Nevelson Chapel White Paper
Submitted to NEH
December 31, 2020

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Dedicated in 1977, Nevelson Chapel is the only remaining, fully intact sculptural environment by artist Louise Nevelson. Inside the asymmetrical polygon envelope, the floor-to-ceiling window and skylight pour light onto the white-on-white environment. Nevelson’s carefully crafted wall sculptures, her mastery of light and shadow, and her unparalleled sense of space and movement, combine to create a distinctive experience. Nevelson aspired to “break down the historical dichotomy between life and art” by creating what has since come to be called installation art.

Closed due to COVID-19, the Chapel is normally open to the public from 9-9. A mass is held daily at noon. Saint Peter’s is a hub of activity, fulfilling its mission to “creatively shape life in the city” by partnering on religious, social service, and arts programs that serve half a million people annually, including public programs that promote Nevelson’s legacy and the Chapel conservation.

In December 2013 conservator Sarah Nunberg installed a PEM2 data logger in the Chapel to record ambient relative humidity levels. The collected data from December 2013 to July 2015 indicate that the RH of the room ranged from 6% to 84% between 16 December 2013 and 4 August 2014. Fluctuations of over 50% in less than one week increments were occurring in the heating season, and smaller short-term fluctuations of 20% were occurring in the cooling season. The data logger also recorded mixed air conditions in the room with portions of the sculpture directly below supply air discharges, which typically are hotter with lower RH in winter, and cooler with higher RH in summer. In general, dew point temperatures in the Chapel were tracking closely with exterior dew point temperatures, indicating that moisture vapor in the Chapel was not well controlled.

Beginning December 2014, Michael C. Henry, PE, AIA, of Watson & Henry Associates collected more specific environmental data with HOBO UX100 series data loggers. This data was consistent with the earlier findings and showed that relative humidity and temperature levels were generally well outside the recommended specifications for museum collections, either ASHRAE Control Class A Fixed (40 to 60%RH) or ASHRAE Control Class B (30 to 50%RH in winter, 40 to 60%RH in summer).

Henry reviewed the Chapel space and its sculptures, the existing HVAC system and data and concluded that the air supply, presence of harmful lighting approaches, and poor temperature and humidity control were each contributing significantly to the deterioration of Louise Nevelson’s painted wood sculpture. Henry attributed the extremes in relative humidity and short-term fluctuations to the following: Mixing of the air in the Chapel zone with air from adjacent spaces; Low relative humidity in winter, due to lack of, or inadequate, humidification; High relative humidity and wide relative humidity fluctuations in winter due to use of outside air with high dew point for “free cooling”; Wide fluctuations in relative humidity in spring when outside air with high dew point is used for “free cooling” without dehumidification; High relative humidity in summer due to inadequate dehumidification at the cooling coils; Fluctuations in temperature...
and relative humidity due to “occupied” and “unoccupied” control settings; Fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity due to apparent lack of zone reheat control. Henry added that the rate and extent of paint detachment of the objects would be locally exacerbated by artificial light damage and air flowing directly at the objects at close proximity in particular areas.

PROJECT GOALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Located within Saint Peter’s Church and the larger complex of Citicorp Center, now known as “601 Lexington Avenue”, the HVAC inside the Chapel has been entirely controlled by the larger complex. These environmental systems and controls were designed for the corporate office tower, not for an intimate “museum” space housing a unique artwork, and certainly not with any consideration or contemporary understanding for the preservation of such an object.

This project introduced mechanical and environmental upgrades for improved environmental management, regulation over seasonal fluctuations, and long-term preservation of the Chapel, with reduced energy use and costs, in combination with the art conservation work also in progress. The upgrades sub-divide the Chapel from the rest of Citicorp Center, and reduce fluctuations in relative humidity and temperature within the Chapel environment. The new system provides realistic climate control using ASHRAE Class B as a target, and aims to reduce future degradation of the Nevelson sculptures. Alterations to lighting, windows, and doors also improve the energy efficiency while reducing the damaging effects of the aging components.

Project accomplishments include:

- Installation of updated, energy-efficient HVAC system and controls to stabilize the fluctuating relative humidity and temperature in the space (semi-independent HVAC system installed 2019; reheat coil installed September 2020)
- Relocation of air supply and return, eliminating the current vents that blow directly on the sculpture, adding physical stress to some surface (completed 2019; updated September 2020)
- Removal of existing incandescent light fixtures and introduction of new energy-efficient LED light fixtures and controls (completed 2019)
- Replacement of existing entry doors to reduce air mixing and noise penetration. (completed 2019)
- Replacement of the compromised skylight above the northern sculptures with energy-efficient skylights that block ultraviolet light, do not leak or allow water condensation—all while continuing to provide the natural light Nevelson desired there (scheduled for spring 2021)
- Substitution of the existing single-pane window with insulated glazing to increase energy efficiency, filter out ultraviolet light, and reduce street noise audible in the space intended by Nevelson to be “an oasis of silence.” (scheduled for spring 2021)

