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Teaching an old dog new tricks: Renovating or repositioning buildings into retail uses

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Ever since the economic downturn more and more developers seem to be renovating or repositioning buildings into retail venues. While renovation of buildings within the city of Boston has been common over the last 50 years, this dramatic up-tick especially in more suburban locales may be predicated on many factors. These include economic, leasing, zoning changes, or other market-driven forces.

At SMOOK Architecture & Urban Design, Inc. we find this type of work to be both challenging and rewarding. As architects, we love to design beautiful buildings that will last for generations. Equally fulfilling is breathing new life into what some may deem an eyesore and transforming an unattractive space into something truly appealing.

This article examines some of the regulatory and building code hurdles a design team must work with in the renovation of buildings within the Commonwealth. Often what appears to be quite a simple project can actually be very complex; being able to frame key issues early on is essential to an on-time, on-budget project. Prior to the renovation or repositioning of any sizable structure, SMOOK Architecture always engages a qualified Code Consultant who can provide the design team with an existing building narrative report summarizing the applicable codes and standards for the project.

In older buildings, the presence of hazardous materials such as asbestos, lead paint and other contaminants also need to be identified and evaluated at the outset. Usually, removal is the best means of eliminating the problem although in some cases encapsulation is possible. Getting a handle on the extent of hazardous materials within an existing building or on site requires careful planning.

Watch Out for Those Building Upgrade Triggers

Fire sprinkler systems, accessibility and structure are some of the factors that need to be evaluated to get a full sense of the scope and cost of the building improvements. Each has its own major building upgrade thresholds.

Fire protection systems (automatic sprinklers) are required for any new or existing building greater than 7,500 square feet when altered by addition or major renovation provided sufficient water supply and pressure exists. Major renovations in this case are defined as work that exceeds one third of the aggregate area or one third of the assessed value of the building. Cost of work performed is as aggregated over a five-year timeframe.

Accessibility is another critical item. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts there are two standards for accessibility: the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) 2010 Standards for Accessible Design. For the former there are three levels of thresholds which will trigger upgrades: work less than \$100,000, work greater

then \$100,000 but less than 30% of the full and fair cash value of the building, and work greater than 30% of that same figure. The first requires only the new building upgrades and corresponding components to comply; the last requires compliance of the entire facility to comply. Variances can be sought if improvements can be illustrated to be technologically infeasible or compliance would result in excessive and unreasonable costs without substantial benefits to those with disabilities.

Building structural upgrades come with their own set of triggers. One major one occurs when modifying more than 50% of the area of the building, in which case a structural engineer needs to be engaged to evaluate the requirements of seismic upgrades. Such upgrades could include diagonal bracing, shear wall or other core augmentations. Additionally the change of the intended use of the building may cause additional triggers, depending on if the new intended use moves the building to a higher hazard/use category than its present use.

Pick Your Path But Be Consistent

The International Building Code (IBC) and The International Existing Building Code (IEBC) are now in force in Massachusetts and provide for three alternative compliance paths for the renovation of an existing building: The Prescriptive Method, The Work Area Method, and the Performance Method. Each has its own merits and drawbacks. It is important to involve the entire design team in the decision about which to use as once a method is chosen the renovation must strictly adhere throughout the scope of the project.

Approvals, Approvals and more Approvals... This is Massachusetts

Approvals vary from city to city and town to town, but in general permitting in the northeast can be a bit more challenging than other parts of the country, especially given the public approval process here in the Commonwealth. Approvals can range from the most basic of building department approvals to the most complex labyrinth of paths involving local, state and even federal agencies. When possible consulting with a local attorney specializing in permitting can help spearhead and/or expedite the approval process.

Designing for the 21st Century

With the increase in environmental awareness in both the public and private sectors, more and more developers and builders are choosing to integrate sustainable strategies into their projects, with some taking the steps necessary to attain LEED status.

Over the last decade developers and owners have become more and more cost-conscious. While due diligence is key to the final success of any renovation project, working with a qualified contractor during the design process to assist with pre-construction services is also beneficial. Carrying realistic construction cost contingencies through each of the phases of design and construction is essential. The team at SMOOK Architecture has spent the last two decades honing our skills specifically on these types of projects. Our professional staff can quickly get our collective arms around the issues discussed in this article, as well as others specific to each building or location, and delve passionately into design solutions that will add value to your project and real estate portfolio.

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