

The powers of photography

Margolis documents the restoration of a Rochester landmark

By Linda Quinlan

The things a photographer will do for that "perfect" shot ...

He couldn't get just the right angle for an exterior shot of the Powers Building, so photographer Richard Margolis climbed out onto a 2-foot ledge outside a fourth-floor window of the Wilder Building across the street.

Yet, he humbly calls what he did "so simple" in comparison to the workmen who removed walls, constructed new elevator shafts, and generally completed the restoration of the historic downtown building.

He was hired by Value Properties, the project's developers, to record the story of the building's transformation from near ruin to "the new standard for excellence" in Rochester office space.

In the course of two years, spending hours at a time, sometimes daily, sometimes once a month, in the building, he got to know it well, Margolis said, wryly.

While the primary purpose of his work was to document the project, "I started bringing home photos that I liked," Margolis said.

What emerged is a series of photos that is not only a stunning tribute to the care taken and effort invested in preserving the landmark for the city of Rochester but also a testament to the artistic ability of the photographer himself.

"I could argue that all I did was take advantage of what's here," he said, but I can see, as I went back time and again, the photos got better and better."

In the 30 photographs he's assembled for the exhibition, Margolis shares his view of the renovation, beginning with the condition of the building as the work began.

He said he tried to predict angles that could be "valuable" later, that would yield finished views for a "before and after" type of reflection.

"I tried to separate the commercial interests from the aesthetics," he said, explaining that the way the prints are selected and matted "is not a sales promotion."

He admits he almost liked the building better before, but that's from the artistic perspective.

Obviously, no one was willing to use the building before its restoration. Even the elevators, the first outside New York City in the building's heyday (it opened in 1869), had become a center-city joke. (If attorneys were late, it was joked they were probably stuck in an elevator in the Powers Building.)



Richard Margolis has spent countless hours "getting to know" the Powers Building in the past two years, as he documented its restoration. Here, assistant E. Vincente Martinez captured him at work.

The renovated building, located at the corner of State and Main streets, is amazingly different, he said.

Just one of the innovations is new elevators, added in a central location and reported to be the fastest in the city. They're beautiful, besides, with mahogany panels and slate floors.

The installation of the new elevators turned out to be difficult, Margolis said, launching into another story.

He seems to be as enamored of the

workmanship of the project as he is proud of his own accomplishment.

Iron I-beams had to be hoisted vertically through the building, in the new, narrow shafts, he related.

"Normally that's done while the building's being erected; here, it was really kind of heroic work."

He likened the photographs he might have gotten to the famous ones Lewis Hine took of the construction of the Empire State Building.

Seen as a whole, the prints Margolis

decided upon give the viewer a sense of the history and character of the elegant old building. Individually and collectively, the prints also have moods, from lonely to eerie.

On a visual level, the photos are rewarding to look at.

"I like to play with the lighting, the edges, the composition. When I think of them translated into music, they're rich, like a Bach."

One of the challenges, he said, was staying away from the Grand Staircase, the cast-iron 50-ton masterpiece that was the focal point of the onetime tallest building in Rochester. "I didn't want to shortchange the building," he said.

"Going through it as a hulk, it was hard for me to imagine what it (once renovated) would be like," he said, again reflecting on his esteem for the men in other professions: the architects, who, with their "endless blueprints," had to see in their minds how it would be; the workmen who always seemed to know just what to do next and in what order.

So there is a marvelous photo of a new doorway cut out of a pair of old, jalousied doors. Peering through, you see yet another door.

There are shots of peeling plaster and ceilings that speak to your heart.

Still another of water and slush covering the floor of an empty eighth-floor hallway (before the roof was fixed).

In perfect imagery, "It's almost like the building has healed," he said.

Margolis, with an ever-present wry sense of humor, quipped, "The leaking water created interesting wall treatments." Seriously, he added that what's fascinating is the building was sturdy enough to withstand the neglect and rise again.

If truth be known, his photos are skill much more than the luck he attributes to them. "I always move back and forth, looking at the shapes," he admitted. "I like the visual game; it's almost like doing math puzzles."

"I do break basic rules; I play with the edges more than just the center."

He offered that it's the edges that are the difference between a snapshot and a photograph.

Margolis, who teaches photography at the Community College of the Finger Lakes, quips that he could probably make more money from photography by selling his equipment, but his ability has garnered him a great deal of attention, from a striking exhibit of trees to a series on bridges, "Symbols of Progress," that will become a traveling exhibition through the Gallery Association of New York State.