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Mansion tenant's HQ networks with history

Levey building's interior design mixes new with the old

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At the Louis Levey Mansion on North Meridian Street, the blending of past, present and future greets visitors as they walk through the heavy arched doors of networks Financial Institute's headquarters.

In the entry hallway, a receptionist with all the latest technology on her desk sits under a Victorian-era stained-glass skylight. Around her, contemporary art hangs next to elaborately carved wood molding on the walls.

Futuristic glass-and-chrome lighting fixtures hang from the ceilings, one of which has an original painted canvas covering.

Modular conference-room furniture, made to pull apart to serve smaller work groups or different functions, sits in a room with walk-through windows that raise into the ceiling to allow passage onto a stone terrace outside.

For NFI, an outreach program of Indiana State University, the marriage between 20th- and 21st-century design was an arranged one. The Levey Mansion provides office space for the 2-year old institute in a building that symbolizes ISU's 125-history.

"NFI is supposed to be forward-looking and innovative," said Executive Director Elizabeth A. Coit. "We're looking at the financial services industry in different ways. We wanted that feel of modern. On the other hand... we didn't want to lose the historic nature."

The Institute is a not-for-profit organization that engages in financial services policy research, education and outreach. NFI provides independent analysis of major issues in the financial services industry for lawmakers and industry experts, and has created financial services literacy programs for elementary and high-school students.

NFI is also sponsoring its second class of Networks Scholars, ISU students studying for financial services careers. Those students travel to NFI's Indianapolis and Washington, D.C., locations to work in financial services companies and attend events in the nation's capital, said Coit, who formerly headed insurance operations for Carmel-based Consec Inc.

Despite its modern mission, locating anywhere but in a historic building was never really an option, Coit said. ISU President Lloyd W. Benjamin III, an art historian, envisioned a historic setting for ISU's newest initiative, as well as a place in Indianapolis to host parties for visiting dignitaries and ISU alumni.

The institute looked at several locations before deciding on the Levey Mansion, at 29th and Meridian streets on the former Indianapolis Life Insurance Co. campus.

The Beaux Arts-style mansion is in the Meridian Corridor historic district, is close to downtown, and is in an established not-for-profit community. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Indianapolis, the

500 Festival, The Children's Museum of Indianapolis and Lilly Endowment Inc. all make their homes nearby. "The location couldn't be more perfect," Coit said.

Once the lease was signed – a lengthy process because Indianapolis Life was preparing to sell the entire 12-acre campus to local insurer International Medical Group Inc. – NFI began setting about renovating the 1905 residence for its offices.

The mansion had been vacant since 2000, when it was featured as the St. Margaret Guild's Decorator's Show House. Before that, it had last been used as offices for some of Indianapolis Life's executives.

NFI hired Indianapolis-based Rowland Design Inc. to transform the decorated house into a contemporary office. The institute considered about a half-dozen firms for the job, Coit said, but decided on Rowland because of its design experience and preliminary sketches.

"Plus they have a great reputation for getting done on time and on budget," she added.

Those traits were put to the test once NFI signed its lease. Rowland was given 90 days to finish its work, which required not only décor changes but also room changes, such as changing wall locations and removing closets to create hallways between offices.

The only room not redecorated was the kitchen, remade as a modern gourmet kitchen in the 2000 renovation.

"There were some challenges," said Randy Veatch, a Rowland associate who acted as project manager for the Levey transformation. "Because it's a renovation, we didn't know up front what they were all going to be."

One of the biggest construction challenges was the electrical system, which had to be upgraded from knob-and-tube wiring to accommodate high-tech office equipment. Rowland quickly discovered the original house was made entirely of brick – it was later clad in limestone – which meant electrical wiring had to either go through floors or run along exterior walls.

Coit estimates that of the approximately \$225,000 budget for the renovation and furnishing, about one-third was spent on electrical work.

Very little in the house was restored, with the exception of the walk-through windows in what now serves as NFI's conference room. They had been painted shut and were no longer operable. Leaded-glass bookcases with no backs or shelves were outfitted with translucent plastic behind the glass fronts and lights inside – a cheap fix that shows off their beauty.

When fixtures, such as door frames or built-in cabinets, were removed, NFI and Rowland documented their location and gave the items over to the building's owner for storage in the event a future tenant would want them for a more complete restoration.

IMG, which bought the mansion with NFI already signed as a tenant, appreciated that gesture, said Tom Moses, vice president of real estate for the insurer. Although IMG bought the property more for the expansion possibilities in the 85,000-square-foot office building on the site, the company also liked having a historic property on its campus, Moses said. IMG moved to the midtown location from a former high school it had renovated in Lockerbie Square.

The Levey Mansion, built for the owner of Levey Brothers Printing Co., was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978.

NFI's renovation project was helped by the fact that the mansion had been relatively well-maintained by its previous owners. The extensive woodwork and plaster needed little more than touch-up, Veatch said.

The new décor is understated, with beiges and rich browns throughout. The idea was not to cover up the historic features of the house, but to minimize their appearance, Veatch said. For instance, detailed original plaster molding in the house likely would have been gilded or painted in a contrasting color in a true restoration, but was instead painted the same neutral color of its surroundings.

Contemporary art from ISU's collection was hung on the walls, along with some pieces NFI purchased for the space.

Some of the challenges were never quite met, Veatch conceded. Because of NFI's budget constraints and the fact they lease rather than own the building, deciding how much to spend on mechanical systems such as heating and cooling was a struggle. And only a portion of the mansion is accessible to people with disabilities because of the design and budget problems of installing an elevator.

Overall, however, Coit said she's pleased with the offices, which NFI moved into in June 2004. One of the biggest challenges will be accommodating the institute's staff, now at 15 and growing, in the future. The organization already is planning to convert the third floor into more offices.

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