

CenterBeam project impresses architects; Heritage preservation work can be tricky business, says Fredericton architect

Saint John's CenterBeam Place was showcased to architects from across the country over the weekend as an example of a successful heritage revitalization and restoration project.

About 32 architects, who were in Saint John for the New Brunswick Architects Association's annual general meeting, toured the uptown facility with lead architect Tom Johnson on Saturday.

"We want our members to take high-level knowledge home with them for use on heritage properties in their own communities," said association president Gaye Kapkin, of DFS Inc. Architects of Saint John.

Any architect who does business in the province, not just those who call New Brunswick home, have to be members of the association, she said.

Ed Goguen, of Goguen and Company in Fredericton, was impressed by what he saw.

"It's a very nice project," he said of the block of historic buildings being rehabilitated by Irving-owned Commercial Properties Limited.

He pointed to the installation of elevators, a modern heating system and ventilation system as examples of work that's been done while still maintaining the historic integrity of the buildings bound by Prince William, King, Grannan, and Canterbury streets.

Heritage work can be tricky business, said Mr. Goguen, an architect for 25 years. The goals of a client and historic preservationists are often at odds and the architect is usually "caught in the middle."

It's also very expensive and government funding has been lacking, he said.

Meanwhile, the latest push for so-called green buildings, or energy-conserving buildings, has made the work even more complicated, said Mr. Goguen.

Drafty old windows, for example, are easier and cheaper to replace with new replicas, but heritage groups prefer that original windows be maintained.

"I'd like to do more (heritage work), but it's a real challenge," Mr. Goguen said.

Peter Fellows, of Fellows and Company in Fredericton, agrees.

He recalls bidding on a job on a federally owned building in Fredericton and "butting heads" with the officials in Ottawa. It was an early 1900s building with a 1950s extension. Mr. Fellows wanted to tear off the addition because he felt it had ruined the original building. But new guidelines prohibited that because the addition showed the evolution of the building over time.

"I don't think you'd get every architect agreeing on that," Mr. Fellows said.

Even CenterBeam Place, which he described as "well done," didn't follow all of the guidelines. It couldn't, he said.

In the lobby of 14 King St., for example, four esthetically pleasing wooden columns probably shouldn't have been covered up, said Mr. Fellows, who's been in the business for 34 years.

But the original cast iron columns underneath weren't strong enough to hold the new floor loading of the building.

"There has to be more give and take between what the pure people want and what's real, what's feasible," he said.

With phase one of CenterBeam under his belt, Mr. Johnson, of Thomas Johnson Architect Inc., admits the work along Prince William Street and half of King Street has been a balancing act.

"The government is offering money for conservation, but sometimes, on a big project like this, conservation is not really how you want to go."

The new brick wall that faces the Grannan Street courtyard, for example, was the "dingy back end, service yard and parking lot.

"Historically to conserve that would have been pointless. It wouldn't have given it the lift that it really needs," he said, noting that the courtyard is the focal point of the project.

"We had to do some things for the good of the project which were not really what the federal government had in mind" and didn't qualify for funding.

Still, Mr. Johnson, who blushed at the applause at the end of the tour, is clearly proud of the work to date. "It's been a tough job bringing these buildings back to life, let me tell you."

Phase two, which includes the second half of the portion of CenterBeam Place facing King Street and all of the

Canterbury Street side, should be ready to accept new tenants in about four months, he said.

Dianne VanDommelen, of Architects Four in Moncton, is anxious to apply what she learned about the project to work her firm is doing for the Association Regional de la Communaute francophone de Saint-Jean (Saint John's regional francophone association) on the old Bank of New Brunswick building at 125 Prince William St.

ARCf hopes to use the five-storey building, located in the Trinity Royal heritage preservation area, for a variety of French services, including a live- music club, a bistro or café-style restaurant, retail space, a welcome centre, office space and meeting rooms.

Renovations to the 14,000-square-foot heritage building are expected to cost more than \$1 million.

Mrs. VanDommelen, in the business for 22 years, could not say whether ARCf plans to apply for federal funding, but "there are some basic good principles to follow" on heritage projects, she said. "It's made me more aware."

The 74th annual general meeting of the architects association also included a Building Green in 2006 trade show and educational workshops.

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