

Architects restore upper floor; Development Murdock & Boyd turned a forgotten space into a modern work area

Greg Murdock and Malcolm Boyd love going to work each day in their new office space in uptown Saint John.

Murdock & Boyd Architects moved into the historic building at 50 King St. in July.

The second-storey space had been abandoned for years, but it was just what the two architects were looking for.

"Greg and I have been looking for a historic building for probably five years," Boyd said.

They looked at several buildings before they stumbled across what was to them the ideal diamond in the rough.

It was a long, narrow space divided in the centre by a load-bearing wall. A thick layer of dirt on the windows at the front and rear prevented good light from entering the space.

Bare electrical wires ran to porcelain light fixtures.

A heavy fire door once provided access to the building next to it, an old bookstore.

A square hole in the floor and one in the ceiling, with a suspended block and pulley on the third floor, at one time allowed merchants on the first floor to move stock between the ground level and warehouse space above.

For years, vendors below sold paint, wallpaper, carpet and other floor coverings on the street level.

Walls divided the second-storey space into small offices.

It looked like a mess. But to Boyd, it was just what he and his partner had been looking for.

"As architects, we can visualize what the potential is."

Other than the one wall running lengthways through the centre, the partitions that created cookie-cutter offices could be removed, Boyd said.

"It was more or less open. A lot of these buildings are full of apartments or cut up with walls."

The pair had come across the space when the building's owner, Darcy Murphy, asked for their help in deciding how to design his new Tim Hortons on the main floor.

"He wanted some assistance in laying out the space," Boyd said.

Murphy wanted advice on where to put stairs and how to set things up for potential tenants on the upper floors.

Boyd looked the space over and realized he'd found something.

"So I told my partner, 'Greg,' I said, 'You've got to come over and see this space because I think this might be it.'"

And so their project began.

"We probably did more demolition than we did construction," Boyd said.

"We took out partitions, we took off lath and plaster and ceilings, to expose all the brick and expose all the beams."

Murdock and Boyd aren't the only developers of upper-level space in uptown Saint John.

Down the street, CenterBeam Place is an entire block of old buildings with recently restored upper levels, now home to offices and businesses throughout its 100,000 square feet of upper-floor space.

But that project, taken on by the Irving family's Commercial Properties, didn't influence

Murdock and Boyd's decision to move their operations to the uptown.

"We'd been looking. We saw the potential here years ago. We just had to get around to it. We just had to find the right space to do it," Boyd said.

He wants to see more upper-level revitalization.

"I think if more people see this space and realize the potential and that it doesn't take a lot of effort - I keep saying, we did more demolition than construction - people won't be scared away by it."

Mayor Norm McFarlane agrees. He toured the new office space during its grand opening Thursday.

"This is tremendous. More than I ever expected it to be. It should be a showcase we use to convince other businesses to use upper floors," McFarlane said.

The two architects didn't build many walls. A partition with open space above divides the reception area from the working studio.

Murdock and Boyd have their offices in the front, but they shared the light of the street-side windows by installing windows high on interior walls.

And they're not just any windows, Boyd said.

"Those windows came from the old Saint John opera house. The glass in those is a hundred years old."

They were in search of old windows and found a good source, who they prefer not to name.

"He said, come and get them, and he gave them to us. So we picked the pick of the litter and had them all sanded down."

If you move your head as you look through the panes, you can see the ripple in the old glass.

Boyd's office seems like a porch off the other rooms, decorated with live plants and a large "partner's desk" with leg room on both sides.

His floor is made of original hardwood that had been covered by four layers of other flooring.

Historic beams are exposed overhead - huge closely spaced floor joists made of rough timbers jointed with notches and wooden pins.

Boyd is proud of the solid brick walls in his office, too.

"I said, 'I want brick in my office. I want a brick wall.' I've said that for seven years."

Boyd is pleased to have done his part to restore the uptown.

"This building has now been rejuvenated," he said.

Murdock said the location is convenient for them.

"It's right downtown, right in the centre of commerce."

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