anderson Design Partnership. President Chuck Engberg, whose firm also restored the nearby Pabst Theater, says the criticisms are "unfounded and unfair."

Engberg concedes that there are color differences between old and new materials.

"But they are small," he says, "and when you look at it from a distance or from the street, it all blends together."

On close examination, perhaps the most noticeable contrast is in the brick and terra cotta that was used to rebuild the crumbling dormers facing N. Water St. Seen through binoculars from a 10th-floor room in the InterContinental (formerly Wyndham) Hotel across the street, the new brick has a uniform, orangy hue; the old is a more mottled pecan color, with flecks of yellow and gray. Likewise, the new terra cotta is a more uniform gray than the old.

Melding the old and new

But matching new to old materials is tricky. Walk around architect H.C. Koch's Flemish Renaissance Revival masterwork, and you'll see a patchwork of original brick colors, some darker or lighter than others. That's also true of the terra cotta, where water, weather and mold have produced color variations ranging from green and yellow to red and purple.

Gary Kulwicki, the city's facilities manager and point man on the project, says a big reason for the contrasts is that some parts of the building got heavier weathering than others. Engberg put it this way: "You had so many different climatic conditions around the building that it was like little eco-zones."

The section facing Water St. also was exposed directly to soot from an old, now-dismantled power plant on nearby Wells St. Then there are the effects of an ill-starred chemical cleaning more than 30 years ago, which eroded the surface of some bricks and left them more vulnerable to pollutants.

Add to that the change in brick-making technology. The old bricks came from a coal-fired "beehive" kiln near St. Louis, which produced darker hues at the top, where the temperature was hottest, and lighter ones at the bottom. The new bricks are made in a gas-fired, tunnel-shaped kiln that produces a more uniform color.

"It's like the difference between cooking a ham in the oven versus a Weber grill," Kulwicki says of the contrast between new and old.

After rejecting samples from a brick-maker in Ohio, the restoration team settled on a Canadian firm, I-XL Industries, to manufacture the 200,000 bricks (out of 8 million) that would have to be replaced. Engberg Anderson's Jim Otto said that after adjusting the clay formula several times, the team picked a mid-range hue that seemed close to the original.

Some 12,000 pieces of terra cotta are being made by Gladding, McBean, a 132-year-old company in Lincoln, Calif., which used original pieces to create molds for the new. New sandstone for the foundation came from the same quarry in Ohio that was tapped in 1895. But as with the terra cotta and the brick, color differences are visible here, too: The newer stone looks gray; the older, yellow. The

process of aging will blur the differences, Engberg says.

Addressing other issues

Jim Draeger, an architectural historian with the Wisconsin Historical Society, says it's possible to tint building materials to artificially give them the patina of history, but that might not be a good idea. "How does the material age? In 20 years, what will it look like?"

As for criticism of the mortar joints, Kulwicki acknowledges that some were done badly and had to be corrected; in other cases, he says, the new joints are wider than the old because the new terra cotta shrank at different rates in the kiln. "But you can't see (the differences) from 300 feet away," he says, adding that some of the original sandstone joints themselves had wide variations because the stone wasn't cut uniformly.

As for the sale of damaged material, Kulwicki says that was permitted under the city's contract with J.P. Cullen. More intact pieces have been put in storage. "From an economic standpoint, there is a limit to how much you can save," he said.

Draeger, whose agency approved the rehab plans, said he is not in a position to judge the work at this point because he hasn't inspected it. Part of the problem, he said, is that the city's process for developing the plans may have been too insular and left critics feeling muzzled.

But the bottom line, he said, is that "the process of preservation is imperfect. In a way, it's a fallacy to say we're going to 'restore' a building like City Hall - it's more of a rehabilitation. You can't turn the clock back to what it was. You can't replicate those old technologies. No matter what they do, you're going to notice where they've touched it. It's not going to be seamless."

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