



TRANSFORMING THE BOX THE

Space Needle Came In



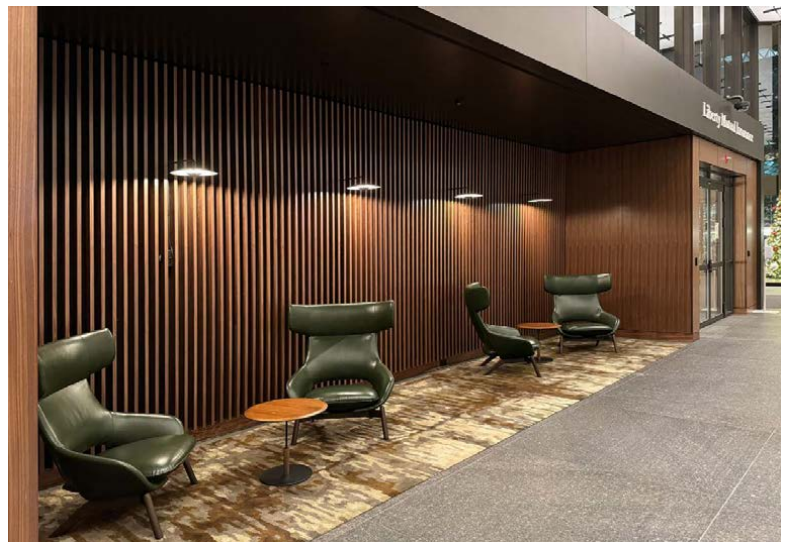
By **RANDY REID**

Photo Courtesy of FMS

In the heart of Seattle's skyline, Safeco Plaza stands not only as an iconic piece of the city's architectural history but also as a testament to the evolution of lighting design in retrofitted office buildings. Prior to the Plaza's construction, the Space Needle was the tallest structure in Seattle. When Safeco Plaza was finished in 1969, it narrowly surpassed the Space Needle as the tallest structure in the city and was affectionately dubbed "the box the Space Needle came in."

The building was originally designed by a local Pacific Northwest architectural firm. In time, this firm expanded and eventually merged to form **NBBJ**, now a globally renowned architectural firm with a substantial office in Seattle. **Charles Stone**, co-founder of **FMS** reflected on the significance, saying, "This building encapsulates the international style that defined an era, sparking considerable conversation among the people of Seattle in the 1970s." The edifice not only represented a style but also marks a transformation in the architectural landscape from local to global prominence.

Built upon the hilly terrain of downtown Seattle, the structure is designed with multi-level access. Upon entering at one level, a descent via escalator or stairs takes you two or three floors below to another street level. Distinguishing this tower from others is its podium, which extends horizontally, allowing for



an unobstructed view from across the street. This vantage point offers a stunning visual of the building's lit interior, highlighted by a luminous ceiling, expansive glass panes, and the quintessential simplicity of a classic International Style skyscraper.

On opening day, its distinct bronze aluminum and glass façade was a beacon of modernity and innovation. Fast forward to 2021, with Boston Properties at the helm, a visionary reimagining of this venerable building began in the hands of the Seattle office of architecture firm **Aedas**.

Charles explained, “Renovations over the years had left the lobby with a lackluster ambiance. The large, outdated 8-inch downlights and harsh accent lighting did little justice to the travertine-clad core walls.” Some of the previous retrofits included compact fluorescent as well as white HPS. FMS’ design approach was clear – respect the building’s history while elevating its aesthetic and functional presence.