IMPACT

The impact on the artwork is immeasurable. Now with this new HVAC system, this distinctive masterwork is likely to survive for generations to fulfill its original purpose as a public space in the heart of midtown Manhattan. Unlike other Nevelson installations which have undergone significant alteration or removal, this one remains intact and in its original location. It is that original location that has undergone significant upgrade. The reductions in privately-owned public spaces in the city, and a shift to a security state in public gathering spaces, is at least mitigated by this very human space. It remains as a reminder to
pause and reflect even as we connect with others, congregate for music and faith and art and recovery, as we remain human in the city.

In addition to continuing to interact with this public space, art professionals and aficionados, religious and non religious persons, students and office workers, retirees and asylees which connect to Saint Peter’s Church and Nevelson Chapel have all come in contact with this project aimed at sustaining cultural heritage. Whether through a series of Salon conversations which consistently attract hundreds of persons or articles published about the Chapel, whether through a professional conference or the Chapel’s growing social media / web presence, people learn of the significance of Louise Nevelson and the Chapel -- her only remaining fully intact environmental installation -- and the mechanical and art-conservation systems and processes crucial to its ongoing life.

Similarly, this project has propelled the Church has a whole into the world of historic preservation and long-term care. Saint Peter’s Church was recently named a New York City Landmark and is undergoing processes to be listed at State and Federal levels. Preservation and environmental upgrades elsewhere in the Church building are now benefiting from the Chapel process. The National Fund for Sacred Spaces. National Trust for Historic Preservation just selected Saint Peter’s Church as part of its 2020-2021 cohort.

LESSONS LEARNED

This project has provided immeasurable professional education for the staff and lay leadership of Saint Peter’s Church. Working with a team of professionals and tracking the day to day progress and obstacles has been a hands-on education in climate control and preservation. Reports at each phase of the project and weekly meetings over the last 6 months has created a fluency that no staff member had previously.

Given that Saint Peter’s is not a professional museum, gallery or other such space that would house a work such as Nevelson Chapel, perhaps the most important lesson learned is the need to have broad advice and consultation by persons not serving as paid consultants. The establishment of an “Arts Committee” in early 2020 has helped us make informed decisions on how to proceed with conservation, climate control, collections management and maintenance, and future programming. The committee has broad expertise—from art history to conservation, from architecture to climate control professionals. The resulting dialogue with paid consultants has been a major benefit to the project.

The need for this ongoing dialogue has only become more clear, and serves as a third major learning both for the HVAC project supported by this grant and the overall conservation of Nevelson Chapel. Namely, the long-term nature of this work. Already we are experiencing both the complexities and the long time frame required to balance this system as it was designed. We are learning new dynamics of our building and are actively recalibrating the system, as well as those building conditions that can be changed, in our effort to maintain our stated environmental goals. COVID-19 shutdowns and regulations have complicated our effort even further. Where we once thought this system could be installed and commissioned over a series of seasons, we now anticipate an ongoing dialogue between art conservator, engineers and programmers. Already plans are in place to upgrade controls in early 2021 in order to provide off-site access -- crucial in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic but also for long-term sustainability.

LOOKING FORWARD

Saint Peter’s Church and the Nevelson Legacy Council are beginning to plan for post-COVID reopening. Both because the Church is committed to maintaining the Chapel as a public space and the Church
understand the importance of the Chapel’s conservation in all its parts being a public venture, the future of Nevelson Chapel remain and, we hope, grow increasingly public. Programatically, preparations are underway to consider the future of the art conservation in light of this new system and in light of new learning on the artworks themselves. Financially, one endowment is being raised to continue to provide programming into the future and a second endowment is being raised to provide funds for ongoing conservation. Colleagially, now as part of the City and wider Landmark / Historic Place network, the Church is sharing the sustainability perspectives from Nevelson Chapel with other historic properties.

Much of our work, to date, has been conveyed in both professional publications as well as more popular sources, including our own website and social media channels. Particularly as the new HVAC system is fine-tuned and data is collected, we anticipate making this information similarly available. We will do this in ways that will be of interest to professionals and is translated to the general public. [www.NevelsonChapel.org](http://www.NevelsonChapel.org) has grown from a small website annotating various conservation conversations, to a comprehensive historical, spiritual, preservation, education and community building platform. A grant has been secured to begin a collection management system and the results of this, too, will further building information sharing.

In crafting Nevelson Chapel, Louise Nevelson called this place “a gift to the Universe.” Thanks to this life-saving environmental upgrade, Nevelson Chapel has turned course from sustained deterioration to sustained preservation. In this way, this masterwork of this Nation’s pioneering environmental installation artist is now able to become a gift to the future, too.