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# Opening Up, Adding To An Architectural Icon In Downtown Houston



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Real Estate

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A landmark skyscraper in downtown Houston's skyline is making some changes -- at street level. CALPIX

Formerly hidden space is being revealed, reconfigured and repurposed as part of a two-phase project to reactivate one of downtown Houston's iconic skyscrapers.

The estimated \$20 million project at Bank of America Center will add 35,000 square feet to the already 1.25 million-square-foot property. Located at 700 Louisiana St., the 1983 postmodern tower rises 56 stories and features a spire-tipped, stepped-back profile executed in Swedish red granite.

Phase I of the redo, now underway, opens up a two-story space previously encased within a windowless section of the building's base. Phase II will float two new floors within the building's banking hall, which soars 125 feet and stretches past a phalanx of 30 teller stations.

When designed 35 years ago by Philip Johnson and John Burgee of Johnson/Burgee Architects, the block-filling building had to accommodate a Western Union regional switching station. At the time, the cable-intense facility was too problematic to move from its corner site. Instead, the design incorporated it, screening it from the street as well as the adjacent bank lobby.

When M-M Properties, a privately held real estate investment firm, purchased the tower in 2007, the intent was to update the asset “someday,” says CEO Kenneth Moczulski.

Plans have been off and on the back burner in the interim, he says, citing timing factors like the national recession and fluctuating oil prices. Ultimately, however, with refinancing the original loan last year and the pending late-2019 departure of namesake tenant BOAC, it was time to get started, he says.



Windows are lightening up a formerly fortress-like facade as part of the redevelopment at Bank of America Center in Houston. CALPIX

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Last month, the project's first phase began to open up the former switching station. Adding windows on three sides (facing two streets and replacing the wall shared with the banking hall) will give the building "more life and a more friendly pedestrian experience," explains K. Jeffries Sydness, principal, Sydness Architects. He was on the original design team at Johnson/Burgee and is now project manager of the reboot.

Moczulski says the opportunity for design continuity was fortuitous: "As an owner and developer, there's a responsibility to the city to make sure you treat properly and with respect an iconic property like this."

Sydness also feels that need for seamlessness: "I just tried to do what I felt we would have done when we were designing the building originally," he says. "I am trying to use the same grammar that we did 35 years ago, in deference to Philip, so that it is a very sympathetic design and one that hopefully will feel like it was that way initially."

Moczulski says a high-end restaurant is a likely use within the freshly revealed space. It fronts the Theater District's Jones Plaza, a public venue also embarking on an update. Cultural events, redevelopment of nearby Market Square and the addition of high-rise residential properties downtown have helped foster a more lively evening atmosphere in the area, he says.



A Sydness Architects rendering depicts Phase II of the BOAC project at 700 Louisiana St., which floats new levels into the banking hall. COURTESY OF SYDNESS ARCHITECTSS

Phase II, affecting the banking hall, could begin in December 2019, following Bank of America's departure. That work scope calls for floating two-plus levels office space at the mezzanine level, reached by a glass-enclosed elevator and stairs. The existing escalator from the original design will be a major element in the space, Sydness says. Lobby-level tenant amenities are part of the remix and might take the form of an open-seating coffee kiosk-style operation and a possible conference center.

The property was originally developed by Hines and home to RepublicBank Center.

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