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Finegold Alexander Architects honored with awards for accessible design

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Boston City Hall Council Chamber

Boston, MA Two of Finegold Alexander Architects' design projects in iconic buildings – City Hall Council Chamber and Old Chapel at UMass Amherst - were recognized with two 2019 William D. Smith Memorial Awards for Accessible Design from The Boston Society of Architects.

The City Hall Council Chamber was recognized with a Citation and Old Chapel was recognized with an Award. The program recognizes excellence in design for creating equal access to these important spaces for all people to use and enjoy. In each project, the designs involved creative interventions to achieve universal access while also respecting, restoring and transforming them for contemporary uses.

“Boston City Hall was originally completed in 1968 and is a prominent example of the monumental Brutalist architectural style of that time, featuring facades and interior surfaces of exposed cast-in-place concrete,” said Jim Alexander, senior principal, Finegold Alexander Architects. Located on the fifth floor of City Hall, the Council Chamber renovation addressed accessibility, upgraded technology, and provided significant system, furniture and finish upgrades.

“We use the Chamber every month for our Advisory Board meetings, and the space is not only accommodating to our board members and the disability community, it provides ideal accessibility and inclusion. I never imagined that the Chamber could be so welcoming to people with disabilities! I am truly impressed and thankful for the design team's work every time I am inside, they did an incredible job,” Kristen McCosh, disability commissioner & ADA Title II coordinator of the Boston mayor's commission for Persons with Disabilities.

The councilors' floor was raised to be flush with the surrounding main floor level, allowing universal accessibility. “Raising the floor eliminated an existing ramp between the visitor seating, the councilors and the podium. Circulation is still direct, but without impediments. In addition, the redesign promotes a more inclusive atmosphere in the chamber,” said Christopher Lane, senior associate, Finegold Alexander Architects. Universal access was applied throughout the entire space

including aisle width adjustments, altered seating arrangements to accommodate wheelchairs and companion seating, the addition of integrated accessible public lecterns and an automated, accessible sit/stand podium for the council president allowing for an adjustable height. The podium was designed to be aesthetically sensitive to the fabric and characteristics of Boston City Hall, and to convey a sense of formality while being fully accessible.

The new lighting was designed in the spirit of the original lighting, by removing the surface mounted fixtures from previous renovations and replacing them with recessed LED fixtures within the concrete grid that is a hallmark of Boston City Hall.

Additionally, new furnishings were designed to accommodate the desired aesthetic, while being accessible and technologically enabled. The work included the installation of new carpeting, replacement of the councilors' desks, fabric drapery panels, and selective replacement of other movable furniture.

Old Chapel at UMass Amherst

Old Chapel at UMass Amherst underwent a \$14.3 million renovation to transform the building from a shuttered former library and place of assembly into an exciting student and event center with flexible, accessible spaces for a variety of uses. "It was important that the renovation was respectfully done to preserve the historic character while providing universal access to the facility," said Regan Shields Ives, principal at Finegold Alexander Architects.

The Old Chapel was originally built in 1884 as a library, classroom, and assembly space. It was closed to the public in 1999 due to code and access deficiencies.

In 2014, Finegold Alexander was hired and began the process of evaluating the building for both restoration and rehabilitation. Preserve UMass, the Mass. Historic Commission, and the Amherst Accessibility Advisory Committee were all included in the overall process of determining what would be the best redesign and use of the building.

The original building entry was completely inaccessible both inside and out as stairs were the only means to navigate level changes. To solve the problem the team designed a new main entry on the south elevation of the building and created an integrated landscaped ramp and terrace. The new glass entry allows the addition of a contemporary accessible entrance without disturbing the historic fabric. Inside, an elevator was discretely inserted to connect all three levels of the building. These design improvements allowed the building's performance goals to be met while still preserving the distinctive features of the Old Chapel. New energy efficient mechanical systems, windows, and insulation contributed to the LEED Gold certification.

Other elements of the Old Chapel renovation include reconfigured program spaces with access and code compliant doorways, accessible toilet rooms, improved lighting, audio-visual and acoustic upgrades, including assistive listening devices, and accessible signage.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Old Chapel is a historic icon for the University. Located in the heart of campus, along two pedestrian thoroughfares, it was especially important that the renovation was sensitively done to preserve the historic character while providing universal access to the facility,” said Jim Alexander, senior principal at Finegold Alexander Architects.

City Hall Council Chamber Project Team

Client: City of Boston, City Hall Council, Public Facilities Dept., Mayor’s Commission for Persons with Disabilities

Architect: Finegold Alexander Architects

General Contractor: Reliable New England General Contractors

Interior Design, Furniture and Finishes: Meek Consulting Group

Lighting Design: Sladen Feinstein Integrated Lighting

Structural Engineer: RSE Associates Inc

MEP/FP Engineer: WSP

Acoustical Engineering: Acentech

Specifications: Kalin Associates Inc.

Cost Estimator: Fennessy Consulting Services

Photographer: Raj Das Photography

UMass Amherst Old Chapel Project Team

Client: University of Massachusetts-Amherst, University of Massachusetts Building Authority

Architect: Finegold Alexander Architects

Contractor: Barr & Barr, Inc.

Structural Engineer: RSE Associates, Inc.

M/P/FP Engineer, Acoustics & Audiovisual: ARUP

Security, Electrical, Telecommunications & IT: ART Engineering Corp.

Accessibility Consultant: Kessler McGuinness & Associates

Sustainability Consultant: The Green Engineer, Inc.

Civil Engineering & Environmental Permitting: Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc.

Building Code Consultant: Hughes Associates, Inc.

Landscape Architect: Stimson Studio

Historic Preservation Consultant: Preservation Technology Associates

Industrial Health Hygienist: Fuss & O’Neill EnviroScience

Cost Estimator: VJ Associates

Food Service/Kitchen Consultant: Crabtree McGrath Associates, Inc.

Stained Glass Window Restoration: Rohlf’s Stained & Leaded Glass Studio

Interior Design: Stefura Associates

Photography: Robert Benson Photography

Historical Review: Preserve UMass, Massachusetts Historic Commission

