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They're banking on Main Architects purchase building for offices

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By Lindsey Wiebe

A CENTURY-OLD downtown bank building has been bought for the bargain price of \$170,000 by an architectural firm trying to help revitalize a bleak stretch of Main Street.

Bridgman Collaborative Architecture, which purchased the old Dominion Bank building at Main and Higgins Avenue, is just one of three businesses eyeing and buying property on the North Main strip.

Just up the street, the Neon Factory sign shop is set to move into new digs from its current location on Princess Street.

And on the other side of Higgins, another vacant piece of property is being considered by the Median Credit Union, currently located on Broadway.

"All over Winnipeg are these magnificent jewels that are in danger, obviously," said architect Wins Bridgman of the 100-year-old bank building his firm bought in late 2006.

"When you open them up and begin to do even the minimal amount of work... you have a magnificent building, an unbelievable building."

The Dominion Bank building, across the street from Thunderbird House, was last occupied by an engineering firm a few years ago.

The building is in remarkably good condition, with soaring 14.5-foot (4.4-metre) ceilings, still-functional bank vaults, and an arcing skylight on the main floor, which will be used as office and meeting space for the nine-person architectural team.

The sprawling second floor, which Bridgman hopes to lease out, has polished hardwood floors and dozens of enormous windows, some with original glass panes.

Architectural intern Jamie Kozak said he's looking forward to moving into the space.

"I enjoy the building itself, but also being part of some of the revitalization downtown," said Kozak. "As a young Winnipegger, it's exciting to be directly involved in it."

Bridgman said his firm wanted to connect community consultation with heritage work and green architecture.

"As our office group we had to decide, where do we really want to help out in the city, where do we want to focus our energies?" said Bridgman, who's working with Inner City Developers to revamp the bank building. "The Exchange is doing beautifully, the area we really need to be engaged with is North Main."

One side of the bank building features one of the Winnipeg's most recognizable murals, a "golden girl" welcoming visitors downtown. Bridgman said the firm will work to preserve at least some of the original mural.

Bridgman also bought an empty lot adjacent to the building for \$20,000, from CentreVenture, the city's downtown development agency. He said the firm plans to build an addition onto the bank,

including a staircase and elevator, as well as develop a public park on the remaining property.

By the time renovations are complete, Bridgman expects he'll have spent an additional \$200,000.

"We think it's fabulous," said CentreVenture development director Loretta Martin. "And to have an architect restoring a heritage building, and also moving professional offices to the north end of Main Street, we think is absolutely wonderful for the area."

The blighted stretch of Main got a noticeable boost in 2005, when the former Occidental Hotel was purchased and cleaned up by local developer Richard Walls, who renamed the space the Red Road Lodge.

Then last year, Walls opened The Edge Artist Village and Gallery next door, offering subsidized housing and gallery space for local artists. The developments are credited by many as helping to jumpstart revitalization along Main.

And more development could be in store for the area. A vacant lot opposite Higgins from the old bank building is being eyed by the Median Credit Union, but general manager Ken McMurdo said the purchase isn't a done deal yet.

"There's some issues that we're trying to work through before we can take ownership of the property," he said.

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Bank on it

Here'some facts about the old Dominion Bank

- * Built in 1907 by American architect Howard Colton Stone
- * Cost of construction: \$27,350
- * Built in the Beaux-Arts Classical style (similar to the Manitoba Legislative Building)
- * Exterior features: massive columns and a terra-cotta facade
- * Interior features: bronze railings, mosaic tile and hardwood floors, and ornamental plaster

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