

# the RESILIENCY PROJECT



Saving a historic building becomes the project of a lifetime as Think Design's Josh Wadzinski navigates the onset of a worldwide pandemic.

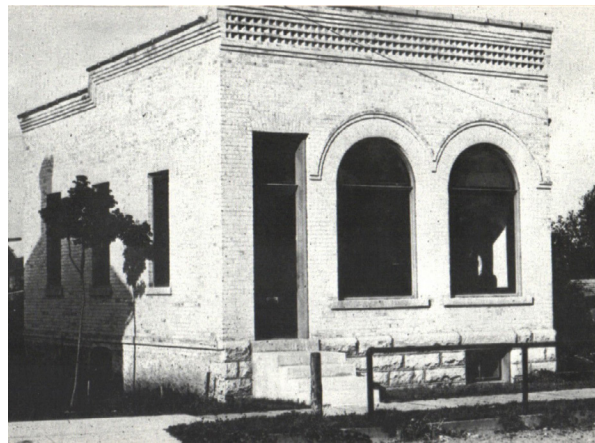
BY JOSH WADZINSKI, AIA

*January 31, 2020 "Start of Construction for your new office!"*  
A calendar excerpt celebrating construction kick-off for our new architectural offices blissfully unaware a global pandemic was about to test our resolve with unimaginable challenges.

After years of planning, working hard and financially saving we embarked on the next chapter of our nine-year-old business. Our new office would include a comprehensive remodel of a historic building complex, a combination of two 100-year old masonry buildings that once housed Grafton's state bank and post office. Restoration work would include: new structural systems, comprehensive utility upgrades, masonry restoration, ADA/life-safety compliance, new windows/doors, full roof replacement, foundation repairs and interior finishes.

The building, originally slated for demolition to be part of a redevelopment of the whole city block, sat empty for 10 years prior to our acquisition and had experienced significant deterioration. Through design, we would blend a faithful historic restoration of the exterior with a relic-like industrial styled interior to meet our office needs. The project would highlight our commitment to sustainable design and adaptive reuse of structures; serving as a model for our clients.





1908



1926



1967



2019



**Historic Grafton State Bank & Post Office 1908-2019**

A small cream city brick building with distinct arched windows was constructed in 1908 for Grafton's first bank (even included a hitching post for horses). With success from local deposits, in 1926 just before the Great Depression, the bank expanded with a new building four feet to the east. The original building was then leased to the Grafton Post Office for forty years. In 1967 the bank once again expanded, this time combining the two buildings (relocating the post office in the process). During this expansion the exterior was completely clad in gold metal panels which covered all windows and historic ornamentation.

A few weeks into the build and all was proceeding smoothly; the demolition phase was near complete with rough carpentry starting. A steel chain-link fence surrounded the building to protect the public from the missing sidewalks, demolished concrete stoops and construction equipment. Plywood covered all the giant window and door openings, not much to be concerned with from weather because the "building" was a deteriorated brick shell and new work was slated to commence quickly.

With architectural planning complete, at the start of the construction I was essentially acting as a construction manager – coordinating multiple bids, awarding sub contracts, critical path scheduling, handling draw payments and daily construction meetings. I had expected minor construction contingencies to be solved with traditional, financial methods. On March 13, 2020 the ground seemingly shifted beneath our feet as the pandemic kicked into high gear with country-wide lock downs, flight cancellations and school closings. I spent the weekend contemplating the future of the project – stop work or press on? The decision was made: we had to adapt while firmly committing our resolve to see a project through.

Announcement of the lockdown brought an initial jolt of panic, the project really was not in a position to stop – after



2022



the prep phase of getting the historic structure ready for new work, it would have been catastrophic to abandon the site and our dreams to Covid. Regulations were reviewed and our interpretation of the new lockdown rules coming from the state allowed for construction to be considered an "essential business operation" when the health, safety and welfare of the general public was at risk. Discussions were held and with subcontractors' willingness to work we forged ahead together into uncharted territory.

Springtime brought warm weather and we started to see some benefits to working through the pandemic. Exterior work commenced: the roof was a full tear off, the roof decking needed significant repair, brick parapets needed reconstruction, new mechanical units were craned to the roof and the entire exterior of the building required extensive masonry restoration (scaffolding, mechanical lifts, dust, debris, etc.). All of this dangerous work, to a building located on a normally busy corner, occurred in a pandemic ghost town. We were actually ahead of schedule.

