



Photo: Pamela Marr

HAMILTON LANDMARK GLOWS AGAIN

The Lister Block emerges from decay to glory, rejuvenating the city's downtown.

by Katherine McIntyre

Most residents of Hamilton, Ontario never thought they would see the day the iconic Lister Block in the heart of their city's downtown would be restored to its former splendour. It had become one of the worst local examples of urban decay. And after a third failed attempt to save the heritage building in 2008, many doubted anything more could be done. But, creative minds pulled together for one more try.

It has been a long journey for the Lister—one that has ended in a tremendous transformation that many now see as key to the rejuvenation of downtown Hamilton.

Opened in 1924 on the corner of James Street North and King William Street for prosperous local merchant Joseph H. Lister, the retail and office building quickly became a favourite downtown destination. Architect Bernard H. Prack's classically inspired design integrated two innovative L-shaped shopping arcades into a modern office facility. By clustering small shops together, the building fulfilled Joseph Lister's dream "to build a most modern and central location for small merchants at a modest rent." In so doing, it became the first commercial mall in Canada.

The Lister Block is pivotal in the commercial history of Hamilton, marking a

transition in the development of major mixed-use facilities in downtown areas that allowed small-scale businesses to compete with the growing popularity of large department stores.

Designed in a Renaissance Revival style, Prack's six-storey building used the latest construction technology for ventilation, natural light and fire resistance. He emphasized the ground- and second-floor shopping arcades with ornamented entrances and large exterior retail windows separated by decorative cream-coloured pilasters of glazed terra cotta. The office storeys above were finished with a more subdued brown rug brick with copper spandrel panels in the window bays. An elaborate

With lights ablaze, the Lister Block shows the shining results of its rehabilitation last May. Final landscaping work is still under way.

Inset: View of the deteriorated state of the building's main entrance and its glazed terra cotta exterior (2009).



Photo: Carolyn Samko

L'immeuble Lister en mai dernier, révélant brillamment le résultat de sa réhabilitation. Les paysagistes étaient encore affairés à parachever leur œuvre.

En médaillon : Une photo de 2009 montre le délabrement de l'entrée principale et des surfaces extérieures en terracotta vitrifiée.

Photo: Pamela Mairr



Photo: Pamela Marr

The cream-coloured glazed terra cotta cornice was retained and meticulously repaired and the exterior brown rug brick carefully cleaned and re-pointed.

Inset: Photo of same before restoration work began.

La corniche ornée de terracotta vitrifiée de couleur crème a été conservée et méticuleusement réparée, et l'extérieur de brique striée brune a été soigneusement nettoyé et rejointoyé.

En médaillon : Photo de l'immeuble avant que les travaux de restauration ont commencé.

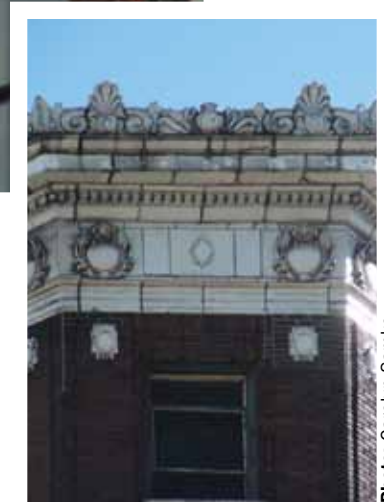


Photo: Carolyn Samko

cream-coloured glazed terra cotta cornice balanced the base, anchoring the building on the corner.

Inside, the shopping arcades were resplendent with marble, mosaic and terrazzo floors, gently arched ceilings dressed up with decorative plasterwork and intermittent skylights. Storefronts boasted solid oak trim with bronze fixtures and extra-large glass windows. Two staircases with steel stringers, newels and balusters, oak handrails and white marble treads led to the second storey. Following Lister's mandate for modest tenants, the basement housed a bowling alley, billiard parlour, barber-shop and shoeshine stand.

When several historic buildings in Hamilton's downtown core were demolished and a new City Hall built to the northeast in 1960, the civic heart of the city shifted away from James Street North and King William Street. Tenants started leaving the Lister. By 1970 it was a shabby caricature of its former self. In 1991 the building closed. Over the years it suffered from the damages inflicted by vandalism, fire and water infiltration.

Recognizing the heritage value of the aging and abandoned structure—and intent on preserving the best of its architecture—the City of Hamilton had certain elements designated under the *Ontario Heritage Act* in 1996: the

principal exterior façades, the arcade entrances, an original exterior storefront, and the two interior arcades.

In 1998 LIUNA (Labourers International Union of North America Local 837) bought the Lister Block and attempted to arrange a lease agreement with the federal government. The deal fell through, leaving the building vacant for another nine years.

