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Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

Modernist gem rescued in core City businessmen revitalize unique architecturally historic structure

By: Murray McNeill

Posted: 02/28/2011 1:00 AM | Comments: 5

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The building at 135 Lombard Ave., where renovations are ongoing on the architecturally distinct interior. (WAYNE.GLOWACKI@FREEPRESS.MB.CA)



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The world-famous Barcelona Pavilion (above) has design elements similar to 135 Lombard Ave. (HANDOUT PHOTO)

Two local businessmen are breathing new life into a small, downtown office building that's been described as one of the city's finest examples of modernist architecture.

George Sigurdson and Kevin McFadden, owners of Sigurdson McFadden Benefits & Pensions, are spending an undisclosed sum of money on renovations and upgrades to the former Northern Sales building at 135 Lombard Ave.

The architect working on the project -- Ronald Basarab of Number Ten Architectural Group -- describes the one-storey structure as "a remarkable piece of architectural history in Winnipeg."

Built in 1953, the one-storey, 4,200-square-foot, brick-and-glass structure incorporates some of the same design elements used in the world-famous Barcelona Pavilion built for the 1929 World's Fair in Spain.

He said its modernist design and modest size are in stark contrast with many of the other larger, imposing, heritage buildings in the historic Exchange District.

"It's now become a little island... that's become trapped by everything around it," he said.

"Everything before that was heavy, heavy masonry and heavy, heavy steel. But this one is very sleek and clean, with almost an entire wall of glass. It's a reflection of the modernist thinking, and it's one of only a few (downtown) buildings that can lay claim to that sort of thing."

Sigurdson said he'd had his eye on the building for more than 15 years.

"I used to park across the street and I kept looking at it and thinking, 'Gee, what's the story behind that building?' I always thought it would be nice someday to have it as an office."

So when it came up for sale last year, he and McFadden, who was also keen to buy a building for their growing business operations, raced over to check it out.

Sigurdson said it took them about three minutes to decide they had to have it.

"It was such a natural fit," he said, adding they were committed to remaining in the downtown and it was the perfect size.

Selling agent Ken Roseman of Cushman & Wakefield said he received 18 inquiries and multiple offers for the building, which was listed for sale at \$1 million. (McFadden and Sigurdson declined to disclose what they paid for it).

Roseman said not only is it architecturally significant, it also boasts amenities not usually found in an Exchange District office building. That includes an on-site parking lot and a brick-walled courtyard with grass, mature trees, benches and even a birdhouse.

Basarab said because it was built on about 40 concrete piles that extend down to bedrock -- another unusual feature for a structure of that age -- the building is as solid as a rock.

He said the Schwartz family, which owned Northern Sales, made sure the building would not only stand the test of time, but also make a statement.

"Their instructions (to builder A.A. Akman) were that no expense be spared, to make it one of the finest technical buildings of its time."

That included installing loads of teak and mahogany woodwork, a circular boardroom and a large, curved glass window that was imported from Italy and overlooks the courtyard.

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How long should Boston's Zdeno Chara have been suspended for the hit that hospitalized Montreal forward Max Pacioretty?

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- Three games.
- Rest of the regular season.
- As long as Pacioretty is unable to play.

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Although they've essentially gutted the interior, McFadden and Sigurdson said they intend to maintain and enhance the modernist design of the building by adding some glass-panel interior walls and more windows to bring in more natural light.

"We are respecting the integrity of the original building, but we're also bringing it into the modern age," Sigurdson said.

McFadden said they're also replacing the heating, cooling, plumbing and electrical systems, installing a custom-designed audio/video/security system and redeveloping the basement to include offices, a kitchen, staff lounge, showers and workout space.

Roseman, who is related to the Schwartz family, said the family was proud of the building and wanted it to remain an office building. He said some of the prospective buyers had talked about converting it to a nightclub or even a residence.

Basarab said he's glad it wasn't demolished and replaced with another parkade.

"(That) would have been an absolute crime."

Know of any newsworthy developments in the local office, retail, or industrial real estate sectors? Let real estate reporter Murray McNeill know at the e-mail address below, or at 697-7254.

murray.mcneill@freepress.mb.ca

135 Lombard Ave.:

located on the east side of Lombard Avenue between the Grain Exchange Building and the former Brick's Fine Furniture building;

former corporate headquarters for the Northern Sales Ltd. grain trading company;

built in 1953 by Winnipeg's Schwartz family, which owned Northern Sales;

includes a 4,200-square-foot main floor, 2,000-square-foot lower level, a 2,000-square-foot exterior courtyard and a seven-stall parking lot;

although Northern Sales ceased operations in 2000, the Schwartz family continued to use the building until the end of 2009;

undergoing extensive renovations, which should be complete in May.

New owner/occupants:

purchased by Winnipeg businessmen George Sigurdson and Kevin McFadden;

Sigurdson McFadden Benefits and Pensions provides employee benefits and pension consulting services to about 250 companies and organizations in Canada;

Sigurdson Financial Group provides individual insurance and investment planning services to about 2,000 clients in Canada;

the two companies have a combined staff of 12 people.

-- Sources: Sigurdson McFadden Benefits & Pensions and Number Ten Architectural Group

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POSTED BY: Ken Smarts
MARCH 1, 2011 AT 2:19 AM

Nothing is growing the walls.
Kerry Swartz

0 0

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POSTED BY: WpgMom3
FEBRUARY 28, 2011 AT 10:10 PM

Just checked it out on Google Street View. Lovely to have that courtyard with the mature trees! It appears to be in excellent condition for a building almost 60 years old. But what's growing in the walls?.... yikes. Our winters have not been kind to these buildings (e.g. Russell Building @ U of M). Glad to see it will get some TLC; updated building envelope technology will prevent moisture issues and still allow in all that beautiful sunshine.

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" I would like to know Katz definition of "infrastructure" "

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The style is now called Modernist but back in the day they called it International Style. The idea was that identical structures would be built anywhere in the world..... and they were right, we have Walmart!!! :)

0 0

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POSTED BY: Joe14
FEBRUARY 28, 2011 AT 7:09 PM

The public sector gets involved when developers are dealing with renting space and rental revenue challenges.

You never see government giving tax breaks to someone building and occupying thier own building do you?

With business owners own and occupy their own commercial buildings they generate money in otherways - e.g. selling insurance. So its a different investment decision.

Its a great investment decision nonetheless!

1 0

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POSTED BY: Ken Smarts
FEBRUARY 28, 2011 AT 4:26 PM

fyi "Swartz" not "Schwartz".

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POSTED BY: sputnik
FEBRUARY 28, 2011 AT 9:04 AM

Great to see a project like this happening without the public sector being involved.

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