

ACAI NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

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Renovation Versus New Construction

Fort Lauderdale, FL (April 2008) -- For many businesses, cities and school districts, the choice to renovate or construct a new structure is on par with the ease of sorting through presidential candidates' promises and figuring out which assurances are likely to stand the test of time. In short, it's a majorly confounding undertaking!

However, as with the task of picking your ideal candidate for political office, the better informed you are about the issues and the "candidate" building's core, the better decision you'll make between investing in the renovation and maintenance of an existing facility or demolishing a current structure and building anew.

"There are innumerable factors to consider," says Adolfo Cotilla, AIA, president of ACAI Associates, a full-service, South Florida-based architecture and design firm. "Every scenario is different, and there is no single case study that can help you make the right call." Cotilla recommends stepping back from a project, examining the facts, and taking a commonsense, thorough approach to the task.

Building New

Face it ... a new building is sexy and appealing on almost every level of evaluation. If well designed, it can be aesthetically striking and alluring, as well as meet an owner's perceptions of what is ideal for their structure. Depending on budget, a new building can be designed with all of the desired bells and whistles. "Green" elements and innumerable energy-management efficiencies are easier to integrate into a new building. Likewise, a new building can more easily incorporate cutting-edge technology through advance planning for required wiring and conduits. A new structure can better adopt more flexible, open layouts, and it can more easily enhance productivity and learning. A new building is also, by definition, "healthier" -- no issues with mold, asbestos, etc. A new building can often allow consolidation of offices or tasks currently spread across multiple locations, allowing an owner to achieve significant savings in equipment, personnel, security and overall operational efficiency. Moreover, a new building can often revitalize and anchor a community, a specific project, a campus or a business. In short, building new is very appealing on numerous levels. A new building jazzes the senses. Like a new car, it even smells new!

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The logo for ACAI, featuring the word "acai" in a lowercase, red, sans-serif font.

The decision to build new is oftentimes a relatively easy one. “Renovation has to be, at its core, practical,” states Cotilla. “Generally -- and there certainly are exceptions to this tenet -- if a building has been badly maintained and poorly constructed, it should probably come down. If you’ve got to deal with hazardous construction materials that are difficult to remove or deal with, or if you have no reasonable design options to adequately reconfigure space and expand so as to fit even the most fundamental goals and objectives of your business’ day-to-day operations, then new construction may be the way to go.”

In some scenarios, issues associated with an existing building’s envelope, its roof and windows are so daunting that the effort and cost to upgrade the structure to meet current building codes is unreasonable and not practical. Older structures being renovated also have to be brought up to present-day health, safety and access building codes. What you want to accomplish within the structure makes a huge difference, as well. If envisioned uses result in significant reconfiguration of walls, the cost to renovate can radically jump, especially if the ideal plan involves modifying or removing load-bearing concrete or masonry walls. If so, the structure and its foundations may need to be reinforced -- another expensive task. The case for building new is stronger still if components of an existing structure -- ranging from air conditioners to electrical systems -- will need to be replaced in the short term. “Although it’s certainly not always the case, renovation can be expensive and intimidating,” states Cotilla. “In some instances, there are fewer challenges and obstacles to designing and building a new structure,” continues Cotilla.

Renovation

When does renovation make sense? According to Cotilla, the short answer is, “When careful assessment of an existing structure shows it to be in decent structural shape, when there is adequate space for its envisioned, long-range purpose, and when its location makes sense. Unfortunately, there is no shortcut to making such assessments, but it is a direction that can be deliberately evaluated. Without question, there are circumstances when renovating can be the right and best thing to do.”

In many cases it costs less to renovate and reuse an existing building, with its already-installed systems and services -- sometimes significantly less. Renovation also can promote the perception of fiscal responsibility. As an added bonus, the U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Environmental & Energy Design (LEED) so strongly encourages reuse of an existing site and building that embracing such a path earns points toward LEED accreditation.

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The potential for more efficient use of a space is often a driving factor for major renovation. An existing space can often be more efficiently configured, but keep in mind that there is just so much floor space in an existing footprint. When considering renovation, look carefully to determine whether you have reached the maximum capacity available; indeed, try to extrapolate your envisioned use five and 10 years down the road. Consider “going vertical.” Is there room for add-on space? When looking to optimize space, take into account that the advent of cutting-edge technology has enabled use of smaller spaces, which, in turn, makes them easier to remodel.

There are scores of considerations that, once examined, often point toward renovation as the best option. If the building occupies a prominent location, has historical significance or is an architectural masterpiece, those are strong cases for renovation. In fact, there are some buildings where renovation is the required path -- the National Register of Historic Places is the Federal government’s program to help property owners and groups (such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation) coordinate, identify and protect historic sites in the United States. Additionally, a structure may be viewed as “irreplaceable” by some important “camps” -- without question, renovation is often fueled by loyalty to a building as much as it is to the economy of reuse. If today’s state-of-the-art building systems can be relatively easily introduced to the older facility, that’s a real plus. If so, such systems will reduce maintenance and operational costs, as well as provide an environment nearly as good as any found in a new structure.

