

## Trash Talk: Reuse in Kitchener on a very large scale

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I love old buildings.

I hate to see them torn down, and I hate to think of all the materials, often irreplaceable in terms of quality, that go to the dump. And I hate to think of the intangible losses, the stories, history and memory that vanish with buildings.



Kitchener's Tannery District is being revitalized. Buildings are being renovated but in a way that retains their historic character.

So, it was fascinating to be taken on a tour by Toronto architect Roland Rom Colthoff of The Tannery District, a two-block 2.2-hectare former industrial site in downtown Kitchener that's being given new life and will, in turn, give new life to the city.

Here's where the Lang family tanned hides and produced leather for about a century. During the world wars, the company was the largest supplier of sole leather in the British Empire, according to a heritage study by E.R.A. Architects, helping to put boots on soldiers, saddles on horses and, during World War II, leather fuel tank linings in aircraft.

The project is big. It has a price tag of about \$30 million and exceeds 300,000 square feet of space, including retail (Balzac's, the popular coffee shop in Toronto's Distillery District and Liberty Village is opening), new offices and studios within a cluster of buildings. (Originally, there were more than 30 buildings, but small sheds and connecting structures have been removed.)

Some artisans and small businesses with low rent accommodation before the redevelopment have relocated in a refurbished but minimally renovated "Artisan Building" in the Tannery. Other sections are getting a more extensive overhaul, with a glassed atrium entrance and mechanical upgrades, a digital innovation centre and multi-media theatre.

Care is being taken not to overdo the renovation; the aim is to retain the patina of age and reveal the historic industrial architecture. The developer, Toronto-based Cadan Inc., however, is making sure to put in features a young, digitally savvy workforce will want.

As Cadan's managing director Lana Sherman enthusiastically explains: "This is the kind of place that feels like home, it has this really great, positive energy when you walk through it, and everything we're doing in it, all the systems we're putting in, cater to that clientele." That means showers on all floors, indoor bicycle storage, wireless throughout and retail that will support the creative classes hard at work on some cutting-edge inspiration.

Rom Colthoff, the project's lead architect through his firm raw design, points out how the Tannery embodies and facilitates Kitchener's transition from an industrial past to knowledge-based activities, "from boots to brains."

One reason the project is so gratifying, according to Sherman, has been Kitchener's support, a marked contrast to the company's Toronto experiences. The city's mayor cut short a vacation to attend Cadan's first meeting with the city's planning and zoning department, and as Sherman says, "If you have a guy at the top who's sensitive and that involved and that interested in what happens in his community, you know that all the staff is going to be extremely engaged in wanting to see positive change. And it's not just lip service."

Rod Regier, executive director of the city's economic development department, says Cadan's approach was just what the city wanted.

"It's very neat to see a group with their creative energy and their optimism, and their vision for an historic building."

Regier continues: "We're quite committed to the idea of taking heritage resources and working with them. Sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes the buildings are not in structural shape to do that work, but the Tannery is a fortress."

The project fits with other redevelopments in the area, including University of Waterloo's nearby health sciences centre and its School of Pharmacy, praised by the *Star's* architecture critic Christopher Hume as an act of civic regeneration and an urban icon.

The city has provided support for the Tannery project through tax increment financing (TIF), which allows a developer to recoup brownfield remediation costs through a tax holiday on the increases in property tax payable once the improved property has been reassessed.

What has a heritage project in Kitchener got to do with trash? It's such a wonderful example of reuse rather than demolition, which was for so many years the preferred and profligate approach. Demolition and construction are big generators of garbage, representing an estimated 30 per cent of the waste stream.

Toronto architect and environmental champion Martin Liefhebber, principal of Breathe Architects, looked at Bridgepoint Health's proposed demolition of the Riverdale Hospital "half-round" building, constructed in the 1960s. Pulling the poured concrete structure down would take six months, he estimates, a dirty task, and the 27,000 tons of waste has to be hauled away. The natural capital, represented by water, aggregate and greenhouse gas-producing energy that went into manufacturing its components, is squandered, just when we're trying to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

Why not reuse the 316,000-square-foot building, which is of architectural interest, as seniors' housing, he asks. Why not indeed.

*Trash Talk appears Saturdays in New in Homes & Condos. Send questions or comments to [e\\_moorhouse@sympatico.ca](mailto:e_moorhouse@sympatico.ca).*

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