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The people's house

Madison officially reopens the Municipal Building this weekend

BY DYLAN BROGAN DECEMBER 6, 2018



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After two years and \$30 million in renovations, the city is celebrating the reopening of the Madison Municipal Building with *Municipal Restored*, a free public event on Dec. 8. The grand opening will feature local artists, food carts, musicians and DJs. The building will be dedicated at noon by Madison Mayor Paul Soglin and Madison's poet laureate Oscar Mireles.

Jeanne Hoffman, the city's facilities and sustainability manager, describes the building as "gorgeous." "We really want to reintroduce people to the building so they can see how beautiful it is and to feel like it's a true public space," says Hoffman, who gave *Isthmus* a tour of the building in advance of the opening. "There was a time when the city debated what was ultimately going to happen with this building. That's over. This was worth investing in for the long term. It's historic, civil architecture designed to be used by the community."

The remodel of the Madison Municipal Building absolves the city of several architectural sins committed over the years. The neoclassical revival structure was built in 1929 to house a United States Post Office and a federal courthouse. The city purchased the building in 1979 and proceeded to strip it of many of its original design features. The first and lower levels were gutted to create office space. The original terracotta floors with marble inlays were

covered in the main entryway. Floor-to-ceiling windows that lined the back of the building were bricked up to save energy. The building's two original staircases were enclosed.



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“I think everyone can agree that when you visited MMB before the renovation — it could feel like you were a tube with no natural light and it was hard to know where you were going,” Hoffman says. “The whole design process was about restoring as much of the history in the building as we could and making it easier for people to navigate. Before, if you needed to go there for a residential parking permit or a building permit, it took some effort and was not intuitive. We’ve made it much more inviting.”

A modern version of the original lobby was restored during the remodel as well as other historic architectural features, including the large windows that were bricked-in 40 years ago.



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“Along with a new skylight and putting back those giant windows, natural light just pours into the building,” Hoffman says. “It’s airy and beautiful and we want everyone to see it.”

The centerpiece of the Municipal Building — room 260, which was originally a federal courtroom — has also been restored to its full grandeur. In the 1980s, the original windows were blackened to create a studio on one side of the room for Madison City Channel, which, among other things, records government meetings. In 2016, City Channel moved across the street to the City County Building, where it will stay.

“We got rid of the blackened windows. We got rid of the suspended fluorescent light ceiling. We got rid of the old, yucky carpeting. All of the original wood in the room has been restored,” says Hoffman, adding that the lighting needed to be updated.



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The building will still house many city agencies and divisions, including building inspection, traffic engineering, economic development, zoning, human resources as well as the Community Development Authority. But it’s more than just an office building. A window-filled art gallery was also added to the second floor, and art is also prominently displayed throughout the building. Many parts of the building have the look and feel of an art museum. The collection has works from local notables, including Romano Johnson, Faisal Abdu’ Allah, Katherine Steichen Rosing, Derrick Buisch, Pranav Sood, Kelly Parks Snider and Zane Williams. Hoffman says the building also has multiple conference rooms available for city and community meetings: “Before MMB was renovated, from Friday night through Sunday, nobody ever used it. We are excited that the community will have this new space to utilize.”

Municipal Restored will be in the same vein as *Bookless* and *Stacked*, the popular events that bookended construction of the (relatively) new Central Library. Before the Municipal Building closed for the remodel in 2016, the city hosted a one-day art festival in the building called *MUNICIPAL*. The Dec. 8 event will feature behind-the-scenes tours and municipal-themed activities for the kiddos.

The Central Library has also teamed up with the city to create an oral history project. “This is where people can come in and record a story, or write a story or draw a picture about their experience with the building,” says Hoffman. “We want to hear and record them for posterity.”

Songwriters Corey Mathew Hart, Zander Anim and Craig Baumann will be performing in the courtroom, as well as hip-hop artists Eli Blakely, and Sood and The Pro. A dozen video art installations will be screened throughout the building. Like the *MUNICIPAL* event in 2016, a dance performance by Liz Sexe will take place on the stairs on the Wilson Street side of the building several times during the day.

“We are learning how the community wants to use this building. This event is a kickoff to let people know this building is for them,” Hoffman says. “There aren’t many city-owned

buildings that are this historic. It's going to be around a long time, and it's something we should all take pride in."

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