

Museum figures that figures must ring historically true

G-town landmark required to put address on building

By Ian Neligh, Clear Creek Courant, Clear Creek County, Idaho Springs, CO
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Historic preservation can sometimes turn a simple issue into a present-day nightmare. For Georgetown's 137-year-old Hotel de Paris Museum, the issue was its address: 409 6th St. The nightmare became how to appropriately deal with a town and county requirement that the address must be displayed on the building.

When you're in the business of historic preservation, simple questions such as how to put letters on a building and what font to use become complicated. The museum, which is a National Trust Historic Site, stayed true to its history by painting the address onto the stucco building, since that was common in the past.

Even more difficult was deciding on a font — not too old, not too new, but just right. It was decided to use a font that was created in the mid-1950s, about the time the hotel became a museum.

With a steady hand, museum director Kevin Kuharic painted the numbers on the building. He said that if the code requirements ever change and the address is not needed, the painted numbers can be removed without a trace.

Complying with code requirements

The address conundrum began recently when Kuharic received a letter from both the town of Georgetown and the county's Fire Authority, requesting the museum put a street address on the building's exterior.

"It is a requirement in the building and fire code that all buildings have their address posted," said Fire Chief Kelly Babeon.

Babeon said making sure all local buildings have a street address on display was a priority and should be fairly simple to comply with.

"They realized that we were one of the buildings in town that was lacking street numbers," Kuharic said. "And we're pretty sure we never had street numbers simply because the building served as a landmark in Georgetown for a century."

To paint or to install

For Kuharic, the question then became how the museum would display the numbers without defacing the historic building.

"Or detracting from the historic aspects," Kuharic said, "because that's what we sell, is history." Kuharic said he played with several ideas before settling on painting the address on the exterior. Drilling in numbers was out of the question.

“The tradition of painting on the stucco existed (in the past), so to me that felt like if we continued the tradition, we were being sensitive to the building,” Kuharic said.

Not blurring past and present

Then the real difficulty began. The museum’s officials couldn’t decide what style the numbers should be in. It had to be a font that wouldn’t compromise the historic site.

Going with a historic font would seem, on the surface, appropriate, but Kuharic said it ultimately would be misleading.

“You don’t want to blur the present with the past,” Kuharic said. “Choosing a historic typeface might indicate to a visitor that the numbers have been up for years and years and maybe (original owner) Louis Dupuy put them up.”

So they needed to avoid going with a historic look. The hotel ceased operations in 1954 and that same year became a museum. It was from this time period that Kuharic took his inspiration. He decided to go with a font that came from the time when the museum officially started.

“So I settled on the typeface Helvetica, which was designed in 1957, very close to 1954,”

Kuharic said. “... One of the first comments I got when I finished the lettering was, ‘Wow, that’s modern looking,’ and I said, ‘Perfect.’ Then we chose the right font, which is counterintuitive.”

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