



Photography by J K Lawrence



**2009 Excellence in Design
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Merit Award**

Architects of Record:

Chris Martison, AIA
A & E Architects
224 North Higgins, Suite B
Missoula, MT 59802
406-721-5643
cmartison@aearchitects.com

The Bluebird Building Renovation
Missoula, Montana

The Renovation of the Bluebird Building celebrates both new and old Architecture by gently blending contemporary and early century design to create a timeless solution. The Bluebird Building, located at 222 N. Higgins, was constructed in 1896 and originally housed a retail store. In 1913 it was converted into a silent movie theater in Missoula, lasting until 1932. At that point the theater was then converted back to retail space. Throughout the upper floor exists much of the theater's original pressed tin ceilings, pressed wall paper and the original upper sloped balcony, which is still intact and preserved today. Along the east alley wall exists the theater's original screen and stage. The building was purchased by the present owner in 1991.

The existing building was split into (3) commercial leased office / retail spaces. The main floor was split into (2) retail spaces with an upstairs owner occupying the upper floor. With time, the business upstairs added pressure on the existing space with numerous remodels in order to accommodate their growing business needs. Access to the space was not only cumbersome but it lacked a primary entrance. This side entrance brought clients up and down a series of stairs until they finally reached their destination. This made numerous accessibility issues problematic. In 2006, the departure of a main floor tenant to the north triggered a major renovation to the space which met the required needs of the owner's growing business upstairs. With this available space to expand, the opportunity to gain "on-street" exposure and increased visibility became a real possibility. The existing main floor space did present its challenges though; a 100 year old building with years of remodeling efforts and a width of 12 feet. The tenant/owner required an open plan on the main floor for (2) reception staff, a waiting area, a break area, copy / fax and a large conference room. There was an additional effort in the design to create a connection with the existing tenant to the south on the main floor. This adjacent tenant would have shared use of the new conference space without affecting the business or security needs of the other. The renovation of space included a reconfiguration of work space upstairs. This work also had to be done while the building was occupied.

With 12' of usable width on the new entry level, the location of the existing door dictated the circulation path through the main floor. The entry door position was set by the buildings original exterior design, moving the door would have posed some larger issues and really no functional gain. Careful attention to scale was also given to the main floor so it would not feel small. This was done by maximizing ceiling heights which required the demolition of multiple old plaster ceilings and exposing the theaters old original floors above, timber beams & trusses. The main floor circulation path was then delineated though subtle articulated plan angles in the casework. These angles provide a clean path without creating a strong lineal corridor feel. The modern casework not only delineates circulation, it carefully screens office filing, copiers, printers and the general clutter that accompanies most reception/office management duties. The adjacent existing south wall was clad with panels of sunflower board which provides a panelized modern look while providing an integral picture rail.

Another primary design element for the office focused on a cantilevered steel stair which is anchored by a 20K lb. concrete footing. This stair connects the new remodeled main floor with the existing office space above. Using clear finished raw steel, maple slabs for treads and stainless steel cabling create an industrial aesthetic that complements the old theater's now exposed timbers and original brick walls.

The building's exterior is original by all counts, although it was never painted to the richness it is today. The entire building was originally painted as a bluish gray which muted and downplayed the rich detailing on the building's façade. Now painted with the traditional colors of the 1900's, the building is now one of Missoula's bright spots on historic Higgins Avenue.