

## Taking it to the Street — Heritage Rehab Brings New Life to Downtown Saint John

by Jo Anne Claus and John F. Irving

John F. Irving has a vision for revitalizing the heart of his hometown, Saint John, New Brunswick. Phase 1 of his vision, CenterBeam Place, involved the rehabilitation of a tired block of late-Victorian buildings. Today, they are a handsome complex of viable commercial properties restored to their former 19th-century glory. The story of this sophisticated 21st-century rehabilitation project provides an exciting glimpse into Saint John's rich architectural heritage.

Owned by Commercial Properties Limited, CenterBeam Place is Mr. Irving's project. The grandson of industrialist K.C. Irving, John F. Irving has his vision grounded in practical good sense. His father, John E. (Jack) Irving, a builder before him, believed this area of the city was underutilized and poorly maintained. In the late 1990s Irving saw that a restored heritage location could attract new tenants and new businesses to the central core, something the city desperately needed.

Located beside the harbour, these eight distinctive late-Victorian buildings dominate the lower third of a steep hill on the main street of the city's business district. The joined structures form three of the four sides of this city block's exterior. It is the key block for Trinity Royal, the city's designated heritage preservation area.

At CenterBeam's street level, retail shops, restaurants and businesses appeal to walkin traffic. But many of the block's buildings, purchased by the Irvings decades earlier, used the upper floors only for storage.

With architect Tom Johnson, whose local firm, Thomas Johnson Architecture Inc., had worked with Mr. Irving on many other projects, planning for the upper floors began in earnest. Mr. Johnson's plan was to retain most of the original narrow floor plates at street level as they had been designed by some of North America's best architects after the Great Fire of 1877 that ravaged the city. By removing the barriers between the upper levels of the individual buildings, however, more than 2,800 square metres could be opened as one continuous space.

But CenterBeam's plans couldn't leave the drawing board until some tenants were committed. Enter Kevin Francis, a Maritimer, former President of Xerox Canada and now CEO of CenterBeam Inc., an information technology solutions provider for PC management, based in San Jose, California. His vision of locating the company's Canadian offices in a dramatically restored Saint John heritage building coincided with John Irving's plans for CenterBeam Place. Work began immediately.

By December 2003 the first CenterBeam staff were settled in 2 King Street. A year later an even larger group moved into the first phase of its permanent space. Phase 2, restoring the buildings on the block's fourth side, is currently under way.

### Facing the Challenges

CenterBeam Place was the first Canadian heritage restoration project to face the structural challenge of melding an entire city block of tall, narrow 19th-century commercial buildings together. On the outside, CenterBeam Place doesn't look like a problem project; its façades with different architectural styles—Romanesque, Italianate and Classical—blend harmoniously to give a sculptural rhythm to the streetscape. The interiors, however, contained significant challenges.

Each building had separate entrances for water and



New wooden doors enhance the restored King Street entrance.

Photos courtesy of Commercial Properties Ltd.

power, different floor elevations and massive foundation walls. No other private company in Canada had ever attempted such a project.

“Think of the block as a gigantic three-dimensional puzzle with over 50 long and thin floor plates, where almost no two are at exactly the same elevation and the object is to create linkages,” said Mr. Johnson. “Remember, the buildings are on a hill so the basement spaces on Canterbury Street are at roughly the same level as the second-floor spaces on Prince William Street.”

### **Phase 1 of the project proved a massive undertaking.**

“We had three problems: the existing buildings didn’t meet modern building codes; they had seriously deteriorated; and they required contemporary modifications to suit modern tenants. There were a lot of sleepless nights,” says Peter Sentell, manager of general contracting with FCC Engineering of Saint John.

“Bringing the electrical, mechanical, plumbing, heating and ventilation up to today’s standards was our biggest accomplishment,” he said.

In 19th-century brick and wood frame construction, floor beams and supports rest on the walls. This does not meet today’s standards. “All the buildings had to be structurally reinforced at every floor,” said Mr. Sentell. “Codes have changed for contemporary buildings. Loadings have changed, like the earthquake loading that didn’t exist in 1879. Now we know that there are quake faults running through Saint John, so certain structural modifications had to be made.”

