



GREENING UP NORTH IDAHO HISTORY

Written by Cate Huisman

Architect Brian Runberg blends past, future with environmentally friendly historic renovations



Brian Runberg

Charles Beardmore

Historic renovation can be a daunting undertaking. As much as communities love their classic buildings, restoring them often requires an investment that goes beyond dollars and cents. To be put to modern use, an old building has to be updated to comply with fire codes and made accessible to people with disabilities and should be wired for modern technology, just for starters. Individuals who take on such projects must bring more than funding to the enterprise.

Seattle architect Brian Runberg is such an individual. To describe his work with historic buildings, he uses the term adaptive reuse for “creating a careful balance between preservation of existing features [and] the integration of new technologies and sustainable building practices.” Several of his projects—historic and otherwise—are designed to meet the U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards. Although he lives on the wet side of the Cascades, he’s an inlander at heart.

“When we’re at Priest Lake, we think we’re home,” he says.

Runberg grew up in Spokane and spent summers at Priest Lake with his grandmother Vivienne Beardmore McAlexander, who

lived there from 1903 to 1988 and gave her young grandson a sense of the history behind the region’s transformation during her lifetime.

This sense of history and home has motivated Runberg to help preserve parts of the Idaho Panhandle’s architectural legacy. As an established professional, he says he’s free to take on “projects that interest me,” and two of those projects are historic buildings in North Idaho. In September of 2006, he bought Priest River’s Beardmore Block—yes, it’s the same Beardmore; it was built by his great-grandfather Charles Beardmore in 1922—and completed its transformation earlier this year. He acquired Sandpoint’s 98-year-old former City Hall in April of 2005 and plans to start work on it soon.

In addition to meeting the requirements for national historic designation through the U.S. Department of the Interior, Runberg has met LEED standards for the Beardmore Block, and he plans to do the same with the old Sandpoint City Hall.

At the Beardmore, many of the materials that came out of building during its renovation were recycled—and some in quite innovative ways. The plaster, for example, was ground down and used in the parking lot

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as an underlay for the asphalt. The roof was rebuilt to drain to a cistern in the basement; this system provides nonpotable water, which is water for uses other than human consumption.

His rationale behind such intricate improvements is simple.

"If you're going to authentically restore an antique car, you don't throw out the engine and gauges and wheels; you have to go back and find ways to fix them and make them work," Runberg explains. So instead of installing new, energy-efficient windows, he took the old windows apart, routed out the frames to install energy-efficient glass and reinstalled them. The bathroom fixtures are being reused within the building, but they have been reconstructed to meet modern needs: They use less than half as much water as they once did.

"I didn't want to cut corners. It's not my nature. It's not authentic," Runberg explains. Consequently, the Beardmore is one of few buildings in the U.S. that meet the LEED

gold standard and are on the National Register of Historic Places.

The undertaking was not without its setbacks, the most remarkable of which was a runaway beer truck that slammed into the side of the building midway through renovation. The truck, which had been parked on the highway while the driver made a delivery to a tavern, went down an embankment, through a parking lot (narrowly missing a motor home), across an alley and into the central electric feed while at the same time shearing off two of the pipes that drained water from the roof into the cistern. Although repairing the electrical and drainage systems was relatively straightforward, finding matching brick to fill the hole—a requirement for historic certification—was not as simple. After several unsuccessful attempts to find replacement brick, including trying to get historic brick from other old buildings in town, Runberg ended up having to use some brick from the interior to make the match.

Now that the Beardmore Block is complete and ready for occupancy, Sandpoint's City Hall is next on the agenda. Runberg plans to carefully dissect the structure, which has been heavily modified in its nearly 100 years of use, while retaining as much as he can of the original woodwork, trim and flooring. He relishes this process.

"Every building has a personality—and you get into it when you start peeling back the layers," he says. He already knows that City Hall once housed the fire station, jail and police station as well as city offices. In 1910, it included stables for horses as well as work spaces for humans.

But Runberg will not restore City Hall as a museum piece. To provide retail space on the ground floor and second-floor offices that are more appropriate for the current century, he anticipates removing some of the interior walls to provide more open space. He says a sidewalk café would be a good fit in the area where the fire engines used to be: The big garage doors through which horse-drawn

fire engines once dashed could be opened for outdoor dining. Still to be determined is what might be done with the coal-delivery chute on the alley and the barred windows where the jail cells once stood.

The building will be renovated to meet the LEED silver standard largely by improving its energy performance. The walls and roof will be insulated, and the windows will be taken apart and rebuilt as was done at the Beardmore. High-efficiency modern heating, ventilation and air conditioning equipment will be installed.

For Runberg, restoring the Beardmore Block and Sandpoint's City Hall means it is possible to meet the requirements of the future without having to give up favorite aspects of the past. Others with similar attachments to place might hope that more builders' great-grandchildren—or their peers—will be inspired to explore similar possibilities. **ibc**

Cate Huisman is a freelance writer who lives in Sandpoint. In addition to contributing to *Inland Business Catalyst*, she writes for a number of publications in North Idaho.



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