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## **Project of the Month: The Cobb: reinvented for a new century**

By [CLAIR ENLOW](#)  
Special to the Journal





Photo courtesy of GGLO

The Cobb has long pleased architecture buffs, with its extravagant Beaux Arts facades.



Photo courtesy Steve Keating Photography. The lobby includes Moderne-style improvements from the 1930s.



Photo courtesy Steve Keating Photography. Specially designed kitchen islands help put The Cobb into the luxury rental category.



Photo courtesy Steve Keating Photography. Large sliding doors break the visual disjuncture between the historic windows and new interior partitions.



Photo courtesy Steve Keating Photography. Units inside the new seismic core, with full-height glass, are in high demand.

The Cobb is a Seattle landmark. But when Unico Properties' Andrew Cox talks about what brings people to the rehabilitated building, the ties to the East Coast are clear.

Some prospective tenants from the Big Apple remark that it feels like home. But it goes deeper. Unico's founder, Roger L. Stevens, a theatrical producer, bought the Empire State Building in 1951 and became a national arts advocate. And those Indian heads that pop out of The Cobb's historic 1910 façade have nothing to do with the Northwest. They are Iroquois.

In the competitive contemporary rental market, the key words for The Cobb are “urban,” “luxury,” and “sustainable.”

The project, located at the corner of Fourth Avenue and University Street, has blazed a trail in a high-end rental niche that transplants from other cities recognize. But for those who care about such things, the building meets high standards for environmental responsibility.

This is the only apartment building in the financial and commercial core of Seattle, with theaters and galleries, restaurants and shopping all nearby. The 91 units of The Cobb were 50 percent pre-leased in 2006, before the rehabilitated building came on the market. Then the rest of it leased up in three months, at above-anticipated rents.

“It was better than our most optimistic projections,” said Cox.

Rents are holding, though there has been a dip in demand with the recession. The pullout of Washington Mutual from its nearby office headquarters was felt acutely. But, according to Cox, “We’ve had a waiting list a lot more than we’ve had a vacancy.”

This success is a little paradoxical. There is a lot of competition in the luxury and urban categories, with sustainability added in, too. But The Cobb “challenges some people’s expectations about where they want to live,” said Michael Wishkoski, project manager for GGLO, the design firm that worked with Unico to achieve an unlikely adaptation of the historic building. That challenge seems to have been an advantage.

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**The Cobb**  
**1301 Fourth Ave., Seattle**

Architect:

GGLO

Alan Grainger, principal in charge

Carol Schaefer, interior design principal

Michael Wishkoski, project manager

Beth Dwyer, project architect

Owner:

Unico Properties

Project type:

Multifamily housing, historic rehabilitation

Size:

91 units (105,820 square feet)

14,500 square feet of commercial

Completion:

September 2006

Construction cost:

\$23.7 million

It's partly a matter of scale. “There are so many glistening new towers,” said Cox. “This one has 91 units instead of 400.”

The historic character is another advantage. The signature Indian heads are part of an extravagant Beaux Arts vocabulary in the original design by Howells & Stokes of New York. The Cobb was built for a novel use in 1910: small, private medical specialty offices.

The brick and terra cotta shell is on the National Register of Historic Places. It was already clear that the interior was exceeding its useful life when the Nisqually quake hit in 2001. Although The Cobb suffered negligible damage, the quake raised fresh concerns about seismic safety.

Structural engineer:  
Magnusson Klemencic Associates

Mechanical engineer:  
MacDonald-Miller Facility Solutions

Acoustical engineer:  
Sparling

Historical  
preservation consultant:  
Bola Architecture & Planning

General contractor:  
Lease Crutcher Lewis

But options for redevelopment came with a bundle of financial and design issues. Seattle zoning would have allowed construction of a 60-story building on the site, adding considerable income potential over the 11-story Cobb. But Unico, which developed the building under its long-term lease from the University of Washington, won support for keeping the historic shell and lobby — with accompanying historic preservation tax credits — while boldly converting it to residential use.

### **Upgrade challenges**

Chief among the redevelopment issues was the seismic upgrade. The usual strategies, most involving cross-bracing, would have been devastating to the Beaux Arts dignity of The Cobb.

