

Lister Block, Hamilton, Ontario

Lister Block was built in 1924 for prosperous merchant Joseph H. Lister on the corner of James Street North and King William Street in downtown Hamilton to replace the original building dating from 1886 that was lost to fire. It was rebuilt as a six-storey commercial building with interior shopping arcades on the first and second floors. Lister Block featured the latest construction technology providing up-to-date qualities of fire resistance, ventilation, and natural light.

Costing \$300,000, it had an exterior consisting of a reinforced concrete frame with brown rug brick, sheet copper and cream-coloured glazed terracotta. The interior ground- and second-floor innovative L-shape arcades included skylights and floors and baseboards made of marble.



This Classical Renaissance-style building was pivotal in the commercial history of Hamilton, marking a transition that allowed small-scale businesses to compete with large scale department stores. The Block prospered as retail and office space until the 1950s, when downtown renewal schemes and suburban expansion shifted commercial and retail activity out of the core. The building had tenants, like the Anne Foster Music Shop, until the mid-1970s, but finally closed in 1991.

City Council designated the building as a municipal heritage site in 1996. Two years later the Hamilton local of the Labourers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) bought Lister Block for \$1.6 million and attempted to arrange a lease agreement with the federal government, which fell through, leaving the building vacant. Over the years several plans were put on the table to either convert it or demolish it.



In 2005, LIUNA and partner Hi-Rise Group proposed a \$30-million plan to demolish and rebuild the by then derelict building. The developers promised to save as much of the façade as possible. The city agreed to be a tenant for \$30 million over 15 years. The demolition permit was issued in 2006, which sparked an outcry from heritage groups. An architectural analysis had already determined that the building was structurally sound and a good candidate for restoration. The Provincial Government intervened and a 60-day moratorium on demolition was granted, allowing a mediation process to begin.

The City and LIUNA eventually struck a deal and a plan was put in place that would see the City purchase the building for \$25 million once refurbishment was complete. Part of the Provincial mediation included the completion of a Condition Survey and the development of a Conservation Plan.

This work was undertaken by heritage architect Julian Smith who created a 'rehabilitation' plan for the conservation and restoration of material that could be reasonably saved and that represented the original design, while creating a contemporary office space. Under the conservation plan, the exterior glazed terracotta was retained and repaired with

emphasis on conserving as much of the original material as possible. The original wooden window sashes on the third to sixth floors were retained and the storefronts on the first and second floor arcades were restored and refitted with replica hardware. Much of the original interior had been destroyed by water infiltration and vandalism, but enough material remained for replicas to be made and reproduced. Specialized craftsmen repaired the marble and terrazzo floors and the two original skylights found behind a false ceiling. The upper floors were adapted to a contemporary open office plan that is being configured to meet the City's needs. After years of false starts and empty promises, Lister Block went from derelict and headed for landfill, to a beautifully restored piece of Hamilton's history.

The project's success depended upon LIUNA's commitment and a range of specializations that combined the skills of traditional craftspeople, provided by Clifford Restorations, with contemporary methods and materials under the expert guidance of architect Richard D'Abrus of WDG Architects and Greenferd Construction.

The building is set to open as office space in March of 2012.

The National Achievement Award was presented to LIUNA president Joe Mancinelli by Heritage Canada Foundation in partnership with the Municipal Heritage Advisory Committee at a ceremony in Hamilton in December. The building was unveiled with rave reviews.