In Marin County, California, an architect and an artist collaborate to convert Building 960, a turn-of-the-century military warehouse, into bucolic studios for artists.

Artists have always drawn inspiration from nature. With that in mind, in 1982 the National Park Service (NPS) helped to establish the Headlands Center for the Arts (HCA), a nonprofit artists' residency program located just north of San Francisco in Marin County's Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA). Last February, when a team led by architect Mark Cavagnero and Leonard Hunter, a sculpture professor at San Francisco State University (SFSU), converted an historic but dilapidated military warehouse in the park - Fort Barry Building 960 - to studios for HCA, the effort vivified HCA's commitment to provide a unique laboratory for visiting artists in a natural setting.

This laboratory - a 12,000-square-foot collection of spacious studios marked by slanted walls, rolling partitions, and a dramatic cantilevered central steel stair-is part of a long transition within the park. For more than a century beginning in 1866, the U.S. military commanded the 13,000-acre Marin headlands. The seaport fortifications hidden within this wooded setting remained there until 1972, when the NPS inherited the well-maintained site and its 200 buildings. They included forts Cronkhite, Barry, and Baker as well as numerous barracks, warehouses, and Cold War missile launch pads. The NPS offered several of these structures to HCA, one of 11 such "park partners," on condition that the buildings-many of which were rundown in spite of the site's overall excellent condition - be revitalized and maintained.

Artistic growth

HCA's presence in the park began with its 1986 renovations of Fort Cronkhite's Rodeo Lagoon beachside barracks and Fort Barry Building 944-the HCA's main headquarters. The center gradually became an internationally known arts organization model and, among preservationists, a creative reuse benchmark. A growing number of local affiliate artists rented the center's subsidized beachside barracks for day-use studios. Eventually, however, the park was unwilling to extend the year-to-year lease on the beachside properties. "There was and is a master plan that calls for certain uses within the park to be clustered," explains Kathryn Reasoner, HCA's executive director, and the pressure was mounting particularly because artists with blowtorches in tinder-dry barracks made the NPS nervous. Losing the studios could have been a crippling blow to the affiliate program.

The center got a break - and new space for studios - in 1994 when it secured a 20-year renewable lease for nine buildings, including its headquarters, Building 944, totaling 71,000 square feet of space. Landscaping by artist Mel Chin, when complete in 2002, will cluster HCA's old and new studios, a community center and a park. Among the center's new acquisitions and its latest creative reuse triumph is Fort Barry Building 960, the largest of a group of board-and-batten warehouses loosely dubbed the "Three Sisters" that sit just above a former Nike missile site. Building 960 had long been abandoned, and NPS even considered tearing it and its sister buildings 961 and 962 down. "There was dry rot in the sill plate and it needed seismic shoring all the way to the roof," says San Francisco-based Cavagnero, an HCA board member who donated his services to this effort.

Clean palette

Unlike Building 944, which features plaster walls, pressed-tin ceilings, and wood details, Building 960 was not architecturally significant. But it was an equally important historic "bookmark." Formerly a U.S. quartermaster's supply depot, the simple, rectilinear pre-World War I structure was built of old-growth redwood and Douglas fir and is a valuable example of army architecture adapted to site-specific conditions. In the attic, for example, posts are angled to brace the roof against gale force coastal winds. "Army engineers had pretty high code standards, and they wrote a code for site-specific conditions. They also had the budgets to build well," says Paul Ryan, another board member and builder. "Building 960 is not as slap dash as it looks."
HCA found virtues in the building's simplicity. Neither office nor barracks, it had no defined rooms: the three-story-high, peaked-roof building with a pair of symmetrical dormers was an open-plan, 12,000-square-foot storage space originally partitioned by chicken-wire dividers; its roughly north-south axis on a west slope allowed views of the Pacific Ocean and rolling hills below; and it contained a concrete basement with a west side loading entrance. A rickety wooden stair connected all levels, and occupants used a pair of simple pulley hoists in the center to haul materials up from the basement. Restoring such a building and adapting it to accommodate informal day-use spaces, Cavagnero emphasized, was yet another opportunity for artistic exploration.

Cavagnero advocated a partnership between contractor John Caletti and artists, despite the HCA board's misgivings over insurance liability. "We let the contractors do the engineering, as well as the work that had the most physical risk and the least visual gain," says the architect, who reserved the interior fabrication of the 18-month-long restoration for Hunter. Cavagnero convinced Rick Borjes, the GGNRA's historic architect, that although rehabilitation standards established by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior typically required that historic building shells remain unscathed, in this instance, to attempt to salvage the shell with interior seismic sheathing or even a crisscross steel brace would do history a greater disservice. "More than 40 percent of the exterior was so degraded that we could never have salvaged it anyway. It was mostly because the Park Service had not painted it," laments Cavagnero.

