

CenterBeam Place a showcase for modern design

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Walking along the top floor of CenterBeam Place, Peter Milan stops and gets his bearing.

"We're standing right above the Birks store right now," said the project manager for Commercial Properties Limited, the company that owns the building.

A few minutes later, he'll point out another portion of the building is fronting on Prince William Street. Taking a tour of the building for a newcomer can be disorienting. The building's open concept, meaning you can walk freely through all of the structures that make up CenterBeam Place, can have you facing Grannan Lane one minute and looking out onto King Street the next.

With the renovation project of the building - which occupies a square city block - nearly complete, the building stands in uptown Saint John as a premier space for both retail and office space alike. The building is a blend of old and new, a collision of modern building standards and techniques combined with the preservation of the space's historical roots.

Take for instance the lobby accessed by either King Street or Grannan Lane. It's the place where you first get the feel of the historic building. The walls are brick and the ceiling is open with exposed wooden beams running across the top.

"What we experienced when we came in was all these buildings had layers of stuff on the walls," Milan said. "The first thing we did was come in and strip all the stuff off and expose the brick because we knew that's what we wanted it to look like."

The brick work throughout the building is a combination of brick that's been in the building since it was built after the Great Fire of 1877 and some that was shipped in from Boston to mirror it.

Other portions of the building have exposed brick tinged black from a fire that occurred 25 years ago.

"You can see the changing colour of the bricks in some places," Milan said. "It's an indication of how far we had to go down a wall before we found original brick we could use."

Windows in the building offer a similar blend. Some windows appear to be wavy when you look out through them. Milan said if it looks wavy, it's an original window on the outside with a new window on the inside.

As for the ceilings with large heavy beams running across the horseshoe shape of the building, Milan said the only way to tell which are new and old is the colour.

"It's a heavy type of lumber and the only difference is the new wood is a little lighter in colour than the old," he said.

Another challenge, was the open concept allowing people to move freely and without barriers around the building. The problem in this area is caused by the several buildings that make up CenterBeam Place. For instance, the building is on a hill and various floors of one building don't match up exactly with adjacent floors of another.

"With all the different elevations, some floors lined up very well and some were off," Milan said. "So we used ramps and stairs where we needed to keep everything open."

An example of this is 18 King Street where three of the buildings intersect. The solution was a wheelchair accessible lift and a small set of stairs.

The biggest challenge during renovations was structural integrity. All of the buildings needed upgrades and some more than others. Several roofs on Prince William Street had to be completely removed and replaced.

The project - which was done in phases - is nearly complete and has 13 tenants in the approximately 110,000 square feet of space.

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