



Edited excerpts from Heritage Canada
The National Trust's interview with
Russell Acton and Mark Ostry this past
November, 2014.

RA – Russell Acton
MO – Mark Ostry

**Q: Your firm, Acton Ostry Architects
Inc. boasts extensive experience in
rehabilitation and adaptive re-use
projects, what sparked your firm's
interest in preservation work?**

MO: It goes back to the start of our practice and maybe even pre-dates our practice forming. We were working on conversions of old warehouses into artist live/work studios and one thing led to the next in terms of interest and expertise in rehabilitation.

RA: I remember Mark had been working on a lot of these types of heritage projects and he said to me, "it's your turn to do one," and I was going "grumble grumble," and then once I started working on one of these old warehouses I was immediately fascinated by it. It presented such an interesting problem solving exercise. At the heart of things with architecture, it's all about solving problems. It's just a basic fascination with the challenge.

MO: In terms of the types of heritage buildings we were working with, it was a lesson in the way buildings were traditionally constructed and an appreciation of the quality of the materials used. We're always struck by the level of quality. Heavy timber beams that are two and half feet in both directions, compared to stick framing. Or masonry instead of stucco. Higher quality materials were used to construct buildings.

What do you find particularly satisfying about working with historic buildings?

RA: Once we begin to learn the history of a building, an intimate relationship develops with the site. The more you learn about its past, the more ideas you have about preserving it and transforming it into a new use for the future. Even when the Salt Building in Vancouver was sitting there decaying, it had this real strength and presence. It was an iconic structure that was struggling. After we were done with it – with the skills of the entire project team – it was as solid as a rock, even though it's made out of a bunch of sticks and timber. It's just so extremely satisfying.

MO: I think both Russell and I believe in the common sense approach to sustainability. It shapes the core of our practice. When we look at a lot of heritage buildings we see how much can be retained rather than demolished and sent to landfill. There are times where we find older buildings that just can't be rehabilitated, but there's so much heritage stock around that you can reuse.

One of your projects, the Water Street Revitalization Project, recently received one of the National Trust's Ecclesiastical Insurance Cornerstone Awards. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience working on that project?

MO: Water Street had an interesting start. The client (The Salient Group) came to us to rehabilitate just one or two of the buildings on the block, which they controlled, in order to increase density. When we started, we quickly realized that the project needed a more holistic approach in order to rationalize increased densities, heights, upper-level additions and overall urban design. It wouldn't have been economically viable to do each building on its own. The project very quickly grew to include five buildings, but we did the construction in three phases. And you can see from the final design and the final construction, that what was added to each individual building relates directly to that building. It's not part of a homogeneous development, even though technically it was done all at once. There was a great desire to celebrate or embrace the heterogeneity of the five buildings instead of trying to build new construction on top that tied it all together. It's really important to keep each building distinct and disparate from a design perspective.

How many rehabilitation projects has your firm worked on over the years?

MO: I don't think we've ever counted. *laughs*

RA: I think it's quite a large percentage of our work. But when we say that, we're including buildings from the 60s.

MO: Modern heritage.

RA: We've done a lot of work out of UBC (University of British Columbia) on 1960s buildings.

MO: We don't distinguish between a 100-year-old building and a 50-year-old building. To us they're the same in terms of rehabilitation, reuse, conversion and recycling.

What was Acton Ostry Architect Inc.'s first rehabilitation project?

MO: It was a conversion and addition to a warehouse on Beattie Street in Vancouver.

RA: The first one, 871 Beattie Street, was a heritage warehouse where we added a couple of storeys of artist live/work studios using a steel structure. We had to marry these two systems of heavy timber and steel structure – it was very challenging. That's the project, where Mark said "hey you do the next one."

Is one of you more interested than the other in rehabilitation projects?

MO: I think it's equal because the challenge is great. And we both love the challenging projects.

RA: The results are very, very satisfying. People love old buildings, right? We probably get more comments when we've worked on old buildings than we do on new construction. People have seen them in a state of disarray and neglect and appreciate seeing them returned to their glory. It's a celebration!