

Dever Architects' Award Winning Adaptive Reuse Project



Above: Synchrony Group interior after renovation. Right: Before renovation
Used with permission from Synchrony Group



Sitting in the heart of downtown West Chester, the 3-story brick building has been passed between at least five owners since it was first built in the 1800's. It served for manufacturing stove sales in the 1840s and for groceries and provisions in the 1860s before it was bought by the James Brothers Plumbing and Steam Fitting Company.

After moving into the building in 1880, the Company installed a gear-driven hoist system in the 1890s. Located in the attic space above the third floor, the gear mechanism was able to more easily move heavy loads from the street level to any of the floors within the building. Eventually, the building became a Five and Dime store in the 1920s, before being used as general office space and being passed from owner to owner starting in the 1950s; until 2015, when ownership was passed to Synchrony Group.

A communications company that specializes in healthcare and medical publications and campaigns, Synchrony Group wanted a custom, unique space that was attuned to their business needs. Along with Dever Architects, they realized that what they needed was an open, airy space.

As an office building under previous owners and tenants, the interior of this historic building was completely covered and boxed in. Interior walls for awkwardly shaped private offices created narrow hallways. Uninspiring carpet covered original wood floors. Dropped ceilings hid the original structure above. Most disheartening, however, was the gear mechanism, forgotten in the un-used attic, and its shaft, boarded up with siding.

The owners and Dever Architects had a shared vision for the design and started immediately with removing the many things that were covering the original interior. Interior walls were taken out to open the space up. All the carpeting was removed to expose the original wood planks. The suspended ceiling tiles were torn down to expose the original wood beams. The awkwardly placed central stair case was removed, to truly open up the office space.

But Synchrony Group wanted their open office to not just display the original character of their historic venue, but to flaunt it. And so Dever Architects worked with Synchrony Group to achieve just that.

Where interior walls were needed, they were fitted with large glass doors, or were designed to be partial height and have glass panels on top. This way, the space was as open as possible and the wooden beams and floors could be seen from any angle. Brick veneer was added to the party wall, to echo the classic style of the Federal-style exterior. More windows and large glass panels were added to the alley-side of the building, allowing more light in that was previously blocked by the adjacent building. The attic space was transformed into a mezzanine conference area, open to the floor below. Open, monumental stairs bring all four levels (and the mezzanine) together and allow for light transmission between floors.

But most exciting of all were the changes to the gear mechanism and the hoist system.

In order to truly flaunt the historic gem, Dever Architects and Synchrony Group both decided to showcase the hoist system. Underneath the mechanism, they added a glass floor, and did the same on the third and second levels, so as to mimic the space of the original open hoist way. They then framed the mechanism using large panels of glass in the adjacent exterior wall, so that passerby will know what once was – and still is – there. The gear mechanism was also restored, so that now it shines within its glass home.

In restoring the 1800s beauty, Dever Architects and Synchrony Group were awarded a West Chester Historic Preservation Award in 2016; the awards committee dubbed the project “an excellent example of how West Chester’s historic properties can adapt and find new life through sensitive preservation efforts.”



Above: Synchrony Group mezzanine after renovation. Right: Before renovation
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