



LEED Gold Resurrection by Brian Libby

To visit the [RiverEast Center](#) in Portland, Oregon, is to stand at a major crossroads. The newly renovated former warehouse building sits along the Willamette River, just across from downtown, at the base of the Hawthorne Bridge. This location affords unobstructed views of boats and cars streaming by in the foreground with the classic downtown Portland skyline behind. The RiverEast Center also sits beside a massive freeway bridge and overpass to the west and a railroad track busy with freight and occasional passenger trains to the east.

The resurrected 1951 building stands near the geographic center of a city that has been praised in urban planning circles for controlling urban sprawl through increased density. This approach in turn makes real estate in core neighborhoods, such as Portland's burgeoning Central Eastside, increasingly valuable.

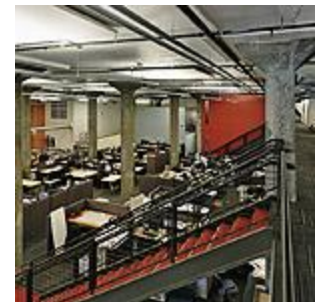
That area isn't zoned for condos, so it hasn't exploded with development quite like Portland's more widely known Pearl District across the river. But as a result, the Central Eastside offers a more eclectic mix of blue collar and creative industry denizens. Here architects, graphic designers, chefs, and photographers regularly rub elbows with forklift and big-rig operators.

For the two company heads who developed the RiverEast project, the prospect of diving headlong into a \$17 million warehouse conversion was not exactly a risk-free endeavor. Longtime friends Jeff Reaves of architecture firm [Group Mackenzie](#) and Jay Haladay of software-maker Coaxis, Inc. faced a lengthy process that involved negotiations among government agencies and a contractual commitment to rent to nonprofit tenants at below-market rates.

"You have to have some faith on a project like this, and we certainly had surprises along the way during construction," Reaves says. "But you could see that the building had so much potential. And the location was incredible — this front row seat on the city."



Sections of concrete wall, removed to add windows and improve daylighting throughout the [RiverEast Center](#), were reused in a site installation designed by artist Linda Wysong. Photo: Gary Wilson Photo/Graphic



The original double-height, cast-in-place concrete columns help to define the offices of [Group Mackenzie](#) in the [RiverEast Center](#). Photo: Gary Wilson Photo/Graphic [Extra Large Image](#)

Half a century ago, the Holman Transfer Building, as the warehouse was then known, bustled with activity as part of a riverfront supply chain. In the mid-1960s, it was condemned to make way for the new Mount Hood Freeway, only to be granted a reprieve when a local campaign against building the freeway was successful. (That effort helped set Portland on the course of greater pedestrian- and transit-oriented planning in the 1970s, which has led to the city's modern downtown successes.)

In 2001, the city built the now-popular Eastbank Esplanade along the river, abutting the Holman warehouse. At that time, the local government's development wing, the Portland Development Commission, purchased the Holman Transfer Building. The development commission envisioned replacing the building's parking lot with a city park, a move that would have made finding a client for the warehouse very difficult.

Still, when the official request for proposals was issued by the development commission, Jeff Reaves got interested quickly. "I think a 95,000-square-foot [8,800-square-meter] space probably scared off a lot of potential developers," the architect says. But with Group Mackenzie already assisting Coaxis in the search for a new headquarters, and the architecture firm itself outgrowing its Portland office, the project seemed plausible. One of the pre-renovation tenants — the nonprofit Portland Boathouse, which provides boat storage and boating educational programs — even wanted to stay.

Following lengthy, nearly two-year negotiations with the City of Portland, and after addressing issues of site contamination, the first construction goal was to bring the building up to current seismic codes. This required the addition of new cross bracing and sheer walls. Today those visible additions, along with pock-marked concrete floors and countless pipes and ducts, both new and old, impart an unfussy industrial aesthetic to RiverEast.

The most dramatic architectural feature inside, particularly in the space in which Group Mackenzie set up its offices, is the series of original 20-foot- (six-meter-) high concrete columns. Located inside a double-height space surrounded by a mezzanine, the column forms become a kind of star attraction, not unlike the signature lily pad-shaped columns in [Frank Lloyd Wright's famous Johnson Wax Building](#).

"The structural clarity with its tall columns and then the shallower mezzanines was what attracted us," says Dick Spies, another principal at Group Mackenzie. "It's very three-dimensional compared to most offices. That adds a lot of visual interest." To preserve the pattern made in the masonry by the original wood casting forms, the surface of the columns was acid-washed rather than sandblasted.

The next challenge was to bring in natural light and transparency to support the higher lighting requirements of the building's new uses. A



Following the renovation completed in 2007, the Holman Transfer Building was renamed the [RiverEast Center](#) and is now home to the headquarters of Coaxis, Inc., the Portland office of [Group Mackenzie](#), the Portland Boathouse, and other tenants.

*Photo: Gary Wilson
Photo/Graphic*



The open southwest corner of the Holman Transfer building was enclosed during renovation to form a third-story gathering space, now used by Coaxis.

Photo: Sally Painter [Extra Large Image](#)



The simple Art Deco detailing around the main entry to the [RiverEast](#)

common design move for such a wide building would be to introduce a central atrium. "That was the point we started from," Reaves remembers. "But you lose a lot of square footage that way, and it kind of dictates the layout you have for the rest of the space."