### **The Work**

The CenterBeam Place rehabilitation project was more labour-intensive than new construction because of the structural upgrades required. Almost every post and beam had to be restored, not simply replaced. Core drilling through basements involved routing thousands of metres of new mechanical systems through shale rock walls that were nearly two metres thick. In phase 1, workers had to run 2,600 metres of pipe for heating alone.

Once the existing walls were shored up and all floors determined to be sound, the work of opening up the interior began. Slow and meticulous hand labour protected the original structures from damage. Pipes were inserted through main walls using core drilling that required a very long drill bit, physical strength and a lot of patience.

Even moving around the work site proved challenging. To reach the opposite side of an upper-storey wall, workers returned to the main floor, walked outside, entered the main door of another building, climbed another set of stairs and then located the exact wall spot in a totally different room configuration!

On modern work sites, equipment and supplies are passed through existing windows and doors. Because shops and offices occupied the front façade’s ground floors, cutting traffic access on the city’s busiest streets in the heart of the business district in order to swing materials by crane into upper storey windows was not an option. This left access through the rear mud service yard. The rear façades of Victorian commercial buildings, however, rarely have windows and only a few doors. In this case, only one door existed for workmen to trundle wheelbarrows filled with construction materials into the building and then walk out those same barrows loaded with debris.

And then, there were the nasty discoveries.

“We expected roof repair would be a major job in these deteriorated buildings and we allowed for it in the budget,” Mr. Irving said. “We could see holes from years of neglect. When the roofing was stripped

though, we found the beams underneath had rotted away, beams that were supposedly holding exterior walls to the building. We found beams that were charred from past fires—all the stuff of nightmares.”

“For many years these structures had no purpose or use above street level, so quick patches were done instead of addressing the substantive issues,” he explained. “We have learned if brickwork repair has been neglected at roof corners and around window frames, there will be serious internal structural damage.”

Masonry conservation continued throughout the project. Wherever a new opening was made, workers salvaged brick because, unlike contemporary brick, the original ones were the right colour, size and shape for restoration repairs. Workers reached their goal of saving 10,000 original bricks to use in phase 1. They are still saving and cleaning bricks for their current work in phase 2.

“We have almost finished our first contract in an ongoing program of masonry restoration,” said Mr. Johnson. “All of the brick and stone walls are being assessed and restored as needed.”

### **Beyond Historical Precedent**

Originally, CenterBeam Place’s tall, narrow commercial buildings only had front street-facing windows. All the buildings shared a flat, windowless rear wall covered with stuccolike grey parging. Its one service door faced a mud yard.

This rough, unused yard was transformed into a Victorian-inspired courtyard, now serving tenants and the community. Although without historical precedent, it was decided to introduce this feature into the project plan. The courtyard work was not eligible for any provincial or federal financial assistance, but “it was the right thing to do for our clients and for the city,” said Mr. Irving.



Historic and contemporary elements merge to form a new conference room.

A totally new brick façade with three storeys of period-style windows overlooks this elegant garden courtyard and a summertime outdoor café. The rear wall of windows also floods CenterBeam Place interiors with natural light. The two dramatic public spaces, courtyard and new lobby, are frequently used for public functions.

Architect Tom Johnson considers the courtyard and lobby as the “great unifying elements” of the plan.

“The courtyard opens up the King Street buildings to sunlight . . . and the grand lobby, which forms an axis from the courtyard to the main entrance on King Street, contains both elevator cores, linking all the spaces on the block vertically,” he explained.

The architect’s interior design connects the project. The tenants are happy with their contemporary interior spaces that respect the existing heritage elements. They appreciate the warm old brick and heavy natural beams surrounding their workspaces.

