

From the Sacramento Business Journal:

<http://www.bizjournals.com/sacramento/news/2016/09/30/real-estate-projects-sacramento-valley-station.html>

2016 Best Real Estate Projects | Historic Restoration

## Best Real Estate Projects: Sacramento Valley Station

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Sep 30, 2016, 3:00am PDT

It took only a few drops of distilled water to reveal Sacramento's Sistine Chapel.

Architect Greg Taylor remembers the moment. He was watching workers painstakingly restore a large mural inside Sacramento Valley Station, the city's longtime rail depot located on the northern fringes of downtown.

With a few gentle wipes, the mural's original colors beamed from a tiny patch of freshly restored paint, covered for years by layers of grime and cigarette smoke. Taylor, the city's supervising architect and project manager for the depot's ongoing modernization work, which includes the mural's restoration, said he was stunned.

"It was just so luminescent, the light almost emanating out of the window of this clean mural surface," said Taylor, who described the artwork as "our Sistine Chapel."

The mural depicts the 1863 groundbreaking ceremony held in Sacramento for the First Transcontinental Railroad. It is just one part of a long-term, three-phase overhaul of the 90-year-old station. With more than one million passengers each year, the station is the seventh-busiest rail station in the country.

City officials hope the refurbished station and its newly cleaned mural will become a bridge between downtown's two major redevelopment projects — the mixed-use railyard project being developed by LDK Ventures and the district around Golden 1 Center.

"There should be a natural connection between them," said Fran Halbakken, the city's project manager for the railyard.

The train station's transformation has been a long process. First constructed in 1926 when Americans still traveled primarily by rail, the station's busiest year followed its grand opening — a time of economic prosperity for Sacramento. But traffic declined after World War II as travelers turned to the automobile and airplanes to get around the country. A restaurant located in the building's western wing closed sometime in the 1960s. A false roof eventually was installed in the main lobby and waiting room, obscuring subtle but beautifully intricate stenciling on the vaulted ceiling.



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Those changes had a dimming effect on the station's character, said Roberta Deering, the city's former preservation director who worked on the project.

"When I first went in there, it was these sort of funky looking offices," Deering said. "It was just a nothing space."

The city took ownership of the 32-acre site in 2007 and has since spent nearly \$200 million on its renovation.

The first phase involved relocating tracks; a seismic upgrade; and the construction of three tunnels, passenger platforms and canopied walkways.

The second phase started in 2014. It has focused on historic preservation, the addition of energy-efficiency features, and construction of 25,000 square feet of mixed-use leasable space. The cost of this current phase is \$36.5 million.

At one point during the current phase, the building's brick façade was completely covered in white plastic sheeting, looking a bit like a giant circus tent as crews cleaned the red brick exterior.

Inside, workers were busy digging into the building's bones, which included 30 excavations to evaluate some of the station's 427 original Douglas fir pile foundations for decay. Taylor said that process was a bit tricky, requiring the city to slightly delay the project's timeline once engineers realized the complexity of the work. Only a few of the 14- to 15-inch-thick piles had noticeable signs of decay, but each one had to be sealed in a fiberglass jacket and injected with epoxy resin to strengthen the wood.

The excavations added time to the overall renovation but also confirmed the soundness of the 90-year-old foundation. "The building's never settled," said Taylor. "There's no cracking. It's very robust."

Another technically difficult part of the renovation involved the station's climate system. The building didn't have an air conditioning system other than a few window-mounted cooling units. And up until March, the building used boiler-heated steam radiators within the waiting area's wooden benches. The city, which is the general contractor on the project, replaced that system with water-filled tubing running through aluminum plates anchored to the underside of the concrete floor. An air displacement system sucks hot air out of the waiting room, reusing it during cooler months and evacuating it during the summer.

The new system will keep the station's climate controlled at 70 degrees year round.

"The ambient temperature at the passenger level will be very comfortable," Taylor said.

Another challenge involved keeping the station open during construction. Amtrak needed a workable space for offices and a ticket counter. The city eventually designed a temporary cube-like structure inside the western wing of the station for the rail company.

On the preservation side, the large mural in the waiting room is what immediately stands out, but other artistic touches have emerged throughout the renovation. Deering said one of the most rewarding aspects of restoring the building involved removing the false ceiling and cleaning the original vaulted surface to reveal softly-colored patterns of russet brown, turquoise and taupe stenciled high above the station's main waiting room.

"You just got this 'whoa, this is just a great wonderful ceiling,'" Deering said. "It was just beautiful to see it all."

Another thrill for the city's preservationists came when work crews discovered the station's bricks were manufactured by Cannon and Co., a local factory once located in Sacramento's Ben Ali neighborhood. Once the walls were cleaned, Deering said, she was amazed at how the station's original architects designed subtle patterns in the walls with different shades of brick. The building's wall "doesn't seem so one-dimensional," Deering said. "It's got more life to it."

Beyond the technical and historical aspects, the upgrades will transform the station into a mixed-use hub for 25,000 square feet of office and retail use over two floors, a rooftop terrace and patio space. Halbakken said she thinks the station's new leasable area will fit seamlessly into the railyard's central shops district, where developers have plans for similar mixed-use space.

"If you started (a smaller business) in the depot and it grew, you would be able to do that on a much larger scale in the railyard itself," she said.

In a way, the new commercial space provides a link to the building's past. The station once was a vibrant transportation hub where the community would gather for historic events, such as presidential whistle stop tours and the troop deployments of World War II, said William Burg, a local historian and board member of Preservation Sacramento.

But the new upgrades also will reboot the station in a way that goes beyond traditional preservation, Burg said. He pointed out that the most successful renovation projects in places such as Denver — where that city's historic station now includes restaurants, shopping, and a hotel — retain the historical transportation use while also introducing new uses to prolong and enrich the building's purpose.

"They're reprogramming," Burg said. "They're not putting it back to the way it was by any means."

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## Fast Facts

Location: 4th and I streets, Sacramento

Size: 68,000 square feet

Completion date: Phase 1 completed. Phase 2 to be finished in early December

Total cost: \$36.5 million for Phase 2

Developer: City of Sacramento

General contractor: Rudolph & Sletten Inc.

Architect, landscape design: Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Architects LLP

Preservation architect: Page & Turnbull

Mechanical, electrical, plumbing engineering design: Arup

Structural engineering, building envelope: Simpson Gumpertz & Heger Inc.

Civil engineering: Cunningham Engineering

Construction management: Vali Cooper & Associates Inc.