Instead, the design team (with structural engineering firm Magnusson Klemencic) came up with a winning solution: a heavy concrete service core tucked into the back corner of the L-shaped plan. This core also contains a stack of thoroughly modern apartment units with full-height glass and steel windows, and city views.

The other significant challenge was the original windows, closely spaced to synchronize with small medical exam rooms and offices. Moving interior walls to optimal position would have put them at odds with the pattern. For this seemingly insurmountable problem, the design team came up with an elegant solution borrowed from industrial lofts: the surface-mounted sliding door.

Now a signature feature in the residential units, the tall mahogany doors hang close to the outer walls where the new partitions meet them. These doors, which are more like moving walls, can stand open for panoramic views out the windows or closed for separation between spaces. Translucent panels are reminiscent of shoji screens, and the dark finish repeats the deep stain of the hardwood floors installed throughout.

Plaster finish and moldings on the inside of the outer walls were retained, and patched where adjoining walls were removed. The historic windows and flowed glass, with its distinctive refraction pattern, are all freshly rehabilitated with a special low-E coating.

### **That 1930s feel**

The tall lobby of The Cobb, which had undergone a major renovation in the grand Moderne style 20 years after the original was built, is restored to 1930s grandeur. Some of the features could not be saved, but the elevator doors, balustrades and clock were and now command attention in the lobby.

“Once you peel it down, it's pretty bold,” said Carol Deal Schaefer, GGLO design principal for interiors. “The furnishings had to have the same command.”

The specially fabricated and richly patterned rug set into the floor, adapted from an early 20th century design by Maurice Dufrene, stands up to these features and sets up the sequence from the entry to the bright deco-relief metal of the historic elevator doors.

In the apartments, many kitchens have a substantial and movable kitchen island, custom designed for The Cobb. All have built-in casework with slab granite countertops, tile backsplash and high-end appliances. Bedrooms have walk-in closets and baths have high-end fixtures.

As befits Seattle, this luxury residence is loaded with environmental credentials — beginning with the preservation and reuse of the building's shell. The high ceilings, combined with the generous window openings and the narrow distance between exterior and core in the L-shaped building, mean that there is a lot of natural light.

### **LEED silver**

The top of the historic structure, which originally held recuperative outdoor sunning areas for patients of the clinics below, now accommodates a green roof with generous plantings, seating and entertaining areas.

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#### **Jury comments**

“Skillful, elegant adaptation and preservation of a new use in an important legacy building.

“This project succeeds through its understated honesty and restraint. The interiors make an asset out of the challenge of misalignment between exterior window modulation and interior partitions. building.

“The dual use of the new core, for seismic reinforcement and vertical circulation at the weak point of the L-shaped plan, is an elegant, innovative solution.” building.

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New materials, including metals, wallboard, insulation, concrete and acoustical ceiling tile contain recycled content. A hybrid heat pump system provides heating and cooling to each apartment. When in the cooling mode, rejected heat preheats domestic hot water. The Cobb is certified LEED silver.

Along the corridors of The Cobb are museum-quality black-and-white photographs, taken during construction by John Stamets using a large format camera. Since 2006, some of the few tenants who have moved on have contacted Stamets for their own prints as a reminder of the place.

In the years since The Cobb reopened, tours are not just for prospective residents, but for architecture buffs from Seattle and elsewhere. Some of them, according to Wishkoski, have had stories to tell about going to the dentist or doctor inside. They marvel at the details that have survived the century.

The mix of enduring features and change is one of the lessons of The Cobb for architects, and for the rest of us.

“All the buildings we build will ultimately have multiple lives,” said Wishkoski.

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*The Project of the Month is sponsored by the Daily Journal of Commerce and the Seattle chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The project for March was selected with the assistance of Washington Green Building Council director Joel Sisolek, architect Jim Moore, and landscape architect Bob Shrosbree. For information about submitting projects, contact Stephanie Pure at AIA Seattle at (206) 448-4938, or [stephaniep@aiaseattle.org](mailto:stephaniep@aiaseattle.org).*

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