“As well as facilitating the introduction of all new mechanical and electrical systems, we decided to expose the heavy timber and brick bearing wall construction as another way of unifying the project,” said Mr. Johnson. “In phase 1 we reinforced everything with great blocks of chunky wood held together with steel straps. We liked the look but, after discussion with Parks Canada, we decided to use more steel in phase 2 so the original columns can still be seen.”

“Most of the original windows in phase 1 had to be replaced with new wood reproductions, but we were able to restore some of the elaborate windows facing north on to King Street. We have restored more in phase 2, losing only the windows on the top floors and those facing south and west.”

The project benefited from the guidance of Suzanne Myers (Parks Canada Agency) who oversaw the work in connection with the federal Commercial Heritage Properties Incentive Fund (see sidebar Financial Encouragement). Her written recommendations for the project’s windows, based on federal heritage standards, proved to be very helpful.

### **A Convert to Heritage Restoration**

“When I began the project I had an idea of what we wanted to do, without any real appreciation for the historical significance of the buildings. Our attitude could have been, ‘they’re our buildings, we’ll do what we want’ before I quickly realized that being in a designated heritage preservation area meant a discussion would occur amongst the various interested partners in conservation and preservation,” notes John Irving.

During the bylaw review process, a number of Irving’s initial ideas were modified. For instance, there was the issue of wooden doors on the entrance into a public lobby. The doors had to be new. Victorian retail buildings did not need a common lobby or a common door. The Irving-approved design was for structural glass doors on this lobby entrance to reveal the interior and to draw people in.

“The city’s heritage planner, Jim Bezanson, worked to persuade us that wooden doors were more compatible, more accurate,” Mr. Irving admits.

“While our discussions were going back and forth, I was in Montréal on business and went into a heritage building on Sherbrooke Street. I suddenly became aware of the massive oak doors soaring above me with their heavy brass fittings. They looked so right in the stone archway, it was a revelation. Authentic details do matter!”

“We have to keep some buildings restored authentically, for ourselves and our children to understand the past. Jim and the Saint John Preservation Review Board were right. This project should have wooden doors amongst other important historical details,” he said.

### **Commercial Heritage Properties Incentive Fund Made the Difference**

From his experience John Irving, president of Commercial Properties Limited, believes the Commercial Heritage Properties Incentive Fund (CHPIF) should be continued, but on a tax credit incentive basis, rather than as a grant (see sidebar Financial Encouragement). This federal money supported infrastructure and repairs essential to making the buildings usable. That federal support freed up cash in the project budget for some ineligible building features like the courtyard garden and the new back wall of compatible windows.



Roof repairs were extensive. Several beams designed to hold exterior walls to the building had rotted away.

“Unpleasant surprises were allowed for in our budget. But knowing these will happen, it’s encouraging to have an incentive to begin a project. Both the federal CHPIF and the provincial Property Tax Abatement Program were extremely important to the CenterBeam project,” says Mr. Irving.

There is a great need for continued support and encouragement for the preservation of heritage buildings.

The Canadian Register of Historic Places has 3,991 listings with approximately 17,500 previously designated places to be added eventually. Many of those are commercial properties in need of rehabilitation work but they are waiting for encouragement and financial incentives. For example, in 2004, 10 of the 13 New Brunswick buildings on the Register were part of the CentreBeam project. Today, New Brunswick has 330 historic places on the list, with 1,100 more waiting to be entered.

### **Project Success**

Phase 2 of the CenterBeam Place project, rehabilitating heritage buildings on the fourth side of the block, is under way and is expected to be completed this fall.

"We would like to think," Mr. Irving says, "that we have proven heritage spaces can be rehabilitated and restored for 21st-century business. I hope it will stimulate serious interest for other neglected 19th-century buildings in Trinity Royal."

Recent real estate activity in the area shows others have recognized the commercial potential. Enthusiasm for heritage restoration is contagious!

*Jo Anne Claus is a writer based in Saint John, New Brunswick with a great appreciation for heritage buildings and history.*

*John F. Irving is a Saint John businessman who sees the value in the restoration of heritage buildings, both for current business clients and future generations.*