BEYOND THE MEGA PROJECTS

Downtown Revitalization Hinges on Developments Big AND Small | By Laurie Nealin

Hanan Assor and Richard Walls bring vastly different levels of experience to their downtown redevelopment projects, but the two men are of like minds when it comes to plunging headlong into ventures some would consider too risky.

"If you don't try, you are not going to know. It's as simple as that," said novice developer Assor, who purchased and is redeveloping 289 Garry Street, the long-vacant building next door to the Garrick Hotel.

"Basically, in life we take chances and hope that we can manage it. I took the same attitude here and I think it will work out good for everybody. You can't go through life sitting and watching, waiting for the other guy to do it," added Assor, whose project features street-level, retail space and four condominium units on the upper two floors.

Walls, ADI Designworks' director of design and development, is perhaps best-known for his purchase of Main Street's New Occidental Hotel, which he subsequently made an alcohol-free zone. Two doors down from that formerly infamous establishment, Walls is now putting the finishing touches on a unique, $1million redevelopment of a two-storey, 1901 building at 611 Main, the former home of Norman's Meats.

"The Edge Artist Village", a combination of eight housing units and common art studio space, grew from Walls' vision to provide a place where emerging artists - visual, musical and theatrical - could afford to live and work downtown. Public art classes and monthly gallery-like shows are envisioned for the studio facility where the public can also interact with artists at work.

As a pioneer in the redevelopment of buildings in the Exchange District, Walls was aware that changes in that marketplace had reduced the availability of affordable live-work options for this unique population. His idea was to blend the artist and general populations who live in the Main Street area, at once allowing artists to mature and prosper in a stimulating, affordable environment while helping the neighbourhood's impoverished residents rise to a higher level, perhaps through inspiration from the artistic community.

Assor, who owns two outdoor sign companies (ACE Signs and Duchon Signs), is acting on a vision of his own in redeveloping 289 Garry. He foresees a vibrant downtown on the horizon and wanted to get in on the ground floor.

"The visionary people will always be ahead. Or broke. One of the two," Assor chuckled.



611 Main Street, the Edge Artist Village comes alive.

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>
> - Hanan Assor

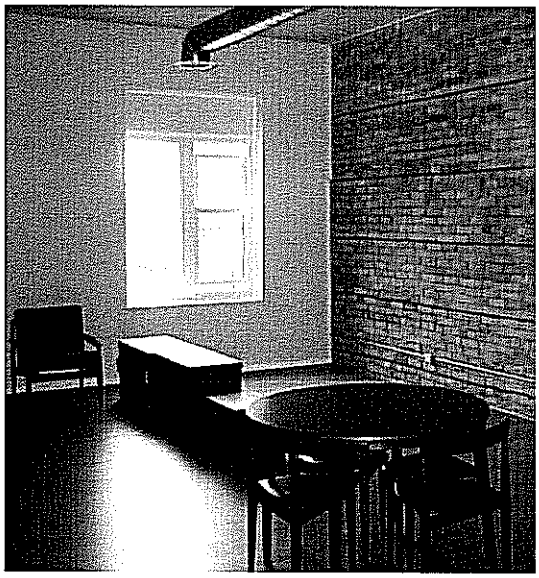
Looking Ahead

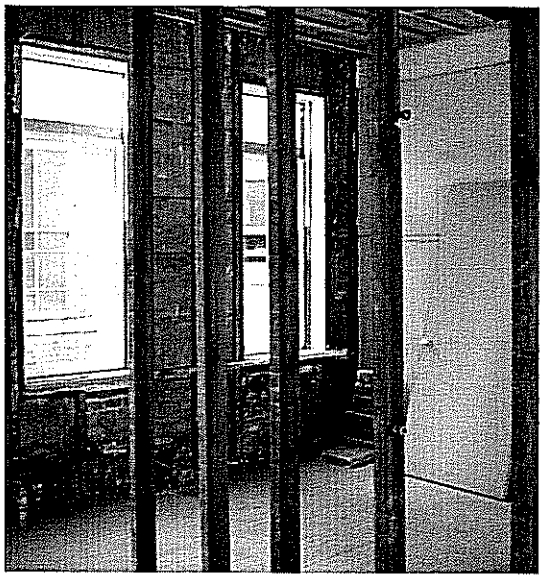
A retailer in the "fur garment industry" is expected to open for business at 289 Garry in August. Assor, the owner of Cobblestone Properties, will begin marketing the 1200- and 1500-square-foot condos at that time. The base price is expected to be about $125,000, reported Assor, noting his intent is "not to get rich" from the venture.

"I think it's exciting, it's rewarding and I will probably do more (downtown redevelopments)," said Assor, who immigrated to Canada from Israel 20 years ago. "On the second one I'll be smarter and by the third one, I'll probably be good at it.

"I wouldn't say that I am a leader, but I am certainly

Left: Affordable and spacious living for one of several new artist residents at 611 Main St.
Right: Condos will take advantage of existing bricks walls and openings with a central raised courtyard and ample natural light at 289 Garry St.





not a follower. When you have a vision, you must act on it," Assor added.

Walls expressed similar sentiments as he talked about revitalizing the Main Street strip. In 2002, he decided to take matters into his own hands, he said, "embarrassed" that governments had allowed the area to deteriorate to such an extent and neither the private nor public sectors seemed willing to rectify the situation.

"I thought I would come up with a plan and do something," said Walls. "The broader vision was to take the whole area from Disraeli to Higgins, where the real estate was quite affordable, and redefine the area using heritage, arts and culture as a catalyst for change."