LIUNA, now partnered with Hi-Rise Developments, applied for a permit to demolish the building in 2005. Heritage groups erupted and petitions flew to stay its execution. The Heritage Canada Foundation listed it as one of Canada's Top Ten Endangered Places. Councillor Brian McHattie alerted

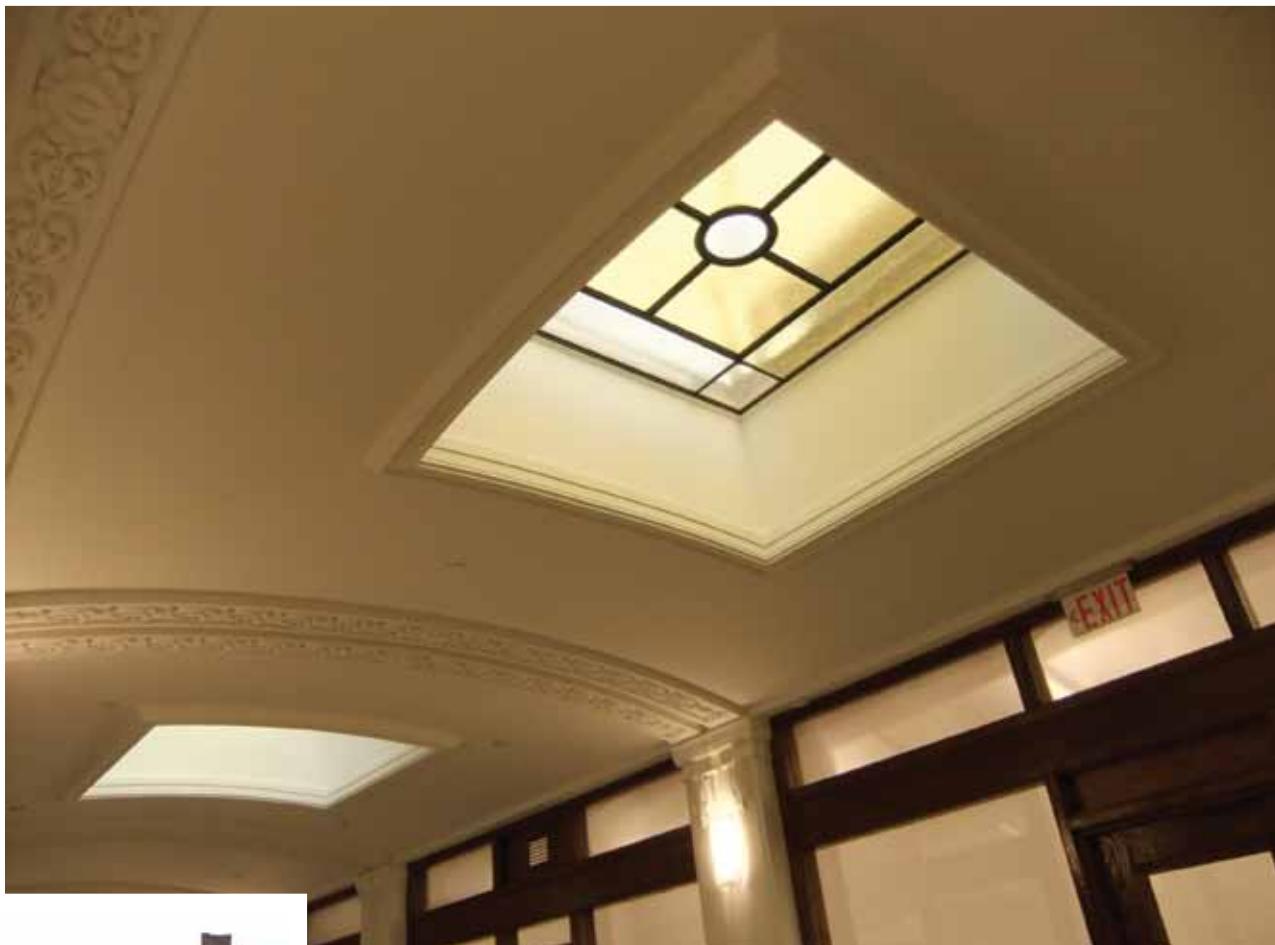


Photo: Carolyn Samko



Photo: Courtesy City of Hamilton

Workers carefully salvaged the skylight sash (inset) before it was restored and re-installed in the arcade ceiling (above).

Des ouvriers ont délicatement retiré le châssis de la lucarne (en médaillon); il sera restauré et remis en place au plafond de la galerie (ci-dessus).

Caroline di Cocco, Ontario's then Minister of Culture, who intervened. A 60-day moratorium on demolition was granted and a mediation process initiated. Alan Wells was appointed as the provincial facilitator and tasked to bring the various players to the table to work out a solution for the Lister's future. The result was an agreement between the City, the Province and LIUNA that would see the City commit to purchasing the building for \$25 million once rehabilitation was complete.

