

In our old industrial buildings a new world is being born

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Beautiful art displayed in an old rubber factory. Economic predictions proffered in a former tannery. This is the changing face of Waterloo Region.

Two recent community events in Kitchener illustrate the innovative use of space happening in our community.

At the Box 10 Art Show and Sale last weekend, artists showcased their work in a unique setting, a building in the Breithaupt Block redevelopment. A few days later, the audience at the Wilfrid Laurier Economic Outlook 2011 got a peak at the new development in the old Lang Tannery on Charles Street.

The art show changes its setting each year, offering visitors a chance to see old factories ripe for redevelopment, while exposing guests to visual art from local talent. This year, guests were asked to enter through the loading dock, an early sign that this would be an intriguing venue.

The Perimeter Development Corporation is transforming the former rubber company into office space. The history of the Breithaupt buildings goes back to the 1902 founding of the Merchants Rubber Co., by Jacob Kaurmann and T.H. Rieder. The block consists of several old industrial buildings with about 176,000 square feet of space at King and Breithaupt streets. David Gibson, the developer, said he is excited about the potential for the site and the kind of companies it can attract.

The old factory at 51 Breithaupt Street was a great selection for the show, offering an interesting glimpse into the interior of the old complex, complete with high ceilings, artifacts from the factory and lots of brick.

The community also benefits because a portion of the art sales is donated to charity. This year it was Capacity Waterloo Region. Last year, the charity was the Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation.

Capacity Waterloo's executive director-in-residence, Cathy Brothers, was the show's guest curator. She said it's remarkable how the old industrial space was prepared for the show, in such a short time.

Another piece of history that's experiencing a remarkable rebirth is the former Lang Tannery complex on Charles Street. Some offices and a pharmacy have opened there, as well as Communitech's hi-tech space for emerging technology. The Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre doubled its space by moving to the Francis Street area of the complex. I got a glimpse inside that space when I spoke at workshop for the Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener-Waterloo.

Wilfrid Laurier University School of Business and Economics held its annual economic forecast in the heart of the tannery redevelopment on Tuesday night.

For many guests, it was their first visit to the tannery district. Although they came to hear discussion about the economic outlook, they also got a glimpse of redevelopment that's improving the local economy.

The old world is giving way to the new in Waterloo Region. It was interesting to attend these events and see community members react so well to this evolution. Our industrial spirit is alive and well, housed in the same buildings but with new life breathed into them.



Peter Lee/Record staff
Workers recently repainted the Lang Tanning Company Limited sign on the side of The Tannery building in Kitchener.