

Fernwood volunteers creating community

Residents get on board with Cornerstone restoration project

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Transforming an ugly duckling into a swan can be an expensive proposition when it comes to building restoration projects.

The Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group knew that going in when its board worked out a deal a year ago to buy the Cornerstone Building at Gladstone Street and Fernwood Road, with the idea of converting it into four three-bedroom family affordable suites upstairs and complementary retail and community services on the ground floor.

But an amazing thing has happened in the process: community members have adopted the project as their own, contributing thousands of hours of volunteer labour and taking emotional ownership of the building.

"People who may not want to go to a meeting have been more than willing to swing a hammer," Fernwood NRG development co-ordinator Lenore Rankin said, standing in a prime, ground-floor corner space that will soon be the Cornerstone Café.

Formerly owned by Robin Kimpton, who had two similar low-income rental buildings shut down by the city for health and safety reasons, the building – erected in 1909 and added to in 1911 – was literally a mess when the non-profit community group traded him a character home that housed their day-care program.

"We hauled 16 dumpsters worth of crap out of this building," NRG executive director Roberta Martell said of the massive effort to gut the two-story brick structure of most of the existing walls, ceilings and framing.

"Three hundred people signed up to be volunteers. And they were doing the dirtiest jobs, scraping old insulation off timbers, shoveling old drywall into a chute, you name it. And they kept coming back."

Encouraging Fernwood residents to take part in the revitalization of this building – essentially revitalizing their neighbourhood – has been an amaz-

ing way of building community, Martell said.

People who have helped out can look at the finished product, likely later this year, and say "I did that," she said.

Contractors have been working on the interior without the help of community members for the past month. Once the walls get put up and trades work such as electrical and plumbing is completed, the volunteers will be back, Martell said.

"We were saying maybe we can have a design competition for each of the suites," she joked.

They've got plenty to work with. The fir floors that run throughout the second storey will be refinished for the most part, with linoleum only to be placed in bathrooms and the odd section where the fir is too worn out.

The suites have each been given a name relating to the view tenants will see – the Belfry, the Georgian, the Gladstone and the Alleyview.

The café, which NRG members expect to be open by the end of August or sooner, will be the focal point for the building, a natural complement to the Belfry Theatre, merchants in the square and the George and Dragon

Restaurant, which was recently purchased by Boom Boom Room cabaret owner Jeff Wilson.

"It's about creating a space where people can connect with each other," said Rankin, who helped design the upstairs layout and considers the corner café her pet project. "It's going to be a lot of fun and people gravitate to fun."

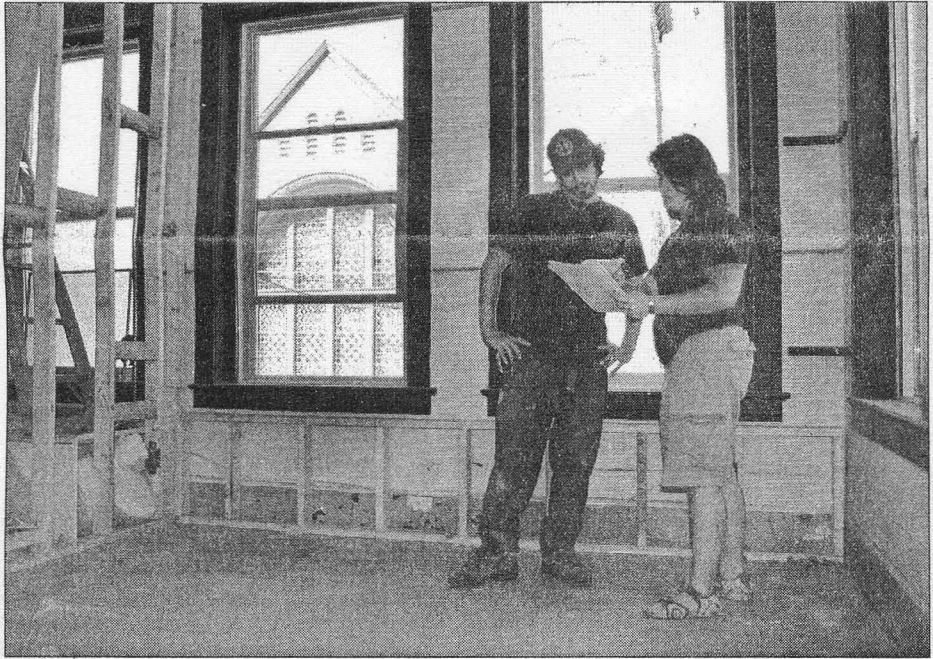
The café will serve not only as a place to come and gab with neighbours over a cup of hot java, it will be a resource centre where people can find out what's going on in the community.

"Our board calls it a 'space of encounter,'" Martell said. "I call it Fernwood's living room."

With the other lower floor spaces designated for a kilt shop – the operator currently in the George and Dragon building has already indicated his interest – and perhaps a market or general store, the goal is to have a building that provides revenue for NRG programs up Gladstone Street at the community centre and contributes to the building of community.

"This is going to be a great legacy," Martell said.

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Roberta Martell and construction worker Ben Buckwood check out plans for the upper floor of the Cornerstone Building in a corner suite.