Just before Memorial Day came our first confirmed case on the jobsite – a construction worker's relative became ill and transmitted the virus. That morning, upon learning about the exposure, the jobsite shutdown and I requested everyone get tested at a National Guard drive-thru station. After a negative test, I walked the empty jobsite spraying ammonia on bare rough carpentry. At the time, we really had no idea what was effective in killing the virus or how long it stayed on surfaces. Further complicating the situation, proper cleaning supplies and protective gear were scarce on store shelves. Luckily, I had a stock pile of ammonia to counter the acid we were using for brick masonry restoration. Spraying 2x4s seemed ridiculous but what choice did we have? National information was often contradictory and changed daily.

With renewed caution, construction continued after our two week site closure. Progress over the next few months slowed dramatically. For the construction industry, the pandemic became the go-to-excuse for having schedules slide. I however was witnessing companies, who had

**2019-2022**

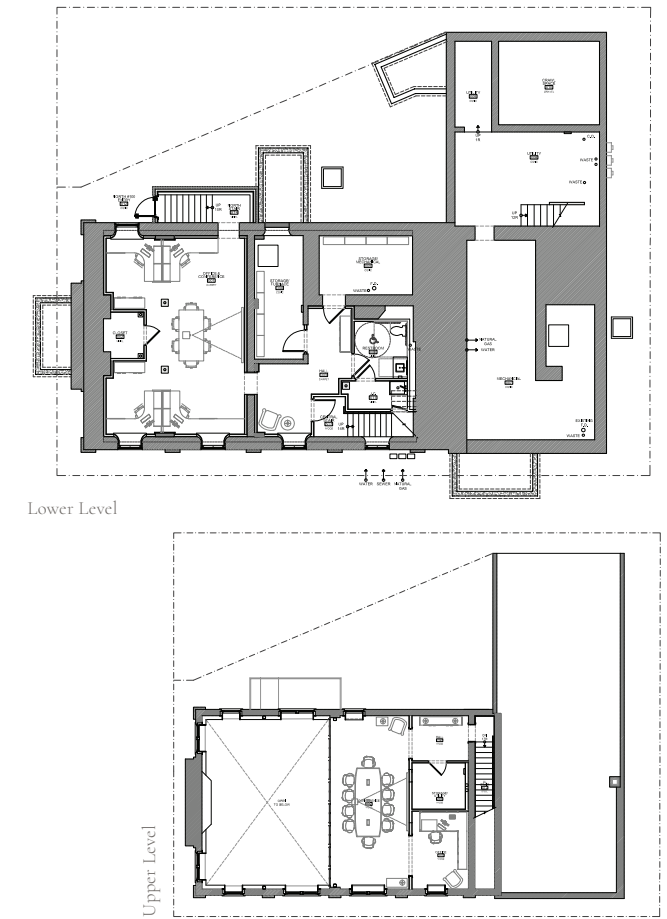
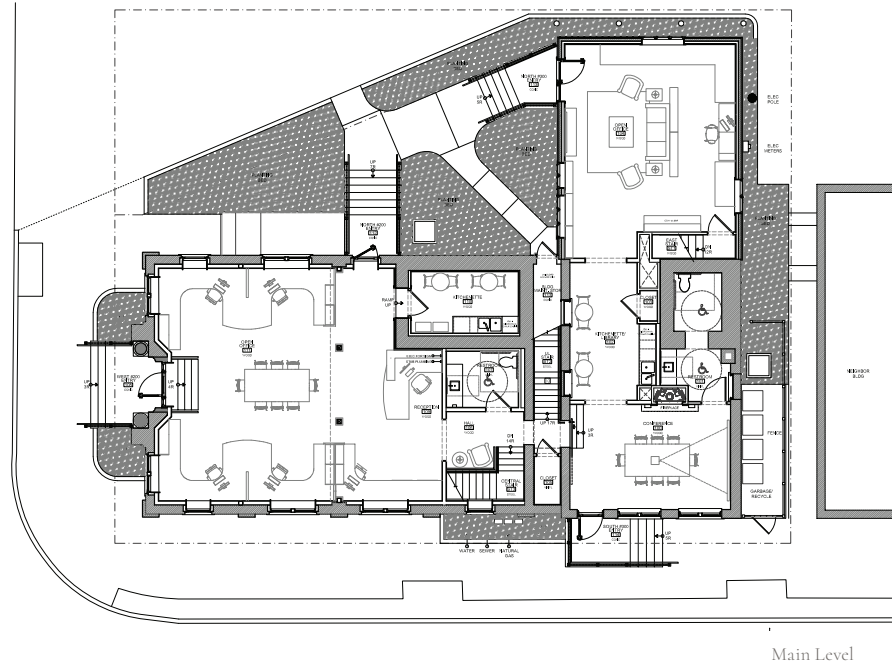
With metal paneling removed, after sitting vacant for a decade, the building in 2019 was near collapse. Think Design acquired the building and the architectural planning began for new offices. Two-and-half years later, the masonry buildings that once housed the village's state bank and post office have been fully restored, blending a faithful historic exterior with contemporary interiors.

