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## Restoration a Capitol idea

The Capitol Theatre and the Bowles building have been beautifully restored

By **JANE SIMS**

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**VIDEO: The final pressure-wash on the fresh limestone of two historic gems in London's downtown marks the beginning of a new life for the Capitol Theatre and the Bowles Building.**

Two side-by-side downtown London historic gems that came close to a date with the wrecker's ball have returned to their former glory.

The Capitol Theatre and Bowles building, once thought to be too derelict to restore, have made majestic comebacks on London's Dundas Street, breathing new life into a block of core buildings between Clarence and Richmond streets that badly need a new draw.

Their comeback -- with their inviting grey limestone and large windows -- is owed in large part to London developer Shmuel Farhi and the City of London who came together with an idea that would save the buildings.

The \$4-million development will soon house the city's planning department in 2010 in its open, airy spaces.

Farhi is excited about the results and admitted while the cost was high, it was a great investment in "giving back to the community" and "bringing more people to Dundas Street."

"Hopefully this development will show the city that when I say we're going to do something, we put our money where our mouth is," he said.

The Capitol was built in 1920 and was known as the Allen. It had a long lobby with mirrored walls that led to a large theatre. But after the years of neglect, it became a Dundas Street eyesore with a sign on its marquee that said R.I.P.

The movie theatre was demolished to make way for parking and Farhi, after he bought the property in 2006, initially planned to raze the whole thing.

The Bowles building was added in 1928, and was a restaurant and a jewelry store.

In 2008, an architect determined the facade was worth saving after the large sign out front was removed to reveal the ornate stonework. City council later agreed to enter a 20-year lease with Farhi for civic offices.

There have been some significant changes. The Capitol facade cost about \$800,000 alone to restore. About 68% of the stone was damaged.

The Bowles used to have a terracotta front, but 80% of the 400 tiles were damaged.

The decision was made to change all of it to stone that was meticulously carved.

It cost \$170,000 to brace each piece of stone inside the building.

"This is the masterpiece it has become," Farhi said as he looked over at the buildings.

"This is really a work of love. This is really heritage restoration at its best."

Farhi said it would have been easy to build a box-like structure, but he wanted the city to pay attention to its history and see the value in heritage.

And, he said, it will bring more white-collar office workers onto Dundas Street.

"We need the feet on the street," he said.

And Farhi said he would like to see more public-private partnerships like this one.

"If we really want to see the renaissance of downtown we need to do more of these kinds of projects," he said.

The new-look buildings have certainly created a buzz downtown.

MainStreet London manager Janette MacDonald said the restoration results "probably exceeded our expectations."

"This building has been revitalized exactly as we wanted it to be. "

MacDonald said the Capitol success "signals to me that the incentives that the city put in place are working." A community improvement plan was put in place 11 years ago and was enriched two years ago.

There are lots of landlords willing to participate. Seventy-six properties have been improved by one or more of the city's financial incentive programs.

MacDonald said there have been \$980,000 in loans and \$355,000 in grants on construction values of \$4.5 million. There have also been \$156,000 in tenant improvement loans and facade grants commitments of \$78,000.

And there is a lot more coming. MacDonald said several downtown buildings have sold recently, including the long-vacant Grandma Lee's building at 142 Dundas St that was purchased by a local lawyer interested in restoring it.

MacDonald said it is gratifying to see the city lease downtown space at the Capitol.

"The city is walking its own talk by taking space in the downtown," she said and the planning department will draw a lot of pedestrian traffic to Dundas Street.

"I defy anybody to say downtown is not thriving," she said.

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