Many of those involved in the project identified conservation expert Julian Smith of Julian Smith & Associates Architects as the catalyst who, after years of false starts and failed hopes,

persuaded the sceptics that the "eyesore in the core" could be saved. His knowledge, experience and insight convinced key partners of the value of investing in the landmark heritage property.

With Clinton Brown of Clinton Brown Company Architecture, Smith created a rehabilitation plan that would see the restoration of historic elements integrated into the building's conversion for modern use.

"This new plan calls for marrying the old with the new, keeping what has survived in an old building, and incorporating it in a new contemporary design," explained Smith.

When in 2007 Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty committed \$7 million to the project, Joe Mancinelli, president of

LIUNA, and Shawn Marr, vice-president of Hi-Rise Developments and the project manager, were ready to start.

Hoardings went up around the building in the spring of 2009. Over 1,000 tons of refuse were removed, and from a mess of peeling paint, broken glass and shattered plaster intact elements began to emerge. Enter heritage consultant and clerk of the works Carolyn Samko. She painstakingly documented all the features that could be salvaged, saved or copied, including the marble floor of the first-floor arcade with its cross bands and borders, two steel staircases with oak railings and marble steps and two original skylights. Of particular interest were three original oak storefronts with



Photo: Carolyn Samko



Photo: Pamela Marr

Enough material was salvaged to restore the decorative prism glass transom above a storefront on James Street North, complete with original grille work.

Inset: Detailed repairs of the exterior glazed terra cotta required the skills of traditional craftspeople.

Les ouvriers ont récupéré suffisamment de matériel pour restaurer les impostes décoratives à vitre prismatique au-dessus d'une devanture de magasin de la rue James Nord, avec son grillage d'origine.

En médaillon : La réparation minutieuse de la terracotta vitrifiée extérieure a exigé les talents d'artisans traditionnels.

copper and bronze detailing, decorative steel grilles and leaded transoms that had survived almost undamaged. The other storefronts had long since been replaced and had to be rebuilt. Samko photographed, sketched, measured and analyzed.

"I salvaged everything I could," she says. "I detailed representative pieces of all the crumbling ornamental plasterwork from the two arcades before removing them to a warehouse where they were copied."

Vandals had smashed a drainpipe, stripped everything metal from the arcades and tagged most available surfaces with graffiti. "It was winter when we started and there was nearly a

foot of ice in the arcades," recalls Samko. "The mail slots, kick plates, hinges and all the bronze door handles from the storefronts were gone, but we did find one door handle and had it reproduced."

On the second-floor arcade, the terrazzo floor with quarry tile border was found largely intact and storefronts were in better condition than those on the first floor.

Donovan Pauley, a masonry conservator from Clifford Restorations, surveyed the building and prepared a detailed repair strategy. Specialized craftsmen did the intricate restoration work of polishing the marble and then matching new tiles where needed. Coloured glass was found to match

what remained in the two original skylights that were hidden behind a false ceiling. Although the plasterwork on the first floor was beyond salvage due to water infiltration, enough material remained to allow it to be fully reproduced. The second-level terrazzo floor was ground and polished. The two staircases with marble treads were restored.

The Lister Block's famous dark rug brick exterior, unchanged since 1924, was cleaned and re-pointed. The terra cotta was removed, repaired and re-installed with new fasteners. Where it was too damaged, pre-cast concrete replicas were used. The original wooden window sashes on the third



Photo: Carolyn Samko

The impressive marble mosaic and terrazzo floor of the second-floor arcade and the decorative wood elements of the storefronts were repaired and retained.

L'impressionnant plancher en mosaïque de marbre et terrazzo de la galerie du deuxième niveau et les décorations en bois des devantures de magasin ont été réparés et conservés.

to sixth floors and copper-framed storefront windows on the second floor were retained in the three most easterly bays on King William Street. The remainder were replaced with aluminium using a mid-rail detail and similar proportions to the originals. Decorative prism glass transoms and oak-trimmed storefronts with entrances on both King William and James Street North were restored or replicated.

The upper floors were adapted to an open plan for office use and will be configured by the City to meet their departmental needs.

Meeting building code requirements, which can be difficult when dealing with a heritage building, proved

challenging. “The elevator size, exit signs and wheelchair accessibility were just a few of the issues we faced,” says Samko.

“The project has been trying at times,” said Shawn Marr when interviewed by the *Hamilton Spectator*. “But the results show that intricate restoration is well worth the trouble. The work has exceeded my expectations People who remember the Lister Block from three years ago as a derelict building are going to be completely overwhelmed.”

The completion of the project depended upon LIUNA’s unflagging support and a range of specializations that combined the skills of traditional craftspeople with contemporary methods

and materials under the expert guidance of project architect Richard D’Abrus of WDG Architects and Greenferd Construction.

Completed on schedule, the Lister Block was unveiled to rave reviews in May of this year. The project has also been selected for a Heritage Canada Foundation National Achievement Award.

Katherine McIntyre is a freelance writer with a special interest in unusual heritage, travel and First Nations stories.