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# West End buildings rejuvenated

## Construction company refurbishes old, structurally sound buildings

By: **Murray McNeill**Posted: **1:00 AM** | Comments: **0 (including replies)**

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*John Woods / Winnipeg Free Press Wintec general manager Jeff Eales (left) and president Michael Romani look at drawings in front of 540 Maryland St. Sunday. (WINNIPEG FREE PRESS)*

A Winnipeg company is trying to improve the quality of rental housing in the city's West End, one apartment building at a time.

For the last three years, the construction division of Wintec Building Services Ltd. has been refurbishing/rehabilitating old, structurally sound apartment blocks and converting old warehouses into apartment buildings.

One of its projects has already been completed, three more are underway or scheduled, and three more are in the works.

Although they're Wintec projects, the buildings are actually owned by a numbered company owned by Wintec president Michael Romani.

The three projects in the works involve buildings for which Romani's company has tentative deals to purchase. Two are existing apartment blocks he plans to rehabilitate and one is a warehouse that will be converted into an apartment building.

All three buildings are also in the West End.

Romani said Wintec is focusing on the West End because there is a demand there for better-quality rental units, and an abundance of older, structurally sound buildings worth rehabilitating or redeveloping.

He and Wintec general manager Jeff Eales also like the multicultural flavour of the area and its residents.

"There are a lot of first-generation Canadians there, and we want to improve the quality of the rental apartments for them," Romani said. "So we're very happy to invest in the area."

Having the city's largest health care facility -- Health Sciences Centre -- just outside the area is also a bonus, he said, because many HSC employees are renters who want to live nearby.

"With the high cost of parking, if they can walk to work, that's what they want to do. And they really want

a higher-level product (to live in)."

Melanie Matheson, vice-president of the West End Business Improvement Zone, said she's familiar with some of Wintec's projects and they fit in well with efforts to revitalize the area.

"And I like the fact they're using the existing buildings, which are part of the historic look of the area, and cleaning them up and revitalizing them," she said. "That adds to the attractiveness of the area and the look of the area. It also helps with people's perception of the safety of the area. People feel more comfortable when they see an area that's being revitalized."

Matheson said she wouldn't want to see all of the older apartment buildings there "gentrified." She said the West End still needs rental units that are affordable for lower-income earners.

Romani said HSC employees and Red River College students make up the bulk of the tenants living in the first West End apartment block Wintec refurbished -- a three-storey, 31-unit building at Beverley Street and Notre Dame Avenue.

That \$2-million project was completed last year, and Romani said the suites filled up quickly. There's a waiting list of people wanting to move in.

He said the company hopes some of those people will move into the new apartment block Wintec will create when it converts a former warehouse at Notre Dame and Erin Street into a 100-suite complex.

That \$8-million project is on hold, awaiting city rezoning approval because the building is in an area zoned industrial, not residential.

The other two rehabilitation projects underway involve two three-storey, walk-up apartment blocks -- one at 540 Maryland St. and the other at 615 Sherbrook St.

Work on the 29-unit Maryland block, which was built in 1912, began in May and should be complete by the end of September. About \$2 million is being spent on upgrades to the building and its 27 suites, and on adding two more basement units.

Work on the 102-year-old Sherbrook block, which is also expected to cost about \$2 million, got underway at the beginning of July and should be finished by January. It also involves a complete overhaul of the building and its 25 suites, as well as the addition of two new basement units.

Romani said the upgrades to the two buildings include a new roof, new doors and windows, new plumbing and electrical systems, new interior walls and new bathrooms.

"Everything is new. It's not a lipstick-on-a-pig kind of thing."

He said one of the advantages Wintec has over some other developers is it uses its own tradespeople, including framers, carpenters, painters, drywall tapers and flooring specialists. It also uses several outside firms that have experience with these types of projects.

Romani said a client's request to refurbish one of his rental properties got Wintec interested in rehabilitation and redevelopment.

"We decided we could do this, and it just went from there."

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About Wintec Building Services Ltd.

Founded in 2001, started out offering power sweeping and line-painting services

Later added five more operating divisions: landscaping, snow removal, flooring, fencing and construction

Has about 170 employees and more than 130 regular clients

In addition to its own projects, the company rehabilitates and renovates residential and commercial buildings for other property owners, including Manitoba Housing and a number of large pension funds

Completed 15 projects in the last three years, including one of its own; working on three other projects of its own, all in the West End, with three more in the works

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