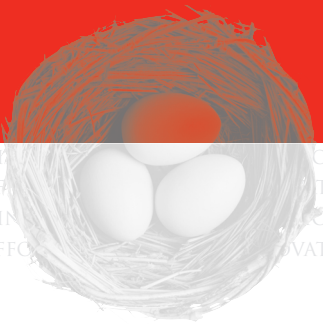


AFFORDABLE HOUSING INNOVATIONS



THE WORKING CENTRE REINVENTS VACANT BUILDING AS VIBRANT MIXED-USE SPACE

For 10 years, the three-storey building at 43 Queen Street South in downtown Kitchener, Ontario, sat vacant and neglected. Today, completely renovated, its community services, shops, and apartments buzz with activity day and night, infusing the neighbourhood with newfound energy.

“Our vision was to create a mixed-use building that combines production and commercial activities with affordable housing,” says Joe Mancini, Director with The Working Centre, the volunteer-driven community services organization that spearheaded the building’s restoration. “We wanted to construct a space for people to work, live, and interact.”

They’ve done exactly that. On the building’s ground level, a street-front store sells crafts and barter goods, a resource area hosts employment workshops and computer-training classes, and a library provides books on job searches and career choices. The second floor is devoted to bicycle refurbishing, computer recycling, and craft making. And on the third floor, two new three-bedroom apartments offer low-cost shelter for people in need.

With a \$15,000 down payment, The Working Centre bought 43 Queen Street South in early 1999 for \$159,000. The building needed extensive renovations, but as always, money was tight. Starting demolition in July 1999, The Working Centre relied on a small crew of paid workers and copious volunteers. Companies, organizations, churches, and professionals chipped in as well, donating time, supplies, or money.

The renovations were completed almost two years later in June 2001, but not without some anguish. “We had a ton of construction problems,” says Mr. Mancini. “The fire code prohibited windows looking onto the rear laneway, so we had to create a large balcony at the back of the apartments. The building also had major structural problems that required us to build special support walls. That cost us a lot of time, but we rarely had to go back and redo anything—a benefit of going slowly and taking one step at a time.”

Today 43 Queen Street bears little resemblance to its former self. In all respects, the building is first rate. “The renovations have made the building look great and has enhanced its original mixed use form,” says Mr. Mancini proudly.

Those living in the two third-floor apartments would agree. Sporting hardwood floors and expansive windows, the loft-like apartments include three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a lounge, a dining area, and a kitchen. The six tenants, typically people on social assistance or extremely low incomes, pay \$325 a month for a room, and they all tend to volunteer in the projects that operate on the first and second floors.

“The housing anchors the whole building,” says Mr. Mancini. “It also allows us to help the right people at the right time. For instance, we had a couple who were living in their car come to us looking for jobs. We were able to put them in a unit until the end of the month. We want to be open to doing things like that.”

The Working Centre is a finalist in the Process and Management category of the 2002 Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) Housing Awards Program, **Affordable Housing Innovations**. The Housing Awards recognize individuals, companies and organizations that have made significant contributions to improving housing affordability in Canada.

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