Walls bought the New Occidental a year later, recognizing that change would not come about until problems associated with the Main Street hotels were addressed. Closing the hotels was not the answer as they provide affordable housing, Walls decided, but relinquishing the liquor licence could be. Eventually, he intends to transform part of the 50-room hotel into a drug- and alcohol-treatment centre in partnership with health agencies, while a dry bar and coffee house on the main floor could serve as performance venues for musicians.

Ultimately, Walls hopes the City will designate this area of Main as an "arts economic development zone" with tax incentives available for projects which would transform the neighbourhood into an arts and culture destination for tourists and Winnipeggers alike.

The eight residential units in the 12,000-square-foot Edge were quickly snapped up. Much to Walls' surprise, single mothers signed on to rent two of the units. They had no qualms about their elementary school-age children living in this Main Street neighbourhood, he reported.

CentreVenture Financing Moves Projects Ahead

Walls and Assor both approached CentreVenture Development Corporation, the City's, arms-length downtown development agency, for assistance in financing their redevelopments. CentreVenture provided mortgages for both projects as well as construction financing for The Edge, which also received a City of Winnipeg housing grant and assistance under the federal-provincial Affordable Housing Initiative.

Those partners, Walls said, allowed his dream to become a reality. Across the street from The Edge, he owns another building for which CentreVenture also provided a mortgage. Finances and viable concepts permitting, Walls has his eye on a few other Main Street properties, as well.

Assor, who submitted the winning proposal for the redevelopment of the CentreVenture-controlled, Garry

"Downtown revitalization does not hinge on megaprojects alone. The on-going reclamation and redevelopment of vacant properties and land in our city centre is crucial in the big picture"

– Diane Bampton

Street building, had been previously unaware that the agency was equipped to provide financial help with projects such as his.

"I want more people to know about CentreVenture. They are good people. We need that kind of group to push for development in the inner city, in downtown," Assor said.

Diane Bampton, president and CEO of CentreVenture, said she and her staff are committed to providing private sector developers with the necessary tools to move their projects forward.

"Whether it is financial help, assistance in navigating through City approval processes, or connecting with right property, CentreVenture is equipped to help visionaries like Richard and Hanan succeed," Bampton said.

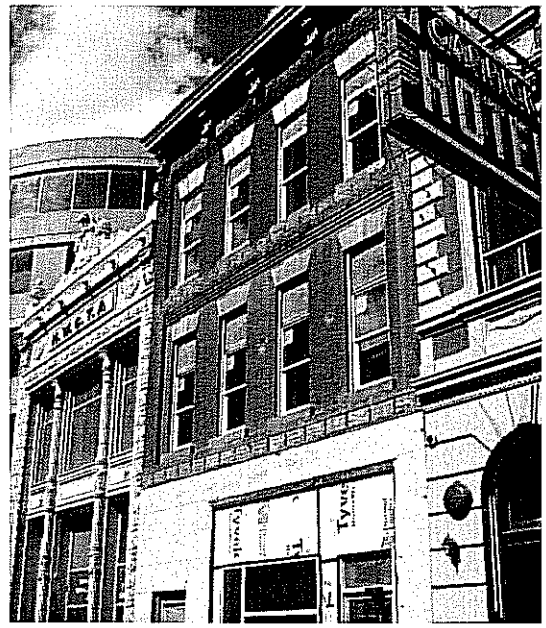
"Downtown revitalization does not hinge on megaprojects alone. The on-going reclamation and redevelopment of vacant properties and land in our city centre is crucial in the big picture," Bampton added. "Just as replacing a missing front tooth has a huge impact on a person's smile, smaller infill projects enhance the face of downtown Winnipeg, one building at a time."

Bampton reported that over the last five years, some 590 residential units and some 160 redevelopment projects have been completed, are in progress or have been committed in downtown Winnipeg. Leading the way on many of these ventures are "the smaller players", as Walls described them.

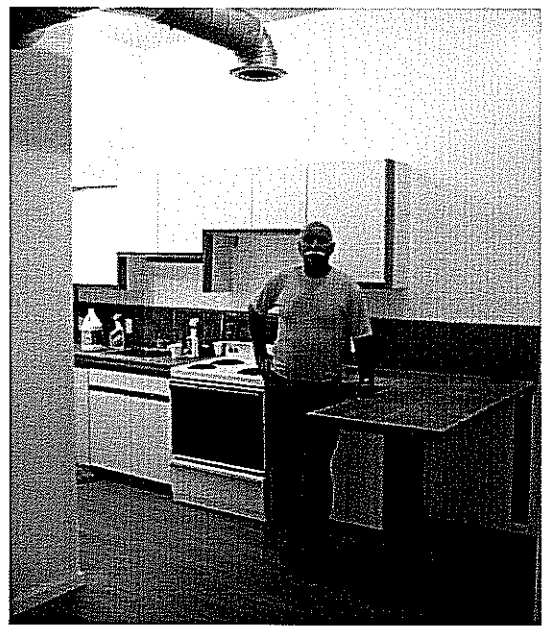
As well, CentreVenture has sold or conditionally sold 31 surplus City-owned properties to entrepreneurs such as Assor. The private-sector investment in these projects will total $116 million once all are completed.

The new projects have coincided with an increasing demand for commercial and residential space downtown. According to CB Richard Ellis's recently-published MarketView report for Winnipeg, business service and government tenants drove demand for downtown office space in 2005 and are expected to continue to absorb space in 2006. In the first quarter of 2006, the overall downtown vacancy rate for Class A space decreased to 8.2 per cent from a year-end rate of 8.8 per cent.

To find out more about downtown Winnipeg development opportunities and alternative financing options, visit www.centreventure.com or call 954-7733.



289 Garry, a commercial/residential redevelopment underway in downtown Winnipeg.



Developer, Richard Walls in one of eight artist live/work studios.