



Romanesque Holiday

If you believe F. Scott Fitzgerald, “There are no second acts in American lives.” Josh Benthien of Northland Enterprises couldn’t disagree more. “The first time I stepped into the Baxter Library building, I knew this historic structure was ready for another scene.”

With the inspiration of Benthien and the rest of an enormous supporting cast, the building is in fact about to enter its *third* act; having served as a library and then as an art school, it will begin the 21st century as home to VIA Group, an advertising, marketing, and communications company.

Let’s set the stage. James Phinney Baxter, mayor of Portland, gave the building that bears his name to the city in 1888. After making his fortune in canned goods, he devoted himself to philanthropy, and while he’s happi-


ly remembered by strollers for his efforts to establish Baxter Boulevard around Back Cove, he was especially interested in education, and from the beginning he meant the building to become the wondrous new Portland Public Library.

To design it, he enlisted Francis Fassett, a Bath-born architect responsible for re-envisioning much of Portland in the wake of the 1866 fire. (Fassett was also responsible for launching John Calvin Stevens’s career; Stevens was an apprentice in Fassett’s office before striking out on his own.) Baxter’s enlightened gift to booklovers follows the Romanesque Revival style of the late 19th century. Henry Hobson Richardson was probably the style’s most famous American proponent, but Fassett enjoys a wonderful Romanesque holiday here himself, incorporating the rounded arches, recessed entrances, and short columns characteristic of the style.

In 1983, after a storied first act—many living Mainers remember getting their first library cards here—the Baxter building was acquired

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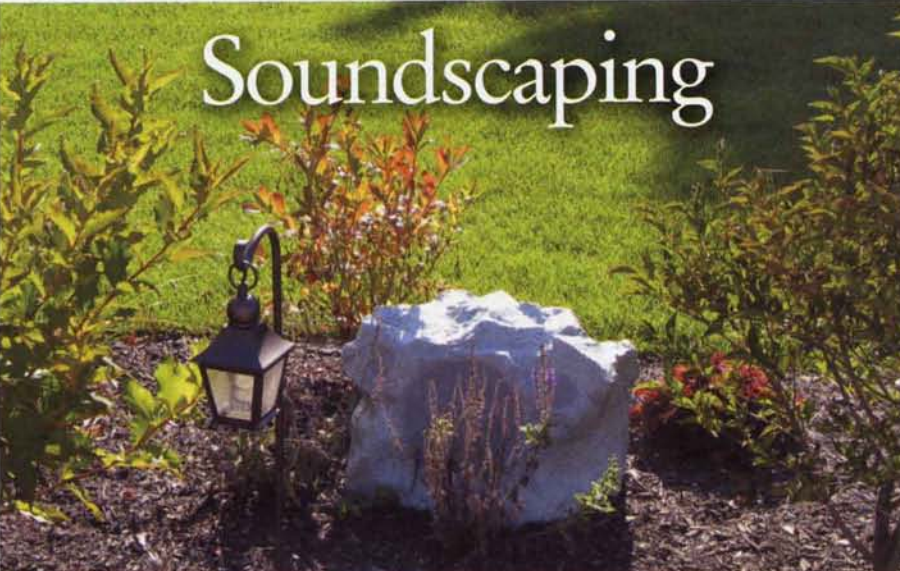
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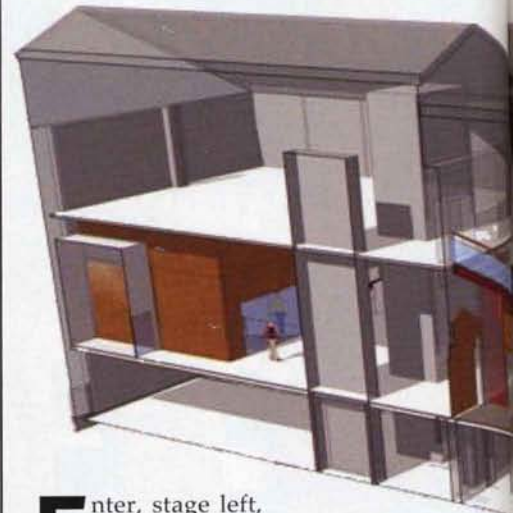
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TALKINGWALLS

and adapted by Maine College of Art (MECA) for classrooms, darkrooms, and a library, but by 2003, they were looking to consolidate their operations in the Porteous Building. After converting the nearby Everett Hotel to dorm space for MECA, "We had a really good working relationship," Northland's Benthien says, "so we offered to develop the Baxter Building" to help MECA better sell or rent the place.

Initial plans to convert the building to small office spaces catering to creative professionals foundered. Still, Northland hung on: "We owed it to MECA to keep trying to make it work."



Enter, stage left, John Coleman, president and CEO of VIA Group: "I'd served on the board of MECA for several years but hadn't paid that much attention until I heard at a board meeting that once again a deal had fallen through. I sheepishly thought, 'Don't raise your hand; don't say you might be interested.' But I cautiously raised my hand and said, 'I may have an idea.'" VIA had been headquartered since its founding in old warehouse buildings on Danforth Street, but their lease was coming to an end: What if they became the Baxter building's next signature occupant?

