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# Biz owner lured by 'energy' of the area

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*John McDonald bought the North West Commercial Travellers' Association Building on Garry Street because he likes what's happening downtown. (COLE BREILAND / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS)*

ONE of the city's hidden gems, and a shining example of the Chicago-style architecture of early Winnipeg, is the latest building to be swept up in the wave of downtown redevelopment projects.

The North West Commercial Travellers' Association Building is a narrow, two-storey building sandwiched between a parkade and another building on Garry Street, south of Portage Avenue. What sets it apart is its striking terra-cotta facade, featuring six lions' heads topped by a massive shield and crest on the parapet.

The building escaped the wrecker's ball in the late 1970s when protests from citizens, architects and the Manitoba Historical Society forced the city to scrap plans to demolish it to make way for a second exit from the nearby Trizec parking lot.

Those architectural features helped persuade Canada's Web Shop to buy the building as the new home for its fast-growing business, which has doubled in size over the last three years and had outgrown rented quarters in the Exchange District.

The building had also been extensively renovated by the previous owner -- a Saskatoon company -- which installed a new roof and new heating, cooling and electrical systems. And Canada's Web Shop president John McDonald liked the fact it's located a short walk from the MTS Centre and the proposed sports, hospitality and entertainment district (SHED).

"I'm a real fan of what's going on downtown and all of the changes that are going on. The energy is great and I wanted to be a part of the revitalization of the downtown."

Canada's Web Shop will occupy the second floor and will lease out the main floor, possibly to several small start-up companies.

McDonald said he looked at several other downtown buildings, including the three-storey building next

door at 289 Garry St., but the North West Commercial building was the best fit because of its size -- 6,300 square feet -- and the open layout.

"This one offers a bit more of a blank slate we can design from," he said, adding he's hired 5468796 Architecture to design the interior space.

The North West Commercial building is the latest early-1900s building to get a new lease on life on the one-block strip of Garry between Portage and Graham avenues.

The four-storey Garry Block at 290 Garry and the Comcheq/ Telpay building at 296-298 Garry both underwent extensive renovations in the late 1980s or early 1990s.

And the building at 289 Garry, also for sale, has also been partially refurbished. The local partnership that owns it is looking for a buyer to come in and finish the job.

"There's been a lot of interest in the building, especially of late," said listing agent Bryn Oliver of Colliers International. "With the whole rise of the downtown and the murmurs going on about them redeveloping some of these old downtown hotels, I'm confident we'll find a buyer."

The building is located next to the Garrick Hotel, and Oliver said people loitering outside the hotel have made it more difficult to sell it.

Premier Greg Selinger said last month the city and province are continuing to explore the possibility of purchasing several downtown hotels in an effort to reduce public intoxication on downtown streets. Sources have said the Garrick is one of the hotels they're targeting.

Heritage Winnipeg executive director Cindy Tugwell said it's encouraging to see older buildings on side streets off of Portage getting refurbished.

"We've got a large inventory of heritage buildings outside of the Exchange District," she said.

"This sends a signal to other developers in the area that it (refurbishing) is an option that is economically viable."

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