Instead, the architects decided to cut into the building's exterior concrete walls, ultimately removing as much as 30 percent of the facade. Even so, the remaining concrete provides helpful thermal mass to minimize temperature swings, thus reducing heating and cooling costs.

Almost all of the concrete that was removed was reused onsite. Some of it was refashioned for a series of outdoor sculptures by artist Linda Wysong.

Large amounts of concrete were also reused in a sitewide rainwater retention system designed in collaboration with landscape architects [GreenWorks](#) of Portland. In a demonstration project coordinated with the Portland Environmental Services Bureau, a "green street" public plaza was created to collect rainwater from the roof and parking lot of the RiverEast Center, as well as from the adjacent Water Avenue. The runoff is then treated in a privately maintained facility before reaching the river.

To fund such elements of the project, the developers sought a host of grants and other alternative funding sources.

On the building's upper southwest corner facing the river, where Coaxis has its some of its offices, a glass box was added to enclose a previously open corner. This space, with floor-to-ceiling windows, acts as a central gathering place for employees. A multistory glass entryway on the east end of the building, with the original wide stairway preserved, has also become valued public space, with employees regularly eschewing the elevator.

The most overt "green" addition to the building is a double-glazed solar wall along most of the south facade. This feature captures heat in the winter and helps divert it in summertime.

With a radiant heating system, specially coated windows, energy-efficient fixtures, and other sustainable features, the building consumes 51 percent less energy than the code-specified maximum. The building's energy efficiency, materials reuse and recycling, use of a contaminated site, and location near ample mass-transit connections earned RiverEast a LEED Gold rating from the U.S. Green Building Council.

Employee culture at both Coaxis and Group Mackenzie has undergone a transformation since construction on the project was completed in April 2007 and the firms moved into their new offices. Coaxis was previously headquartered in the Portland suburb of Tigard, and Group Mackenzie's Portland office was located on a long thoroughfare

[Center](#), recently renovated by [Group Mackenzie](#), expresses the building's origins as an early-1950s warehouse. Photo: David Owen / [Artifice Images](#)



Before renovation work began in 2005, the Holman Transfer Building in Portland, Oregon, had suffered years of disrepair and a number of incongruous modifications. Photo: Sally Painter



Mezzanine areas overlook double-height spaces in the Coaxis offices of [RiverEast Center](#). Photo: Gary Wilson Photo/Graphic



In the third-floor Coaxis lobby, custom glass pieces adorn a shear

heading out of the city. Both companies used to have full parking lots and a mostly business-hours working culture.

But at the new location, their workers increasingly take advantage of available mass transit and biking opportunities. "We used to have seven people getting to work by bus or light rail," Jeff Reaves says. "Now we have about forty."

People from both companies also voluntarily work more often on evenings and weekends at RiverEast; many have integrated their personal athletic and cultural activities — an afternoon kayak trip on the river, perhaps a quick morning shopping jaunt — into their work day, and vice versa.

Meanwhile, other tenants are filling the ground-level street frontage: a boating supply store, a restaurant, an environmental nonprofit.

As architects developing their own building in a burgeoning neighborhood, "we saw the opportunity to have a broader impact," Dick Spies of Group Mackenzie says. "The Central Eastside has a strong history as an industrial sanctuary, but now it's transferring into a higher-density area for creative spaces, such as the one here. There's tremendous potential in that."

"But it was that deal-making opportunity from an entrepreneurial standpoint, to be able to work with a number of partners, that really helped make it happen."

[Brian Libby](#) is a Portland, Oregon-based freelance writer who has also published in Metropolis, The New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor, and Architectural Record.

Other images



The eastern entry to [RiverEast Center](#) leads into a multistory foyer. Photo: David Owen / [Artifice Images](#)



Along the southern side of the [RiverEast Center](#), a normal asphalt street was replaced with a semi-permeable public plaza that aggregates rainwater from collection systems around the site. Photo: David Owen / [Artifice Images](#)



As much as 30 percent of the existing wall concrete was replaced with windows during the renovation of [RiverEast Center](#). Photo: David Owen / [Artifice Images](#)



Salvaged sections of concrete wall were reused throughout the [RiverEast Center](#)'s sitewide rainwater collection system. Photo: David Owen / [Artifice Images](#)

wall, one element of the substantial seismic upgrade required in the [RiverEast Center](#) renovation.

Photo: Gary Wilson
Photo/Graphic



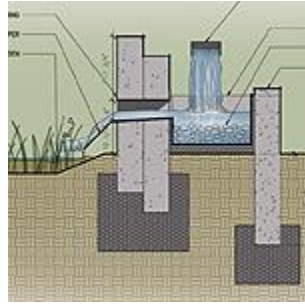
Site plan drawing of [RiverEast Center](#). Image: Group Mackenzie
[Extra Large Image](#)



Ground-floor plan drawing of [RiverEast Center](#). Image: Group Mackenzie
[Extra Large Image](#)



Swales collect rainwater from the parking lot adjacent to the [RiverEast Center](#).
Photo: David Owen / [Artifice Images](#)



Detail section drawing at rainwater catch basin.
Image: Group Mackenzie



Second-floor plan drawing of [RiverEast Center](#).
Image: Group Mackenzie



Third-floor plan drawing of [RiverEast Center](#).
Image: Group Mackenzie



Fourth-floor plan drawing of [RiverEast Center](#).
Image: Group Mackenzie



[RiverEast Center](#) stands at a nexus of vehicular, water, bicycle, and pedestrian conduits in Portland, Oregon.
Photo: David Owen / [Artifice Images](#)