Frequently, a structure is well-suited to its location, but not particularly so for its current use. And if a location is “prime” and the land extremely valuable, renovation could be a viable alternative to securing new property and building a new structure. Determination needs to be made as to whether renovation of an older structure will provide a safer and healthier environment for users. Bear in mind, too, that a new design could dramatically improve the productivity of staff and your business’ attractiveness to its customers. Worrying about disruption of business during a renovation is certainly a viable concern, but there is frequently an opportunity to develop a phased construction schedule that separates construction from occupied areas.

Adding on to an older building often makes sense. Depending on the style, it can be relatively easy to match the materials and detailing of the original structure. On much older buildings, this may not be so easy or cost-effective. While aesthetics alone rarely trigger a major renovation, an enhanced appearance is unquestionably an added benefit of going that route; however, keep in mind that an addition does not have to mimic or reflect the original to still look good.

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Renovation also has to take geographic and “code” factors into consideration such as whether a building may have to withstand hurricanes, changing seismic activity, or deal with snow and temperature safety issues. These are as potentially problematic as electrical systems that are inadequate and hazardous; lack of sprinkler systems; asbestos in flooring and pipe insulation; deficient or nonexistent fire alarm, emergency and security systems; and poorly designed access and egress (to meet life-safety and ADA requirements).

Take into account that, with any renovation, there will be surprises; therefore, a great deal of patience is required by the owner. Original drawings may have long since disappeared. Even if drawings do exist, past renovations or additions may not be documented or may have deviated during the construction process. Unpredictable (hidden) elements such as deteriorating structural components and mold throw a wrench into schedules and budgets. Not knowing how a structure was built, what is above the ceiling or behind the walls, or what the foundation is really like can make it difficult to assess renovation costs. All of this and more make having contingency plans at the ready a must for renovation projects. “One must be flexible to accommodate surprises and make on-site adjustments, especially with older buildings,” states Cotilla. “Plan to accommodate schedule changes, and set aside money to address unanticipated conditions.”

Interestingly, some renovate/build-new decisions are determined by formulas. In Florida, for example, the determination as to whether a school should be redone to meet current needs or replaced with new construction is tied to the results of various formulas that consider elements such as the total cost of educational improvements, the total cost of improvements in the healthfulness of the building, and the total cost of safety improvements, factored by the estimated index of educational adequacy and the estimated life expectancy of the modernized school. The result of this number-crunching must be less than the replacement cost of buildings being considered for modernization, factored by the estimated life of a new school building.

ACAI Associates recently undertook a project for The School Board of Broward County that revisited the dilemma of whether to renovate and remodel or construct new buildings. In this particular case, both choices were creatively employed by the architect.

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The combined project scope includes two building types on the 30-acre campus of the Atlantic Vocational Technical Center in Margate, Florida. On one ACAI drawing board is the remodeling and expansion of a 3,250 sf automotive repair laboratory that was constructed in 1987 into an 11,985 sf Automotive Service Technology Suite. When completed, the new facility will include one large automotive industrial lab, one more of slightly smaller size, a second-floor classroom overlooking the two new labs, and an adjacent area for materials, tools, projects and flammable storage.

On the other ACAI drawing board is a new plan for construction of a standalone 16,500 sf Media Center. ACAI's design charge has been to create a new state-of-the-art facility that is LEED certified that also addresses the specialized goals of the School Board and the community. Desirous of making this new facility a prototype media center for the school district, the high-tech building will include a library and a reading room, a technical processing area, a closed-circuit television/distance-learning lab, a computer classroom, and workrooms and offices for a network and media specialist. Additionally, community use of a cyber café with outdoor patio tables and a conference room and terrace for special events will be welcomed additions and add a very special social and interactive learning environment to this new school facility. The Atlantic Vocational Media Center will be the first LEED-certified building for The School Board of Broward County.

"We're very excited to be designing these challenging projects for the School Board of Broward County," states Cotilla, whose firm has provided architecture and design services to universities, schools, local and state government buildings, healthcare facilities, industrial and commercial businesses, and private and public corporations over the past two decades.

Cotilla makes one final recommendation to help determine whether it is worth investing in the renovation and maintenance of an existing facility or whether it makes more sense to demolish an existing structure and rebuild -- contact a licensed architect to help make the assessment. "The number of components that have to be examined are too numerous to list, especially for an individual or group of elected officials with no real experience in the complexities of such construction options. An experienced architect has the knowledge and skill sets to unearth problems and opportunities, and will bring in a team of professionals to consult, and then offer an unbiased assessment of a structure," concludes Cotilla.

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ACAI is an award-winning, full-service architecture firm with offices in Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach Counties. Founded in 1985, ACAI's project-tested architects, engineers and construction professionals consistently deliver innovative, functional, sustainable and cost-effective design solutions. A minority-business enterprise, ACAI has built a longstanding reputation for excellence in the planning and design of universities, schools, local and state government buildings, healthcare facilities, industrial and commercial businesses, and private and public corporations. To learn more, contact Sandra Smerkers, LEED AP, ACAI's director of marketing, at 954-484-4000, ext. 38, or ssmerkers@acaiworld.com.