

Bringing back 'Busy Berlin' | Your online newspaper for Kitchener, Ontario

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Laurie Snell photo

Frank (left) and Steve Voisin show off the freight elevator they intend to keep when they repurpose the old Goudie's Department Store.

By Laurie Snell
Kitchener Post staff

It's about taking what's old and making it new again. That's how the core's historic buildings have been satisfying demand for brick and beam office space, and now 8 Queen St. N. is taking its turn.



"You need to strike a balance between holding on to the past so much that

you don't evolve and being so adaptable that you destroy the past," Frank Voisin, president of Voisin Capital, said of the property, which was built in 1925 as Goudie's Department Store.

"In terms of brick and beam space like this, there's essentially none left ... It really is an undiscovered gem," Voisin said, adding Goudie's operated there until the mid-to-late 1980s before going bankrupt.

"The city took it back for tax arrears and built a wall separating the Queen side from the King side, and turned it into the Children's Museum at TheMuseum," Voisin said. "That's back when downtown Kitchener had really sort of dark days and that was part of their efforts to revitalize the core. We're now seeing the fruits of that with tech companies moving in."

But because the property sat vacant for a decade, and was purchased in 2000 by Brumante Studio, a supplier for Catholic churches, most people had no reason to come in and see what's going on inside, let alone how big it is.

But Frank and his brother, Steve Voisin, president of Brick by Brick Developments, are planning a 3,000 square-foot expansion, so there will be more than 33,000 square-feet of office space available for rent in January 2016.

The brothers said it's important to retain elements of the building, which reflect Kitchener's history and Arthur Goudie's vision.

"Goudie's brings up childhood memories to residents in Kitchener, so it's important not to lose part of Kitchener's past," Steve said.

"We're going to try to preserve what relics we can find in the community and what stories we can get retold,

and then here and there we'll sprinkle them throughout the building.”

“We’re going to try to bring the front façade back into a time period which is similar to what Goudie built it in — so mainly brick and then lots of glass. The brick will be brand new,” Steve said, adding the property itself was built so well it only needs some investment to bring it back to life.

“It started off as two storeys and then Goudie built a third floor and expanded the third floor over the years,” Steve said. “We’re bringing that third floor into the front, so there’s going to be a 3,000 square-foot expansion and we’re going to make the third floor all glass to get light into the depth of the building.”

The remainder of the work involves bringing it up to code, by adding restrooms to each floor, making the building accessible and adding a staff entrance at the back — things that weren’t a priority in the 1920s.

“When you think about when Goudie located here, it was a time when downtown and the cores of cities were the most important place — it’s where people congregated and it was the centre of the town,” Frank said. “We’ve seen the sea shift away and now we’re seeing it come back to the point where people want to be downtown again.”

He added there is a cool symmetry between then and what’s happening now.

Cory Bluhm, the city’s manager of downtown development, is hoping 8 Queen St. N. will start a domino effect of repurposing other parts of the core.

“What that building has the opportunity to do is to grow the presence of our startup community from well beyond just the innovation district and the Tannery, and start to really spread that community even further south — I think that’s the real opportunity,” Bluhm said. “From the city’s view, you’ve got a beautiful gem of a building that could really be the start of another epicentre of innovation and job growth.”

While there is a low vacancy rate for brick and beam office space, Bluhm said this might also inspire other startups and businesses to look at other older buildings which have sat vacant for years above the storefronts downtown.

“Most of them have big, huge ceilings and they’ve got a different kind of character. A lot of them will have crown mouldings, for example, that are super ornate as opposed to the brick and beam style,” Bluhm said.

“But you wonder, if, once the supply of that sort of factory loft space is gone, do people start turning their heads to these other older spaces that are desperately in need of some improvement? That would be our hope that the trend continues and you see people reinvest in some of these older, under-utilized spaces.”

And Bluhm is hopeful this will spur a ‘Busy Berlin’ revival in the core, with the potential for upwards of 200 new employees taking over the space come January 2016.

“You can imagine like 100 years ago, you’ve got all these factory workers just buzzing around these buildings and so they got the label ‘Busy Berlin,’” Bluhm said.

“Obviously those buildings became obsolete for manufacturing, but now you’re coming back to this era where it’s Busy Berlin again, almost in a repurposed kind of way.”

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