



## Nomination Form

Please type or print clearly in black or blue ink.

- Return application along with required materials by noon on Friday, April 4, 2014 to:  
Historic Preservation Awards  
City Clerk - Historic Preservation  
200 E. Wells Street Room B-4  
Milwaukee, WI 53202  
ATTN: Carlen Hatala

Nominee (Individual or Organization)

DENTAL ASSOCIATES

Historical Name of Property (If applicable)

IRON BLOCK BUILDING

Address/Zip

205 E. WISCONSIN AVENUE

Telephone

312-404-1340

Nominee's Email (if applicable)

MDEMSKY@DENTALASSOCIATES.COM

Nomination submitted by

MARK DEMSKY, AIA

Organization

DENTAL ASSOCIATES

Address/Zip

11711 W. BURLEIGH ST. WAUWATOSA, WI 53222

Telephone

312-404-1340

Email (if applicable)

MDEMSKY@DENTALASSOCIATES.COM

Check the category for which you are submitting the nomination.  
Nominations may be submitted in more than one category.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Residential property                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Preservation education                            |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commercial property             | <input type="checkbox"/> Preservation activism/advocacy                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Religious property                         | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> "Back from the brink" award            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public or governmental property            | <input type="checkbox"/> Sensitive new construction in a historic district |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sensitive additions to a historic property |  |

## **A Short History of the Iron Block Building and its Renovation**

Milwaukee's Iron Block Building was purchased by Dental Associates at the beginning of 2012, with the intention of performing a full exterior and interior renovation. The only standing building with a cast iron façade in the state of Wisconsin, the advanced state of disrepair required the resurrection of construction techniques from the 19<sup>th</sup> century coupled with modern technology to save its rare facades.

The Iron Block (originally Excelsior Block) was constructed in 1860-61 using cast iron from Daniel Badger's Architectural Iron Works of New York City, which was shipped by schooner from Manhattan to its site near the Milwaukee River. Envisioned by owner James Martin as a gleaming office and bank building on the site of former wooden shacks, the building was designed by Badger's architect George Johnson in an Italian Neo-Renaissance style. At first decried as "a composite of different styles jumbled inharmoniously together", the building ultimately won the affection of residents with its graceful arched windows and interesting details- most notably garlands of grapevines emanating from the mouths of lions' heads on both main facades. The fourth floor housed the Excelsior Masonic Lodge (hence the original name of the building) until around 1880, when it moved to another location. At this time it is believed that offices were constructed on the top floor.

In 1898, fire destroyed the neighboring building to the south and did extensive damage to the Iron Block. The following year, an addition was built to the south on the site of the destroyed building, and much of the roof and cornice of the original building was reconfigured. The addition was designed in Cream City brick by local architectural firm Crane & Barkhausen, who had done other work for the Martin family. In later years, Carl Barkhausen would himself move his practice into an office in the Iron Block. Subsequent renovation projects eliminated the grand entry stairs and moved the building entries to ground level, and reconfigured the storefronts along Wisconsin Avenue and Water Street.

Over the next eighty years, the building was in a state of steady decline. Most of the detail on the facades fell victim to decay, and perhaps by scrap iron drives during the wars. In the late 1970s, the Iron Block was a rusting hulk on the busiest corner of downtown Milwaukee, a shadow of its former self. The building thankfully underwent a major renovation in 1983, which saved it from the inevitable threat of demolition.

The building was again ready for attention in 2012, as the materials used in the 1983 renovation did not stand the test of time. Corrosion had attacked most of the surfaces of each façade, and it was common to see detached ornament lying on the sidewalk. A full, historically accurate renovation was planned.

In order to bring the facades back to their original magnificence, patterns and molds had to be created from photographs and pieces of the original building. Over 4,200 new pieces were cast in Wisconsin foundries to replace the missing acanthus leaves, lions' heads, columns and capitals, and even the garlands of grapevines. These pieces ranged in weight from a few ounces to over 1,200 pounds for the columns needed to restore the original entrance on Water Street. The entire iron façade was sandblasted down to raw steel, and a three-part epoxy paint system was used to chemically bond with the ferrous surfaces. New cornice and pediments were molded from FRP (fiberglass reinforced

polyester) and restored the proportions and grandeur of the original design. The addition, mistakenly painted for the better part of a century, was stripped down to the original Cream City brick.

The exterior renovation was unveiled in June 2013 to an enthusiastic, supportive city that appreciates its architecture. In the summer of 2014, Dental Associates will open the doors of the Iron Block to show off the extensive renovation of the interior spaces- capturing yet again a bit of the magic of historic Milwaukee.



**BEFORE**



**AFTER**





**BEFORE**



**AFTER**





# A LOST GEM FOUND

BY DIANA MIREL | A HISTORIC RENOVATION HAS ALLOWED THE IRON BLOCK BUILDING IN MILWAUKEE TO RETURN TO ITS FORMER GLORY.

When local Milwaukee businessman James Martin purchased the land at East Wisconsin Avenue and Water Street in 1850, the corner had dilapidated wooden shacks with little life. But Martin had big plans. He took down the shacks and began planning the Iron Block Building, a new office building that would change the neighborhood forever.

Today, this corner is in the heart of downtown Milwaukee, and the newly restored Iron Block Building is a point of pride in the city. But before the building was bought by Dental Associates in January 2012, the building's future was grim.

## THE BACKSTORY

After purchasing the land, Martin headed to New York City looking for architectural inspiration. And he found it at the Cary Building, an Italian Renaissance revival with a cast iron façade by D.D. Badger Co. Martin wanted his building in Milwaukee to mirror the Cary Building architecturally. He hired George Johnson, Badger's chief architect and shop manager, to design the Iron Block building; and Johnson used many of the same molds used for the Cary Building.

