



The front desk at Flashpoint Academy in the Burnham Center. Challenges on this project for Valenti Builders included installing high-tech wiring in a historical building and finishing the educational center in time for classes to begin in September. (Photos by Susan Carr; Carr Cialdella Photography)

Finished In A Flash

Valenti Builders Overcomes Time, Building Constraints To Complete High-Tech Education Complex

BY BECCA KATZ

Constructing within an already-existing building inevitably poses difficulties, but when that project calls for high-tech elements in a building constructed before World War I, a four-month timeline and a LEED Silver certification, the challenges are even more formidable.

Valenti Builders took on those challenges in constructing Flashpoint, The Academy of Media Arts and Sciences, which was completed in September of 2007. The school, which occupies the first, fifth and sixth floors of the historic Burnham Center, is a two-year school that offers degrees in cinema, recording arts, gaming and animation.

The Burnham Center is located at the intersection of Washington Avenue and Clark Street, which is in the middle of downtown. As with any project in downtown Chicago, Valenti Builders had to work in a limited space as efficiently as possible

Project Spotlight

while creating the least amount of inconvenience for pedestrians and traffic.

Valenti Builders constructed a steel staircase made of a cantilevered folded steel plate that is intended to appear to be flying off the wall. This posed a challenge because previously there had not been an open atrium stairway between the fifth and sixth floors. A portion of that floor had to be taken out without compromising the integrity of the structure.

“We cut a hole between the fifth and sixth floor to create an atrium stairway, and structurally there were some unknowns,” Said Project Executive Austin Stanton. His team planned ahead as much it could to be able to accommodate issues that arose, such as cutting through the sixth floor.

“Flashpoint had immense technological requirements,” Stanton said. “There was some pretty new equipment they were getting that we had to educate ourselves on to provide the proper backbone.”

The project called for high-tech studios, so Valenti had to make special accommodations to allow for the cutting-edge

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technology.

Exact documentation of the piping and electrical wiring were unavailable, which meant Valenti Builders had no way to know if pipes and wires would have to be rerouted where the floor was taken out until they actually began the construction phase of the project.

The Academy has classrooms, computer labs, recording facilities, a directing stage, a screening room, a motion-capture studio and student lounges. The screening room has three video cameras that are wired to run simultaneously, and the room is set up with various lighting controls.

Multiple sets and stages for video projects had to be fitted with cameras, audio visual and lighting equipment. Another high-tech room at the Academy is the Matrix Room, where four web-linked projector systems are projected throughout the school. The lobby has surround sound and multiple projection surfaces.

All of this technology within a 75,000 square foot area resulted in 11 miles of wiring.

“Making sure we had the right equipment and had the stages constructed to specifications was a unique challenge,” said Assistant Project Manager Natalie Valenti. “Even though we don’t have to put all of the technology in place, it is our responsibility to make sure the room is done in time for those items to be added.”

Many floors in the building — which originally went up in 1913 — weren’t deep enough to bury the cables and electric wires. By working with the architect and the owners and planning as far ahead as they could, however, Valenti was able to make accommodations for structural issues.

“There were definitely some mechanical issues,” Stanton said. “We coordinated with the architect who rerouted and made architectural changes when there were no other options.

“There were a number of scope enhancements that occurred during the building. Spaces had to grow or contract. Circulation areas changed. A lot of the technical requirements changed,” Stanton said.

Material lead times sometimes contradicted the time it would take to reach LEED requirements. The window coverings and the carpet had to be altered because of conflicts between the materials and the schedule, so Valenti sought new materials that would fulfill the LEED requirements while still achieving what Flashpoint wanted aesthetically.

“The owner and the architect compromised a little bit because their original materials didn’t work, but in the end they got something they liked and it met the LEED requirements,” Stanton said. “The schedule couldn’t be affected, so we worked around it. We understood what we had to get done in the least amount of time possible.”

Flashpoint’s timeline was only four months because the building had to be ready in time for classes to start in September. According to Natalie Valenti, keeping up on documentation was vital to getting the project done in time.

“There’s always certain challenges with building in the Loop,” Stanton said. “There are logistical challenges such as getting materials in and out. It goes with the territory.”

Through Flashpoint Academy of the Media Arts and other projects, Valenti has shown it can rise to meet those challenges.

