

THE NEED

FOR OLD

BUILDINGS

Bielski Specialty Services, Inc.
gives historical buildings
a second chance


by Meredith Wargo

Anyone owning a home is acutely aware of the constant maintenance required in keeping the structure looking and functioning at its best. As demanding as home ownership can be, imagine being tasked with cleaning and restoring a high-rise historical building in a densely populated downtown business district.

Welcome to Tim Bielski's world.

"Although the work can be extremely challenging, it's rewarding knowing we're helping to preserve a piece of history," says Tim Bielski, founder and President of *Bielski Specialty Services, Inc.* in Anaheim, Calif.

Bielski's journey to becoming a leader in providing historical restoration services has been a circuitous one. "I started an exterior maintenance company in 1979," says Bielski. "I founded the company based on my



After the Loma Prieta earthquake struck Northern California, the San Francisco City Hall suffered extensive damage. Bielski Specialty Services, Inc. cleaned the facility's exterior Sierra White granite façade and interior common hall locations, consisting of polished marble and honed surfaces.



An employee performs tuckpointing on the façade of The Old Soap Factory in San Diego. Tuckpointing is a labor-intensive process of repairing mortar joints in stone or brick masonry walls by grinding or raking out the old mortar to a certain depth, and then refilling with new mortar.

skill set at the time, which was pressure washing. It was a means to an end. Within a few years, I met a man who was also providing pressure washing services in the area. We joint-ventured on a few jobs and I ended up buying him out. From there, other avenues started opening up and eventually I created my niche in historical restoration.”

And thanks to a strong economy, there has been a resurgence in preserving historical buildings throughout the country.

“Five years ago, most of our work involved the historical restoration of government facilities and very little private-sector work,” says Ernie Sepulveda, a Senior Project Manager who has worked for Bielski for 15 years. “As the economy has rebounded, more people are investing in bringing historical facilities back to their original state. Today, we’re doing more private work than government work.”

PRESERVING MORE THAN BRICKS AND MORTAR

The stories behind the buildings that Bielski restores are as varied as the services he provides. When the San Fernando earthquake struck Southern California in 1971, Los Angeles’ main government facility experienced significant damage.

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Tim Bielski, Founder and President,
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Built in 1928, the Los Angeles City Hall featured glazed-brick light courts, flamed granite blocks and terra-cotta surfaces. The repairs to the facility were extensive and necessitated the repainting of the entire 32-story building, including the grout lines, which was done to save money and blend in the mortar color. As was common practice in the 70s, lead-based paint was used in painting residential, commercial and industrial facilities. (It wasn’t until 1978 that lead was banned from paints in the United States.)

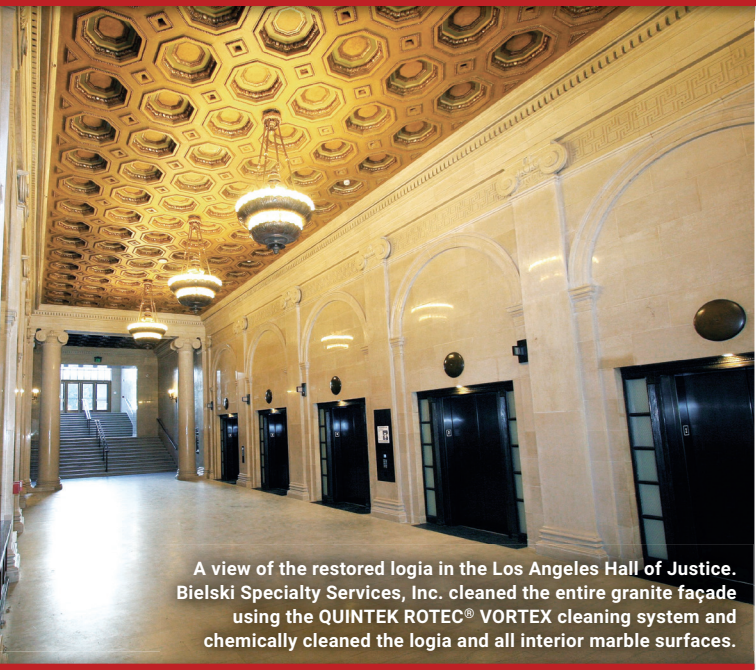
Twenty-three years later, the Northridge earthquake rumbled through the Los Angeles area, and, once again, the Los Angeles City Hall was caught in the crosshairs. Bielski Specialty Services, Inc. was awarded a subcontract for the exterior restoration cleaning of approximately 315,000 square feet of surface area and lead-based paint abatement on approximately 175,000 lineal feet of terra-cotta grout lines.