"Cast iron architecture was just coming into vogue," said Mark Demsky, AIA, architect for Dental Associates. "It was the industrial revolution's answer to stone masonry. With cast iron, you could mold anything you wanted fairly inexpensively and then paint it to look like stone, without the expense of stone masons."

The building was completed in 1860. In 1898, a 30-foot wide addition—built out of masonry—was added to the building and almost doubled its the foot print.

Over the next 100-plus years, the Iron Block Building had many ups and downs. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, and underwent a major renovation in 1983. Much of the façade work at that time was done with foam, wood and metals that did not withstand the test of time. Years of neglect eventually led the building into a state of disrepair.

THE LIONS HEAD MOLDS WITH GRAPEVINES HAD BEEN PART OF THE ORIGINAL BUILDING DESIGN, BUT WERE REMOVED DURING THE BUILDING'S HISTORY. THE RESTORATION TEAM, HOWEVER, HAD A BLACKSMITH RECREATE THE ORNATE MOLDS WITH WROUGHT IRON AND BROUGHT THIS DEFINING FEATURE BACK TO THE BUILDING AFTER 100 YEARS.

## STEPPING UP

That's when Dental Associates—a dental practice that has 11 dental centers throughout Wisconsin—bought the building in January 2012. Dental Associates saw an opportunity to restore the Iron Block Building to its former glory.

When Dental Associates was looking for a property to house their corporate headquarters and dental clinic, location was a top priority. Located in the heart of bustling downtown Milwaukee, the Iron Block Building was prime real estate.

"It is a great location for the clinic," said Demsky. "There are more people moving downtown and no dental providers in the area. It offered us a great opportunity to serve a good section of the community down there."

As one of the Milwaukee's most prominent properties, the Iron Block Building also helped to bring the Dental Associates' commitment



to the community to the forefront. “From a visibility standpoint, we couldn’t have picked a better place to stand up and announce that we’re dedicated to this city,” said Demsky.

Dental Associates’ owner, Dr. Thomas Manos, had a vision for the building and saw its potential despite its tattered state. “Dr. Manos said it could be beautiful again,” said Demsky.

The building needed some serious work. It was mostly vacant, and all of its systems were shot. The building was literally falling apart. “A lot of the pieces that were put on in the ’80s renovation were aluminum, and aluminum can deteriorate cast iron,” said Demsky. “It had gotten to the point where pieces actually were actually falling off the building.”

### BACK TO BEAUTIFUL

Dental Associates laid out a plan to restore the Iron Block Building to its original ornate, cast-iron beauty. The company planned to renovate in two phases, with the historic exterior renovation first, followed by an interior renovation for the corporate offices, a dental clinic and FedEx store (it’s one existing tenant that carried over from the former owner).

The plan was welcomed with open arms by city and state historic preservation societies. “We wanted to put it back to the way it was and take away all of the stuff that had been added that made it look bad,” said Demsky.

After doing thorough research, the architecture, design and construction team recreated patterns and molds for parts that hadn’t been on the building for 100 years. When the project was completed in June 2013, the team had put more than 4,200 new parts back onto the building.

Dental Associates wanted to keep the work local. “We found a local pattern maker and a local foundry to cast all of the iron pieces,” said Demsky. “It was great to have all the workmanship come from Wisconsin companies.”

One of the highlights of the restoration involved restoring the cornice and pediments—which had changed drastically throughout the building’s history—back to their original form. The team removed the old cornice from the ’80s restoration that was made of plywood and aluminum and created a replica of the original cornice.

“Restoring the cornice is a huge deal,” said Demsky. “It puts the correct cap on the building. The proportions of the building were so off because the cornice and pediments had been changed. When we put it back correctly, the difference was amazing.”

### RUNNING SMOOTHLY

Now that the exterior restoration is complete, the interior renovation is scheduled to be completed by February 2014. While the exterior focused on bringing the building back to its original beauty, the interior is more of a clean slate.

With little historical value left on the interior, the interior will be opened up for modern office and clinic spaces. Still, Dental Associates is staying true to the building’s history. “Our new interiors will still have a historic, traditional feel,” said Demsky.

The Iron Block Building is Dental Associates’ eleventh building. The com-



ALL OF THE COLUMN CAPITALS WERE RECAST IN 20-28 SEPARATE PIECES. IF THE COLUMN CAPITALS WERE REDONE IN JUST ONE PIECE, MUCH OF THE DETAIL WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST. BY RECASTING AND FABRICATING THE CAPITALS IN PIECES, THE TEAM WAS ABLE TO RESTORE A STUNNING LEVEL OF DETAIL IN THE BUILDING’S DRAMATIC COLUMNS.

pany will manage the Iron Block Building itself. “We are taking the entire building—aside from the FedEx storefront—for our own use, so we’ll be our own tenants,” said Demsky.

The company takes its role as the building’s caretaker very seriously. “The building was in such bad shape, and we are so proud of what we’ve done here,” said Demsky. “The building hasn’t looked this good in 153 years.”

Since the exterior restoration was unveiled in June 2013, the city has embraced the revitalized Iron Block Building. “A lot of people had ignored this building, and now they marvel at it,” said Demsky. “Everyone thought the Iron Block Building was a lost gem, but all of a sudden here it is again.” ■

DIANA MIREL IS A CONTRIBUTING WRITER FOR *JPM*®. IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS REGARDING THIS ARTICLE OR YOU ARE AN IREM MEMBER INTERESTED IN WRITING FOR *JPM*®, PLEASE E-MAIL MARIANA TOSCAS AT [MTOSCAS@IREM.ORG](mailto:MTOSCAS@IREM.ORG).