

# WHAT LIES BENEATH THE LAYERS

*Development Project  
Breathes New Life into  
Plymouth's Historic  
Post Office Square Building*

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EXTERIOR PHOTOGRAPH BY LUCKI SCHOTZ





LEFT TO RIGHT: GEORGE N. VASVATEKIS (MANAGING PARTNER AT 1620 CAPITAL) WITH NIKOLAOS VASVATEKIS AND YANNI N. VASVATEKIS OF 1620 CAPITAL. BELOW: EDDY PETRAS, LENDER OF MECHANICS CO-OPERATIVE BANK.

**A**vibrant downtown is the heartbeat of all American communities and critical to its growth. But it's the preservation of its historic integrity that is the true breath that brings these Main Streets back to life.

In the downtown harbor district of one of the country's birthplaces—Plymouth, Massachusetts—just a few blocks from the iconic Plymouth Rock, the decrepit but proud Post Office Square building went decades without care until it was purchased by a local development company with ambitious plans for its revival.

Just before its 100th birthday, the Post Office Square building—which stands four stories, spans 18,000 square feet, and sits beneath a soaring clock tower—caught the eye of George Vasvatekis, one of the principals of 1620 Capital, LLC.

"It's quite the space here," says Vasvatekis. "It's a beautiful structure, and it's individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places, so it's certainly a building of significance from a historical perspective. It was quite run down when we acquired it, and we put a lot of work into restoring it."

Located on Leyden Street, a road laid by the Pilgrims in 1620 and now regarded as the oldest street in New England, the property was originally the home site of William Brewster. Brewster was an elder statesman and one of the original members of the religious Separatist congregation in England who migrated to America aboard the Mayflower.

The home was later torn down and the Post Office Square building was built sometime between 1912 and 1914. In the fall of 2013, 1620 Capital purchased the building at a price of \$680,000. Mechanics Cooperative Bank assisted the company, which is also owned by Vasvatekis's father and brother, with both the acquisition and construction financing. A secondary but crucial financial component of the project was



TODAY, THE OLD POST OFFICE SQUARE BUILDING HAS BECOME A HIGH-END REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT THAT STAYED TRUE TO THE RESTORATION OF ITS HISTORY, BRINGING NEW ENERGY TO AN IMPORTANT PIECE OF PLYMOUTH'S MAIN STREETS.

state and federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits that Vasvatekis spent over a year applying for to help offset construction costs.

At the time, the building was occupied by its original tenants, the US Postal Service, as well as three other businesses. Over the first year and a half, the Vasvatekises cleared out the other tenants, with the exception of the post office, and took time to get the proper permits and explore options for the renovation. This included correspondence between 1620 Capital and

Washington D.C. as well as hours of research to fully understand the building's original aesthetic and features.

"The property was being underutilized and there was a high vacancy rate. This was due to the fact that the building was in such disrepair," says Vasvatekis. From the heating and air conditioning to the plumbing and electrical, he adds, there was "some serious deferred maintenance that had probably gone on for about 20 years."

The building had been in private hands since the 1980s when the federal government sold the building to Grossman Companies. It switched hands again a few years later when Richard Melchin purchased the building from Grossman. The post office continued to operate out of the space, and Melchin ran his business out of the upper level office suite until he sold the building to 1620 Capital.

#### PEELING BACK THE LAYERS

The building was originally constructed for a total cost of \$80,000. "Today, the way building codes are and working with engineers and architects, you can't even draw a building of this size for \$80,000," says Vasvatekis.

Construction finally began in March 2015 and concluded two years later in the spring of 2017 for a total restoration cost of \$3.5 million. Once his crew got inside the building and began to peel back the layers, Vasvatekis says, it was ripe with materials.

"There were beautiful brick walls covered by sheetrock and nice [original] ceilings and beams covered by acoustical ceilings," he explains. "We got rid of all those elements and stripped it down to its original brick and marble-accented features."

The goal was to recreate spaces and maintain the historical integrity of the building. That required not only a major stripping of the building's modern influences, but also some massive maneuvering. In many cases, items—such as the original 1912 doors and moldings—had to be removed, catalogued, stored off site, and then reinstalled later once the renovations were completed.

In the lower level of the building, the crew discovered "really beautiful Vermont marble affixed to the walls," explains Vasvatekis. In some areas the marble was removed and cut



down to be introduced throughout the new building in the form of countertops, showers, baseboards, and door thresholds.

Most of the original light fixtures were salvaged, rewired, and fitted with LED lighting and reinstalled. The crews worked with a local locksmith to get the original locks and hardware pieces working.

Toward the end of the construction and renovation phase, many of the original materials were reintroduced as decorations and accents—door transoms became mirrors; old planks from the attic catwalk became TV stands and dining room tables; skylights in the lobby were returned with a light film to conceal the new sprinkler system.

The old building was transformed into a 17-unit, mixed-use structure with four residential spaces on the upper floors and 13

commercial spaces on the street and lower level. Once rundown office space, the lower level—dubbed the "courtyard"—is now a 6,000-square-foot space with eight office suites and a common area with bathrooms, and a kitchen and wide hallways that are adorned with original pictures and blueprints of the building.

The attic is now one of the residential units, a truly unique space complete with a 900-square-foot roof deck that looks out to the harbor. While all the residential units have their own roof decks, the old attic apartment is special, says Vasvatekis, in part because of the spiral staircase that leads up to the 125-foot-tall clock tower.

The clock tower was a meaningful project in its own right. Located in the center of the building's roof, it is a very prominent feature of the building and received an extensive rehab as part of the restoration, explains Vasvatekis.

"We replaced all the rotten wood on the clock tower," he says. "We sanded it down, we repainted it, and actually, there is a dome on top and we put real Italian gold leaf on the dome along with a restoration of the Mayflower weathervane that was on top."

In the front of the property sits a fountain which is a replica of the original Pilgrim's water spring. "We partnered with the town of Plymouth to get it running again," he says.

Today, the old Post Office Square building has become a high-end real estate development that stayed true to the restoration of its history, bringing new energy to an important piece of Plymouth's Main Streets.

"The work George did was kind of astounding," says Ed Petras of Mechanics Cooperative Bank. "The residential space is beautiful."

The project was the recipient of the 2017 Tsongas Preservation Award for "Best Downtown Development." This award is one of the highest distinctions in the commonwealth of Massachusetts and a nice way to conclude the process, says Vasvatekis.

With the building's lobby slated to become an exhibit space to further establish its place in Plymouth history, he hopes it will become a destination for tourists—particularly with 2020, Plymouth's 400-year anniversary celebration, fast approaching. ★