

**Hodgson Russ
brings the Guaranty Building back to life**

By Barry A. Muskat

Photography by kc kratt



“The partners of Hodgson Russ are devoted to resurrecting the Guaranty Building from a near-date with the wrecking ball to complete restoration to its former greatness ... We believe Hodgson Russ’s best days lie in the future—as do Buffalo’s.”

Gary Schober, President and CEO

Hodgson Russ

Hodgson Russ is the oldest law firm in the area, tracing its ancestry to Asa Rice and the early nineteenth century. Two of the firm’s lawyers served as president of the United States, one as governor of New York State, and three as mayors of Buffalo. It’s therefore fitting that the firm is taking responsibility to assure a legacy for one of Buffalo’s most important architectural icons.

Buffalo's Guaranty Building is a world-famous masterpiece, the pinnacle of excellence in Louis Sullivan's career, and has the highest designation as a National Historic Landmark. This is a building about which architectural historians get dreamy. Built in 1895–96, it is critically important in the history of architecture as outstanding example of one of America's finest early skyscrapers.

Depending on their ages, Buffalonians confusingly refer to the site as the Prudential Building, the Guaranty Building, and the Sullivan Building. So first, let's clear up some common misconceptions about the building's name. In the 1890s, Buffalo developer Hascal Taylor commissioned Louis Sullivan to build the finest office building in the city. Taylor died before the groundbreaking. Guaranty Construction (whom Taylor had hired to build the structure) undertook the project themselves and attached their corporate name. Two years later, Prudential Insurance assumed financing and renamed accordingly. The Guaranty name was re-adopted with the building's initial restoration in 1980.

This was a milestone building—an early skyscraper which departed from the standard construction technique using load-bearing walls. Instead, it incorporated an inner structure of steel support and applied exterior curtain walls. An early example of Sullivan's belief that form should always follow function, the building's narrow piers separate the windows and give an upward thrust to the structure, allowing the tall form to soar. Sumptuous red terra cotta tiles cover the façade, exuberantly and lavishly decorated with Sullivan's intricate organic designs.

The building's first interior renovation took it from outmoded mediocrity to quality office space (filling in the light court to bring valuable additional floor space in the 1980 restoration). Today, it's been transformed into a state-of-the-art headquarters for a law firm that has plans to restore and utilize its entire footprint.



The massive lobby features ornamental metalwork and mosaic tile.



The art glass skylights, now fully illuminated.



The Guaranty Building is more known for its exteriors than interiors, but that

doesn't mean there's nothing to love about the interior. Take a step into the lobby to glimpse at the metalwork, the gorgeous mosaic tile frieze, and the amazing skylights. The lobby is still magnificent, but now includes a reception area, an enormous conference room that can seat eighty, and several more intimate spaces.

The Prudential signs which were mounted for a century over the building's two entrance doorways have been saved and are displayed as historic artifacts. The larger is approximately twelve feet wide and hangs prominently in the lobby, very visible from the Pearl Street entrance. The other (which may have been too zealously cleaned up) hangs in the basement cafeteria.

One of my favorite spaces is the small lounge at lobby level. It's wrapped in floor-to-ceiling windows that formed part of the mercantile space to the street. It's flooded with natural light and offers an up-close-and-personal view of Sullivan's ornamentation on the stately round pillars. Nearby, a conference room is handsomely appointed with a granite table and leather chairs, all in shades of black, white, and charcoal.

The upper floors have been restored as offices for attorneys and staff. Color schemes are consistent throughout the building with an interior wall being punctuated in terra cotta (probably in too intense a persimmon shade). Offices are punctuated with large windows offering plenty of light and beautiful city views. The offices on the uppermost floor show off the building's oculus (round and oval) windows. Conference room names have all been taken from the history of the building or the firm (i.e., Cleveland, Fillmore, Asa Rice, Sullivan, Goodyear).

Everywhere you look, original materials frame wainscoting, heavy doors, handsome woodworking, original marble, and pieces of authentic history. A previously abandoned elevator shaft is being reworked to bring all of the original elevators back into service.



Hodgson Russ's initial goal was to have all employees working under one roof. The good and bad news is that with growth, the building doesn't have enough space and they'll still need to occupy a full floor of the Brisbane Building (for Information Technology and Accounting functions).

The most difficult part of the restoration was the federal government's unwillingness to leave their rental space in the building. A public and rather bizarre legal dispute saw Hodgson Russ suing their federal tenants (the Internal Revenue Service and the Drug Enforcement Administration). This eviction proceeding was trumped by government-threatened condemnation. A negotiated settlement was reached and subsequently the agencies have found other downtown sites which will allow the firm to occupy the balance of the space and finish with renovations. They recognize that maintaining and restoring the building's precious terra cotta exteriors will probably be an ongoing (perhaps lifetime) project to be attacked in stages.

For this viewer, the most impressive design element of the renovation is the attention that has been paid to lighting consistently throughout the building. The entire project is bathed in light. Stunning fixtures create a bright, inviting, and dynamic atmosphere. Even the mailroom in the basement glows with excitement and visual appeal, while the cafeteria's unique fixtures are accented in cobalt. Sullivan's sensational art glass skylights (converted to laylights when the light court was in-filled) now show the art glass to its fullest beauty, further illuminated with all-new backlights.

It must be very special to work in this building, so different than a typical corporate office space. Its meticulous historic renovation combined with its up-to-the-minute technology offer the very best of the old and new worlds.

Barry A. Muskat, Spree's architecture critic, is a businessman and architectural historian. He developed the Modern Architecture course at Canisius College and especially enjoyed taking students on a field trip to his favorite Louis Sullivan building.