Contractors peeled away rotting siding from studs that could then be threaded with electrical lines and sheathed in plywood for seismic stability, and then covered the plywood with new redwood siding and fresh paint that matched the historic exterior. "It's a plywood shoebox, and the roof is also encased," says Cavagnero.

Inside, custom steel ties attach the rafters firmly to wall studs and the base sill is bolted to the foundation. Hidden under new siding, the exterior sheath screwed onto the balloon frame from sill plate to rafters distributes both lateral and vertical loads evenly to the original concrete foundation, which is still sound because it sits on bedrock. The architect replaced damaged doors and windows and removed one space-hogging hoist. To compensate for the extra 1/2-inch exterior cladding and siding, workers adjusted all the trim and mullions so that the shadow relationships remained true to the original.

Hunter, one of HCA's cofounders, knew Building 960 well since his students had used it for art installations in 1991. Using welding equipment on loan from SFSU, he installed a metal shop in Building 961 that allowed student fabricators remarkable agility and spontaneity. "We built prototypes on site and we could look at the scale of things rather than making educated guesses," says Hunter. They manufactured custom parts, including a showy curvilinear, cantilevered steel stair that connects all three levels. "I did very precise drawings for the stair showing minute variations," Hunter explains, adding that he eventually discovered that it had to be custom-fitted like everything else.

Inside, sheetrock walls with firetight rooms off a central hallway might have complied with the fire marshall's codes, but Cavagnero convinced Rolf Jensen Associates, the author of the Uniform Building Code (widely accepted in the Midwest and West), to support his argument that by installing an efficient sprinkler system they could arrive at an equally fire-resistant but more lyrical solution. As a result, transparent walls of galvanized steel rods were woven together to form 20 studios that don't overwhelm the building's roughhewn character; the noncombustible partitions, built 2 feet shy of the fire-resistant but more lyrical solution. As a result, transparent walls of galvanized steel rods were woven together to form 20 studios that don't overwhelm the building's roughhewn character; the noncombustible partitions, built 2 feet shy of the fire-resistant but more lyrical solution. As a result, transparent walls of galvanized steel rods were woven together to form 20 studios that don't overwhelm the building's roughhewn character; the noncombustible partitions, built 2 feet shy of the fire-resistant but more lyrical solution.

To determine the plan for studios, the designers polled the HCA's resident artists. "No painter wanted to be in the basement and no sculptor wanted to be in the attic," says Hunter, explaining that the smaller, more contemplative spaces in the attic would not have suited sculptors with heavy equipment. Thus, top-floor studios, with new west-facing skylights, dormer views, and slanted walls aligned to the roof truss, are for writers, painters, and musicians. Their tilted doors on tracks run smoothly on thin Rollerblade wheels. On the main floor, old military mattress springs enliven studio walls for painters, and in the rugged concrete basement, sculptors' studios sport heavy roll-away doors of glazed-and-woven steel strips that recall lyrical bamboo fences in a Zen garden.

Is the design too metal-heavy, and does it try to build in too many metaphors where it might have concentrated instead on, say, better heating strategies? Perhaps, says Hunter. "Still, except for the new code-required stair hole, in two weeks time I got the inside of the building to look the way it did. Except for the hidden shear walls, it is all reversible." And steel and concrete additions, he points out, don't touch the old walls.
The team's final nod to historic preservation came in the basement. There, contractors reinforced substandard, unreinforced concrete, horsehair, and jute columns with metal jackets that allow much of the old textures to show through. "We usurped the qualities of the old shell," says Cavagnero, "so it was a little easier for me to convince the engineers to think differently." The architect likens it to heavy-timbered Japanese architecture, with the trick being "to cleverly incorporate the seismic engineering." Inside, the interplay of historic patinas against new steel make it a place like no other, but outside, Cavagnero is proud that the building appears to have received little more than a good paint job.

CLIENT: Headlands Center for the Arts; National Park Service

ARCHITECT: Mark Cavagnero Associates, San Francisco - Mark Cavagnero (principal), James McLane (project architect)

ENGINEER: Murphy, Burr, Curry (structural); John C. Hom (geotechnical)

CONSULTANTS: Leonard Hunter (artist); Ryan & Associates (construction management); Davis Energy Group (energy); Daniel Stingle (interiors)

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: Caletti Construction

COST: $800,000

PHOTOGRAPHER: Richard Barnes

Zahid Sardar is architecture & design editor at The San Francisco Examiner Magazine.

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA54773067&v=2.1&u=mnaumntwin&it=r&p=PROF&sw=w&asid=cc467fa32aecdde7bb2dd442cf9a4cae

Gale Document Number: GALE|A54773067

Top of page