anticipated a slowdown, over commit themselves to new opportunities. We now had to navigate scheduling beyond general health concerns; there was a labor shortage as well. For our project, the real cause for concern affecting construction started around November 2020. Material orders were placed for interior doors, kitchen cabinets, wood flooring, etc. Weeks went by, months went by, fabricators and construction suppliers made every excuse possible because they had no product to fulfill orders. At first, anything dealing with wood products experienced significant delays. Over the next few weeks, global supply chains started breaking and just about everything was either on extended backorder or simply unavailable. Adaptation and patience was the only option. We had to consider substitutions and availability for virtually everything if we wanted to complete the project.

Earlier, during the bidding phase of the project, I had intentionally not sought bids for finish work after drywall (millwork, cabinets, railings, flooring, decorative metal work, etc.). In order to not overextend the company financially and make the project feasible, I was anticipating taking on construction work myself or hiring it out if the project was on track. Growing up, I was raised in a family-owned business specializing in custom cabinets and remodeling which provided me the necessary skills to even consider this path.

During this point in the timeline, eighty-percent of the project had been locked in with pre-pandemic contracts.





With the remaining twenty-percent, I was now facing difficulties in getting bids to complete the construction due to labor shortages and material costs dramatically rising with inflation. My architectural business was very busy during the pandemic compounding the problems facing completion of the new office. My attempts to hire out the construction work were not successful – the building is complicated, and during a time flush with work, I found companies were either not interested due to full schedules or they were inclined to bid a premium even for consideration.

I rolled up my sleeves, and with any free time available, began working for the next 10 months. With wood shortages and prices skyrocketing, I was fortunate to have spent the past two years collecting reclaimed wood for adaptive sustainability reasons. Searching for reclaimed material on previous construction projects produced California redwood siding (amazing 15' boards without a single knot), old-growth cedar decking, cherry columns from a kitchen remodel, maple, birch, alder, etc. All of the material had to be de-nailed and milled on site with a portable planer. With a mixed assortment of species I took the dominant redwood and found a complimentary stain – the effect blended everything to a surprising consistency. The reclaimed wood became the elaborately-designed trim packages throughout the building.

We went on to install thousands of square feet of hickory flooring, carpeting, diamond-plate steel stairs, interior doors, stone mosaic tile flooring, decorative metal guardrails, a reclaimed gas fireplace & mantle, two kitchenettes and three restrooms. For the most complex two-person projects I was fortunate to have my master craftsman, retired father answer the call when needed. Together we experienced working on the historically crooked building. Every piece of millwork had to be made to unique conditions and painstakingly installed throughout the building.



[Bottom Left] The interior structure being stabilized with a temporary steel armature prior to construction. [Top Left] An existing interior condition with punched openings between the two buildings. [Top Right] New bank entrance with reclaimed wood trims and decorative metalwork. [Bottom Right] A new mezzanine framed in the bank with custom steel guardrail.

I believe every business owner's metric of success varies. For Think Design, we define our success by maintaining optimal design exemplified through high quality construction. When starting a business, that commitment is an extremely difficult choice. It requires you to turn down many potential opportunities that do not meet your company's mission. Growth, in a business sense, is intentionally slow to maintain quality.

Through the pandemic, I went from being a sole practitioner working in his home, to having the renewed potential of an architectural studio for 24 professionals. Our design allowed for subdividing the building into three distinct lease spaces, providing ancillary revenue while allowing for incremental growth. Opportunity awaits as we turn the page of our next chapter, continuing our focus on enriching life through design.



**AUTHOR**

Josh Wadzinski, AIA is the Founder of Think Design LLC, which specializes in boutique commercial projects and heirloom quality residences. With a diverse educational background, his interests range from modern aesthetics to traditional, historical styles of architecture.