

# New kids ON THE BLOCK

by Shayne Stephens



Photography by Ruth Bonneville

An overlooked corner and empty historic building have proved to be

The Higgins and Main intersection has long been one of Winnipeg's greatest urban eyesores. Once a vibrant hub, its sidewalks no longer shoulder the weight of hope and excitement they did back in the early 1900s when the CP Rail depot on the northeast corner acted as a gateway to those in search of a better life. Instead, for years now, they have acted as a meeting place for the city's bedraggled and broken, who, in the doorways of boarded up buildings, congregate to smoke, sniff and sleep, sadly reinforcing many of the negative economic and ethnic stereotypes attached to the surrounding area and its residents.

Slowly but surely, however, change is afoot.

While the most significant investment into the area in close to a century has undoubtedly been the creation of the Aboriginal Centre of Winnipeg and the magnificent Circle of Life Thunderbird House, it is the mechanical whine of an excavator carving a swath into the earth on this rainy Wednesday morning that sings of a bright future. It is the sound of private sector buy-in, a necessity if Winnipeg is to witness a rebirth of its crumbled core.

Wins Bridgman is a soft-spoken, bearded 50-something with short dark hair and funky glasses that suit a man in his position. As co-owner of Bridgman Collaborative Architecture, there is a gleam in his eye and a smile on his face when he talks of his firm's new offices

at 678 Main Street. During a quick tour, he uses words like "magical," "wacko," and "fun" to describe the original detailing of the early 19th century bank. He also makes it clear that because of Winnipeg's failed economy, one is able to stumble upon buildings that have been frozen in time for decades, a prospect he, an accomplished architect, finds thrilling.

"This area is a gold mine for the economy of this city," he offers, before fetching a model revealing a limestone addition (hence the excavator) that will act as the building's new entranceway. "There's just so much room for young firms to be innovative. I believe that in 10 years time, this is where all the young firms are going to be: North Main. You could never afford a place like this in London or Toronto. Here, it can all be done."

Bridgman knows this first hand. Up until nine years ago, he and his wife Rae lived and worked in Toronto. When she accepted the position of associate dean of research at the U of M's faculty of architecture, they packed up their six children and headed west, setting up Bridgman Collaborative from their River Heights home. Over the years they invited more and more collaborators and the collaborative grew, until one day not long ago, there were six or seven of them cramped together, holding board meetings on the trampoline in the back yard.

"It became increasingly difficult to work and answer the phone with the dog barking and the kids playing," he laughs. "So we decided to participate in the revitalization that we are always working on for other people and began looking for the building that would make the greatest



A rendering of what the building's new entranceway will look like.

the perfect fit for architect Wins Bridgman and his team.



impact on the city and for ourselves. We began looking at corner properties and key nodes. This building became the obvious one.”

As it was almost entirely void of natural light, Bridgman’s first matter of business was to secure the adjacent lot through CentreVenture, which was brokering it for the city. By doing so he would be able to add numerous windows to the building’s north wall without the fear of something springing up next door only to cast a shadow on the whole project. As long as he used the land productively and guaranteed that it wouldn’t end up a parking lot, CentreVenture agreed to sell him the land for a small sum of money and some work in-kind in the area. With the ink dry on that contract, Bridgman purchased the building from a previous owner for \$170,000 and the renovations began.

Next, in order to bring it recognition, as well as eligibility for tax credits, Bridgman and the city began discussions on the possibility of his new purchase attaining a “Heritage Building” designation. After what Bridgman admits were some tense moments, the city agreed that with small modifications to the size and placement of some of the proposed windows—to appease those within the community that had voiced concern regarding what the windows would do to the existing mural—and the usual restorative measures, the building would receive the designation.

Along with the aforementioned limestone entrance currently under construction, much has and is being done to revamp the now very bright and open space. The teller stations that once lined the classic white and black mosaic tile have been replaced with a multitude of modern glass desks, each manned by one or two young professionals who wander around with drawings, talking shop under 14.5-foot ceilings. An original skylight is covered now, but will soon shed light on a solarium. Upstairs, strips of cardboard protect the hardwood floors of old management offices while the space is being renovated for a renter scheduled to commence business in the new digs come January.

Despite all the change, history shines through, which is telling of

the Bridgman Collaborative philosophy and vision. It resonates in their work at the Assiniboine Park duck pond, the Dalnavert Museum and the soon to be revealed staircase and wheelchair ramp at the Legislative Building. “There is a wonderful tension between the work that people have done before us and what we do now,” explains Bridgman. “Heritage does not mean that we are the same as the people who made these buildings in 1907. But we stand on the same ground. Remember, we are stabilized by memory. To tear something down and put something new up is disorienting. We’ll spend thousands of dollars doing plasterwork, but then add modern touches. To me that tells a story. An important story. An ongoing story.”

What then will our story be? Will it mimic the story of so many other cities where the influx of urban hipsters and kindergarten firms cleans things up but subsequently clears people out? Will private investment include taking care of the less fortunate in an attempt to correct wrongs and make rights? Will we be daring?

“In Winnipeg, we tend not to be as experimental as we can,” confesses Bridgman. “It’s because our heritage is so fragile and because the economic forces tend to be as urgent as they are. Confidence is the basis on which we can be experimental and respectful. We know that there is a community of people here, and we’re pleased that it’s a highly diversified population. We’re not saying that we’re moving towards gentrification. The Salvation Army is not going to move. We’re not trying to push anyone farther north. Part of a normal downtown is a healthy mix of people who are tolerant of one other. That is my dream for this area.”

More importantly, the question remains, will we entertain, and even act on, the dreams of an excited architect who wants to build on history and change the future? By the sounds of it, it will mean trees and washrooms and dignity. Can we handle that? The excavator’s whine may mean we don’t have a choice. And that, I suspect, is why Bridgman is smiling.