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Friday, February 24, 2006

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## Restoration brings back beauty of downtown gem

By [Derek J. Fuchs](#)  
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Tuesday, August 19, 2003

Bill McCracken is standing outside a ninth-story window of Two Mellon Center, Downtown. Only a sturdy wooden plank separates his feet from almost 200 feet of nothing below.

This is where he had been working every night.

As part of the crew restoring what was previously known as architect Frederick J. Osterling's Union Trust Building, McCracken spent months in a basket slightly larger than a laundry hamper, replacing old terra cotta tiles and crumbling masonry on the building's mansard roof.

A janitor on the sidewalk far below is gawking at him as if McCracken is threatening to jump. From up here, narrow Oliver Avenue looks as if it's peppered with moving action figures. But McCracken is totally at ease.

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"It's your own personal work space," says the burly night-shift supervisor as he points out a new drainage system on the dormer above the window. "You have your 500-watt light, you have your plans you work with, and you start to work side-to-side."

Completed in 1917, Two Mellon Center -- first called the Union Arcade, an upscale mall with 238 retail shops and 714

office suites -- has a steeply pitched, terra cotta roof on all four sides. Its tiles and dormers were damaged by rain and ice. The rooftop, however, is flat.

Osterling designed the block-long arcade for Henry Clay Frick on the site of a former cathedral. The architectural style is Flemish Gothic: Starting above the eighth-floor windows are elaborately crested cornices, and the only windows on the next three floors peer out through narrow dormers with high peaks.

The design was possibly modeled after town halls found in Brussels and Louvain, Belgium, suggested James D. Van Trump in a 1966 paper for the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation.

And it's a unique find, as far as architecture in American cities goes, says

### At a Glance

• Two Mellon Center opened in 1917 as the Union Arcade, an upscale, indoor mall with 238 retail shops and 714 office suites. It consists almost entirely of offices now, but was one of the biggest arcades of its kind when it opened.

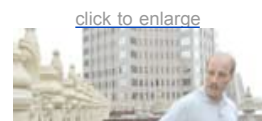
• Architect Frederick J. Osterling (1865-1934) was commissioned to build it by steel magnate Henry Clay Frick.

• Osterling, born in Duquesne, also remodeled Frick's Clayton mansion in Point Breeze. Between 1892 and 1902, he designed three buildings on Fourth Avenue, Downtown, which at the time was Pittsburgh's powerful financial center. One of the buildings was the 18-story Arrott Building, still at 401 Wood St.

• The building, 237 feet tall, takes up a whole block between Grant Street and William Penn Way. It has 11 floors, but two steeples on the rooftop add four stories to the total height.

• The reason for the rooftop chapel myth is that the Union Arcade replaced St. Paul's Cathedral, and, according to legend, when Frick bought the land for \$1.3 million, he promised the Diocese of Pittsburgh he'd include a chapel in the plans.

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Ellis Schmidlapp, president of Landmark Design Associates Architects. Although his firm has overseen restorations for some prominent buildings in Pittsburgh, it isn't involved in the Two Mellon project -- a Chicago firm is handling it.

"It's part of our cultural heritage, as much as something hanging on the museum wall," Schmidlapp says. "It's a beautiful piece of design. It's part of our industrial and commercial history, part of what makes us different from other cities."

Since 1999, employees of the O'Hara-based company Graciano Corp. have been working on the roof, piece by piece. Each tile and minute crack was tested and mapped out for them painstakingly by engineers and architects, a process that took almost two months alone.

Terra cotta tiles were replaced by careful imitations made with glass fiber-reinforced concrete, as were terra cotta sculptures of eagles on each corner of the building.

The workers are done with everything on the building except two four-story steeples on its rooftop. Around those, workers are chipping away at the old masonry on several stories of scaffolding. And as any of the workers will tell you, that undying rumor about the towers housing a chapel or penthouse is false. There is nothing but drab, concrete, water-damaged storage space inside.

Dave Sinclair, who is managing the project for Graciano, says the towers will be completely repaired in perhaps a year and a half, in case Mellon wants to use them for something nicer than housing the elevator machinery that takes up the first floor of each.

Nets that stuck out from Two Mellon's side to catch debris have been removed, and the worker baskets were to be removed Monday.

That's good news for guests of the Omni William Penn Hotel, which has a wall of windows within spitting distance from where McCracken and his colleagues work. Some people don't think to close the blinds.

The hotel tried to book that side as little as possible, but sometimes there wasn't room elsewhere. Guests were warned, but some workers witnessed unusual sights -- by accident, of course -- through the hotel's windows, Sinclair says.

Whether McCracken saw one of those unintentional shows or not, he's not saying. His wife will be reading this.

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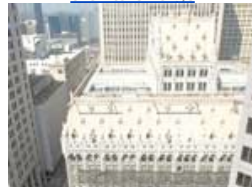
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