
A New Life for the Wanamaker Building

When John Wanamaker opened his new store on Market Street December 30, 1911, President William Howard Taft and 35,000 others attended the christening. They came to see Daniel Burnham's magnificent 12-story Italian renaissance revival structure, its impressive five-story court, the world's largest organ, a 2,500-pound sculptured eagle, the Egyptian Hall, the Greek Hall and the elegant Crystal Tea Room.

John Wanamaker, a pioneer in the retail industry, created a phenomenon; his shoppers came not only to experience the store's uniquely grand atmosphere, but also to take advantage of retailing innovations, such as fixed prices (as opposed to the then-current method of bargaining) and money-back guaranteed satisfaction.

It wasn't long after World War II that the retailing industry began to change. By the 1950s, department stores were following their customers to the suburbs, and downtown department stores found themselves needing less space. With almost 2,000,000 square feet, the Wanamaker building, between 13th and Juniper and Market and Chestnut Streets, is still Philadelphia's largest building, and the store cannot possibly use the entire space. The building's current owner, John Kusmiersky, also developer of the Lit Brothers building, has leased space to Wanamaker's, now owned by Woodward & Lothrop, who has hired Ewing Cole to restore the retail space. Kusmiersky is developing the remainder of the building for office space, for which he has hired Burt Hill Kosar Rittelmann.

The Role of Ewing Cole by Charles Belson, AIA

Ewing Cole was retained as architect and engineer for the renovation and restoration of the John Wanamaker Philadelphia store. I imagined a time in the future when a Wanamaker patron would walk into a new retail space like the Egyptian Hall and say, "What a beautiful old room. Did the architect do anything in here?" This would be high praise considering the scope of the work for the Egyptian Hall, which included demolition of a stage from the 1950s, reconstruction of several missing column sections based loosely on the hypostyle hall at Karnak, structural reinforcement of major ceiling and floor sections to meet current codes, upgrading heating and cooling systems, including fitting new duct systems within existing plaster beams, plus new sprinkler systems, new electrical systems, and new lighting throughout: all this designed so it was not noticed when finished, not disruptive of store operations while under construction, and always in conformance with the Secretary of the Interior's *Guidelines* for restoration and renovation of historically certified buildings.

During the third floor design phase, Ewing Cole worked with Walker Group/CNI to coordinate the



The Wanamaker Building Atrium (Courtesy: Brickstone Realty)

location of their new retail fixtures. Walker called for the removal of old fixtures installed against columns or up against the Grand Court railings. Because the new fixtures were placed free of columns and away from the Grand Court railing,

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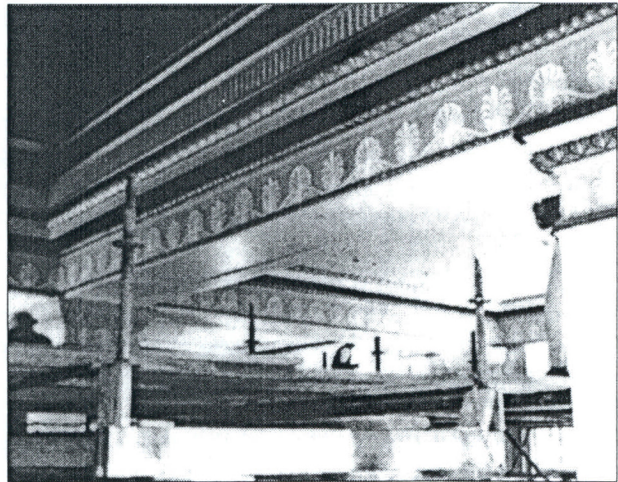
the columns, rails and other architectural details now have room to be seen and appreciated. Patron circulation paths now permit meandering from the interior of the selling floor, out to the floor edge for a view into the Grand Court. Lighting, designed by Theo Kondos, accents the existing architecture as well as the new retail displays. Special care was taken in areas like the Egyptian Hall to remove subdividing partitions not part of the original design so as not to damage the existing fabric of the original design.

John Milner Associates provided advice concerning the restoration of missing details ranging from the column bases to the uraeus frieze, as well as providing overall advice regarding interpretation of the Secretary of the Interior's *Guidelines*. After completing the third floor design, the team moved on to the remaining floors.

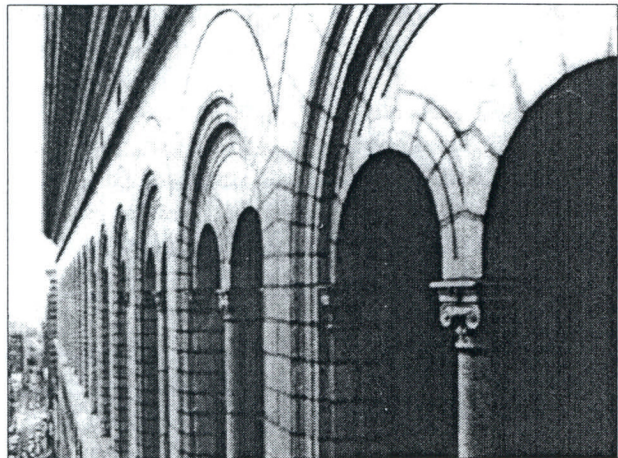
By the time we finished the design work, we had completed bidding packages for the retail floors and the new loading dock on 13th Street for Wanamaker and office tenants. We also completed designs for upgrading existing elevators, new escalators, a new mechanical and electric room in the sub-basement with new and independent services for the store; and major restructuring of the vaults under all sidewalks. Although less than original size, John Wanamaker will still be one of the largest single retail spaces in the world.

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The project was awarded an Honor Award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.



*Detail of John Wanamaker Building office lobby
(Photo: James B. Garrison, AIA)*



*West side of building looking north
(Photo: James B. Garrison, AIA)*