A Bielski Specialty Services, Inc. craftsman provides detailed painting during the renovation of the Pershing Square Building in downtown Los Angeles. The 15-story mixed-use structure was originally built in 1924.

“We frequently have to coordinate the work that we’re doing with other work that is occurring on the project at the same time. We carefully supervise our staff to help minimize potential accidents and disruption to the surrounding area.”

Tim Bielski



A view of the restored loggia in the Los Angeles Hall of Justice. Bielski Specialty Services, Inc. cleaned the entire granite façade using the QUINTEK ROTEC® VORTEX cleaning system and chemically cleaned the loggia and all interior marble surfaces.

NO COMPROMISES

In addition to providing historical restoration, Bielski’s company also offers a variety of services for new facilities, including educational facilities, prisons and water treatment plants. “We work with the masons who build new structures throughout the state,” says Bielski. “We specialize in waterproofing and water-repellent services, concrete sealant, caulking and masonry cleaning for new construction. While we’re not responsible for the masonry, we give the owners the finished product they’re expecting to see.”

Regardless of the type of project, Bielski takes special precautions on every job site to ensure the safety of his employees, the public and the project.

“We deal with a lot of different general contractors,” says Bielski. “Each one implements very stringent safety protocols, which we follow. We also adhere to our own safety procedures in terms of training and meetings. The combined efforts have lowered our workers’ compensation insurance premiums while enabling our employees to take great pride in their work and their safety.”

Bielski explains that every employee is carefully trained in the proper use of all their equipment, including scaffolding, ladders and power tools. He attributes the specialized training as key to the company’s success. “We frequently

“We chemically cleaned the historical wall surfaces using a combination of frame and suspended swing-stage scaffold systems,” says Bielski. “We stripped all the lead-based paint from the entire structure, which generated waste effluent that required special handling and disposal. As with any paint abatement project, our workers closely followed careful procedures to protect themselves as well as the surrounding environment. We stayed on that project for more than a year.”



Bielski Specialty Services, Inc. workers carefully clean the east entrance to the San Francisco City Hall, restoring the granite back to its natural beauty.

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Bielski Specialty Services, Inc. is also a certified applicator of numerous products that are used in the restoration process. "We undergo specialized training and certifications for many of the products we use," says Bielski. "Companies such as PROSOCO, Jahn International and QUINTEK manufacture quality products that contribute significantly to the preservation of the objects to which they are applied. It's important that we're properly trained in using the most gentle and thoroughly acknowledged restoration cleaning processes available in the industry."

HISTORY IN THE MAKING

While the majority of Bielski's work stems from historical restoration, the face of these types of projects is changing.

"Things are more technical now than they used to be because of historic Preservation regulations and guidelines," says Sepulveda. "And because buildings are being repurposed from their original intent, the envelope sometimes gets pushed a bit."

Projects like the Eastern Columbia Building fall into this category. Built in 1929, the structure is in the Broadway Theater and commercial district of downtown Los Angeles and is considered the best surviving example of Art Deco architecture in Los Angeles. Originally built as a department store, the 13-story building was renovated in 2006 and converted into luxury condominiums.

Bielski's restoration contract included chemical cleaning of the glazed terra-cotta façade, interior and exterior glass cleaning, removal and replacement of all sealant, and window renovation.

"Although this was a restoration project, it was different from the norm," says Sepulveda. "The building was pretty run down before its conversion. The owners wanted to keep the original integrity of the building while creating a totally different look. With its modern features, the building has become an iconic landmark."

"Adaptive reuse projects like the Eastern Columbia Building highlight the benefits of historic preservation," adds Bielski. "While it may require more time and money upfront, preserving history instead of demolishing and replacing old buildings bodes well for the future." 🍷

Texas-based Meredith Wargo is a contributing writer with more than 30 years of experience writing for a myriad of industries.