

Fernwood gets a boost from Cornerstone restoration

People are hammering. People are sawing. They're sanding and scraping and painting. In the middle of it all, Roberta Martell, the ringmaster of this circus, is working her rackberry like Donald Trump with too much coffee and no little time.

She has to book the building inspector, somebody needs dry-wall screws and, h-oh, the back door has disappeared from the afé, where a movie crew is supposed to be filming the afternoon.

Building renovation might not have been in the job description when Martell became executive director of her Fernwood non-profit agency, but it has dominated her life in the year since the group bought the historic, two-story Cornerstone Building.

But she thinks it's worth it, believes in resurrecting this derelict, century-old structure, the Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group is breathing life into the community, too.



JACK KNOX

Looming darkly across Fernwood Road from the Belfry Theatre, the Cornerstone had been a dead zone in the heart of Fernwood since 2001, empty save for the squatters nesting upstairs. (Some of them were running a bicycle chop shop up there, as city councillor Dean Fortin once discovered when he went hunting for his stolen bike.) The building symbolized the social problems in an area that sometimes seesawed between unsavoury and artsy-funky cool.

The non-profit group, then known as the Fernwood Community Centre Society, bought the property in the summer of 2005, intending to turn it into something akin to a neighbourhood living room.

They're in the home stretch now. The upstairs is just about ready for the families that will move into the four affordable-housing units. Some local restaurateurs want to open a wine and tapas bar downstairs. Also on the ground floor, the Cornerstone Cafe, run by the neighbourhood group, should open in a week and a half.

"It means a sense of place that isn't a black hole in the middle of the community," Martell said yesterday. "I think we are recapturing the essence of

Fernwood, that Little Europe feel."

The neighbours couldn't be happier. "What they're doing over there is really exciting for us," says Jeffrey Wilson, across Gladstone Avenue at the Fernwood Inn, formerly the George and Dragon. The new owners are almost finished their own renovations, will reopen the gussied-up inn by the end of October.

Longtime Fernwood activist Ron Spence, who owns the building kitty-corner from the Cornerstone, says the revitalization of the high-profile property is a psychological boost. In the past, the "crack shack" attracted sketchy characters, driving others away from Fernwood Square. Now it's the dodgy guys who have vanished. The renaissance is in full swing.

Martell says everybody wins. The black hole has been filled. A sense of community is being fostered. The cafe will give residents a place to have a cup of coffee and tap into the neighbourhood group's social programs. New revenue streams will free the organization from dependence on outside funding.

But lordy it's been a lot of work to get here. The building's upstairs was a rabbit warren of improvised living units, some separated by plywood and



Renovations are in full swing at the Cornerstone Building on Fernwood. The building symbolizes problems in an area trying to seesaw from pessimism to artsy-funky cool.

Darren Stone/Tim

roofing material. At least 20 dumpsters full of refuse — everything from The Bible On Record to bicycle spokes, seats and frames, remnants of the aforementioned chop shop — were hauled away.

Happily, volunteers did most of the work. The Fernwood United soccer team knocked down walls. Coast Capital employees aided with demolition. Local builder Garde Collins became the go-to guy for advice.

"We've had people stop by and give us cookies and sandwiches, even play the accordion," Martell said. Victoria Coun. Helen Hughes showed up, was

handed a crowbar. "She sat p... nails for hours."

Some of the previous occurred out of the building due to crackdown on unsafe premises back to fetch possessions and staying to pitch in. There have been donations of boots, goggles, Building trades have cut generous deals. David Suzuki came on to give a lecture, the proceeding the cost of installing geo-heating.

Everyone, it seems, is willing to swing a hammer to help build a better community.