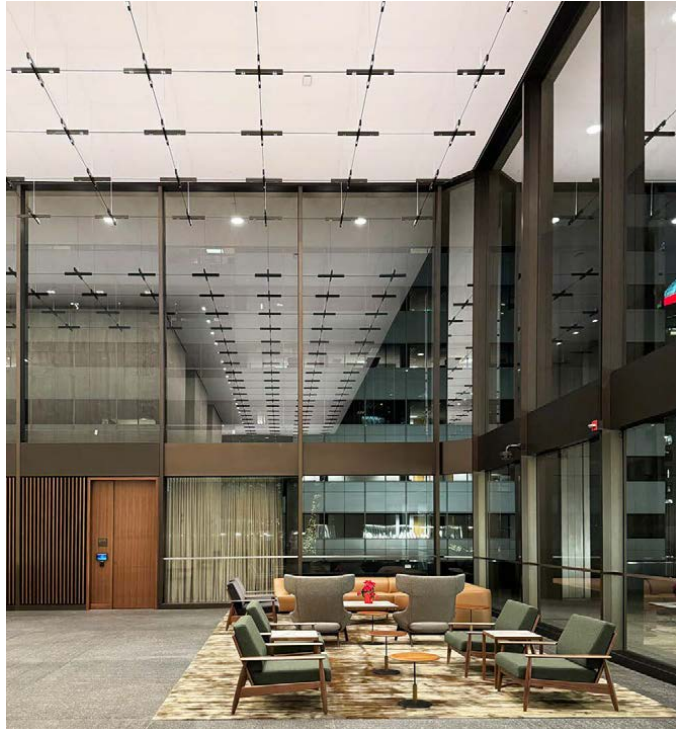
Charles explained the delicate interplay of light and shadow in the lighting design, explaining how small, low-wattage downward sources contribute a subtle sparkle to the space in the lobby, while the luminous diffusers on top emit a gentle uplight.

This lighting scheme is purposefully aligned with the architectural elements, creating shadows that are so finely matched with the surrounding structure that they are almost imperceptible. The observer must look intently to even notice the shadows cast by the line sources and cables.

These minute shadows contribute to an effect of near-shadowless illumination, providing a level of ambient light that feels brighter than it is due to the psychological perception of brightness. The additional downlights enhance this sensation, contributing just enough focal glow to the environment to reinforce the ambient luminescence without overwhelming the space.

The renovation project, fueled by a profound understanding of architectural context and a careful balance between respecting tradition and embracing innovation, required a lighting designer with a rich history in the field. As Charles explained, “It wasn’t just about updating old technology but applying a deep contextual and sympathetic understanding of the building’s character.” He remarked that such a nuanced appreciation for the architectural context and the delicate interplay of light and space comes with time, a commodity that he has amassed through decades of work in the industry.

The FMS team decided on a color temperature of 3000K for both up and downlighting, offering a warm, inviting glow. Using a total of 306 intersections each featuring a Vode Lighting extrusion with uplight optics, the design was a matrix of precision and subtlety. The downlights were a custom addition, with four pairs in each intersection, each only 1 watt, contributing to an understated sparkle that avoided glare and complemented the lobby’s renewed aesthetic.



An on-site mockup was a pandemic-era challenge met with diligence and creativity. Charles stated, “**Kevin Frary** and **Zack Zanolli** did the heavy lifting on the design as well as the fully masked work on site during the mockup.” The previously drab ceiling was transformed with a coat of white paint with a level 4 finish, turning it into a canvas reflecting the carefully crafted lighting design. Laser levels were used in the mockups to ensure perfection.

The project, finished in November of 2023, is more than just a redesign; it’s a narrative of lighting’s power to transform spaces. It’s a demonstration of how the fixtures of yesteryear – the 8-inch downlights that once ruled lobbies like this – can make way for innovation that respects a building’s past while boldly stepping into the future. The seamless integration of the lighting design not only revitalized the lobby but also reinforced Safeco Plaza’s status as a cornerstone of class-A office space in Seattle.

Charles’s words encapsulated the essence of this undertaking: “The blending of seasoned wisdom with contemporary design ensured that each decision, each beam of light, was true to the building’s story and its role in the city’s fabric. It stands as an eloquent reminder that the best designs come from a synergy of experience, respect for the past, and a vision for the future.” ■



At LEDucation 2024, the Safeco Plaza received a special citation from the National Lighting Bureau Tesla Awards.