Having cast the role of tenant, Northland arranged financing, taking advantage of new state tax breaks for historic redevelopment and working out a complicated mix of federal funding, tax help from the city, and other incentives. Because of the mixed financing, a host of different agencies and individuals has to sign off on even the simplest changes to the structure.

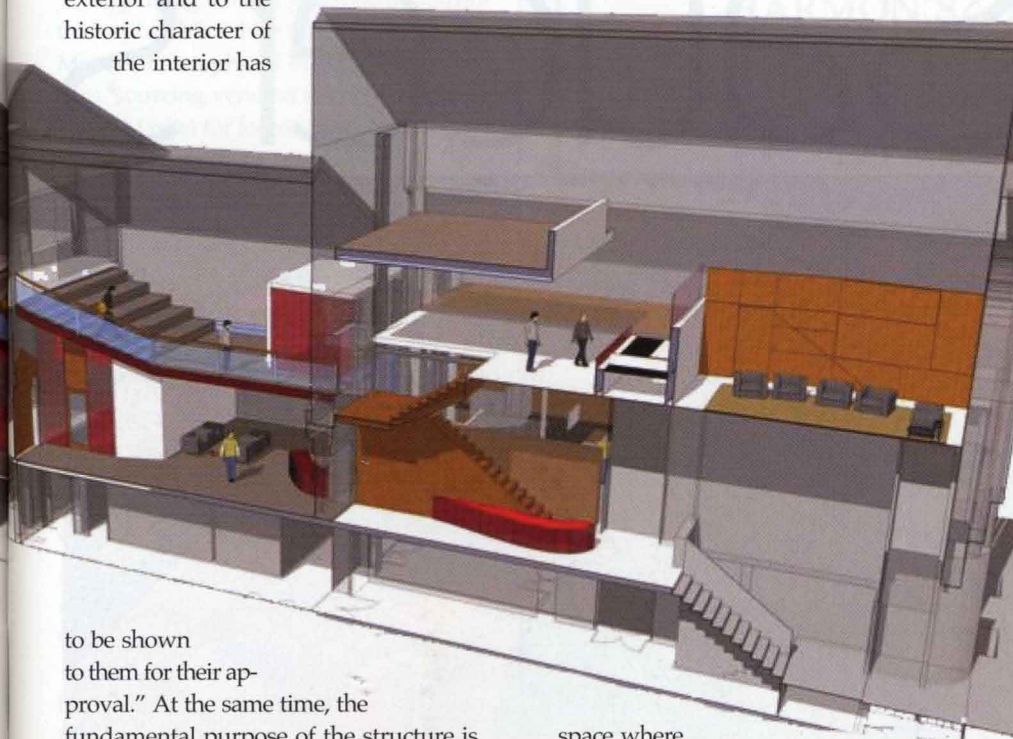
The balancing act doesn't end there. Archi-

jects for both Northland and VIA are coordinating efforts to recast the building. Archetype Architects is responsible for the shell and core, while Scott Simons Architects (SSA) is designing the new interiors for VIA.

Benchmark Construction, the project's contractor, is striving to achieve the goals of both sets of architects while adhering to an aggressive completion deadline.

All this choreography must be carefully managed. Kevin Gough of Archetype says, "The National Park Service is a great example: They're looking to protect the building as a historic landmark, so everything we do to the exterior and to the historic character of the interior has

mation of the former library's Main Reading Room: "The Room had beautiful wood detailing, high book shelves—it was a classic old reading room. We're changing it to a place of activity, where there's lots of movement, lots of motion." SSA has designed a mezzanine that will cut through this room, connecting the upper floor in the rear with the upper gallery in front, dramatically, as Simons puts it, "flying through the space." The mezzanine will provide a place of connection not just for the two ends of the building but also for the people inside, with meeting spaces, a kitchen, and a lounge. "VIA wants to create a very active social



to be shown to them for their approval." At the same time, the fundamental purpose of the structure is changing. Will Gatchell of SSA says, "This was a building designed to hold books. Our challenge is to figure out a way to make it hold people."

Despite these challenges, the parties involved seem thrilled to be creating a new life for a grand old stage. Scott Simons says, "Our goal as the architects for the interior is to create extreme contrast between the old and the new—a very interesting 'conversation.'"

Coleman adds, "We're extremely excited to be part of the arts district; we see that part of town as having just incredible potential, and the building is going to be wonderful, just tremendous." Benthien says simply, "We're so pumped about it."

Inventive set design always grabs an audience's attention. Simons explains the transfor-

space where their clients can come and see the energy of their business."

At the opening ceremonies of the Baxter Library in February of 1889, James Phinney Baxter said, "When the curtain rose upon the first scene in this historic drama of this building, it was but 'the insubstantial fabric of a vision' to the architect and myself... The curtain rises again as I resign this charge to others." The curtain rises again as this landmark sails through time: in August 2010. ■

▶ Visit Online Extras at portlandmonthly.com for more images. Developer: Northland Enterprises LLC, Portland; architect, shell: Archetype Architects, Portland; structural engineers: Structural Design Consulting Inc., Old Orchard; general contractor: Benchmark Construction, Westbrook; architect, interiors: Scott Simons Architects, Portland

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