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AIA Tampa Bay Center for Architecture & Design
Tampa, Florida
Sol Design Studio | Tampa, Florida

Photo by Mark Borosch

AIA Tampa Bay's new Center for Architecture & Design was a long time coming.

"We're talking 20 years," said Peter Hauerstein, AIA, WELL AP, principal/architect at Sol Design Studio and a past president of AIA Tampa Bay. "Way back when, our executive director was working out of a garage. We kept moving but were always looking for a permanent home. When I was president-elect of the chapter, we finally found the place we wanted."

As it turned out, the project to renovate the existing building, which was once a restaurant primarily serving a neighboring cigar factory in West Tampa, rolled over into the following year, when Hauerstein was chapter president. "We needed someone to handle the renovation, and my partner and I stepped up," he said. "The next thing I knew, I was architect, client and construction manager all at the same time."

Before renovation, the circa-1904 building bore many hallmarks of a long-neglected historic commercial structure, including bricked-over windows, mesh security grilles over the meager remaining openings, a portable air conditioner inserted haphazardly into a brick wall and a crumbling parapet. Even so, its inherent architectural character shone through. The front façade, along Howard Avenue, was divided into six slightly recessed bays, each with a modest brick corbel at the top. All of the bays except the one containing the main entrance had inset rectangular panels at the bottom. An intact cornice with a parade of tightly spaced dentils capped the façade and linked the building to neighboring structures to the north.

Sol Design Studio, which undertook the project on a pro bono basis, opened the bricked-over windows, repaired the exterior brick walls and painted them white, and added period-appropriate, hook-shaped

light sconces. The cornice is finished in a contrasting gray. On the south façade, the names and logos of the Tampa Bay chapter and the Center for Architecture & Design are painted directly on the wall, recalling the façade signs that were popular on commercial structures in the early 20th century.

The renovated interior retains several noteworthy historic elements, including a wood post-and-braced-beam frame that was left partly exposed and partly incorporated into a new interior wall. A heavy wood door that originally provided access to the restaurant's cooler was refinished and relocated to one wall of the center's main gallery space. The design team kept some interior partitions low to avoid interfering with the restored stamped-tin ceiling.

The most eye-catching historic interior element is the terrazzo floor, which required delicate rehabilitation. "We knew

it was dirty," said Hauerstein, "but until the grime came off we didn't know how bad its condition was. Our great contractor, MVH Construction, filled hundreds of holes and divots in the floor. I think most people would have a hard time trying to find where any of the repairs were made to the terrazzo or where we had to replicate missing parts of the tin ceiling."

In addition to a gallery space, the center contains offices and special event spaces. Since it opened in 2023, the venue has hosted a wide array of professional and community programs and events. The Tampa Historic Preservation Commission unanimously recommended that the restored building be designated a local landmark in the West Tampa Multiple Properties Group.

"For us, there was something more to this project, knowing that the building wasn't just ours but our chapter's and the community's," said Hauerstein. "The chapter represents 750-plus members, and we wanted them to be proud of this place. With a lot of in-kind support from our allied members, it's really turned into what we hoped it would be."