



The restored Lister Block at King William and James Street North | photographs by Graham Crawford

# CELEBRATING THE BEAUTY *of the* LISTER BLOCK RESTORATION

*While not forgetting how we got there* | Graham Crawford

Sometimes stories blur. The latest facts becomes the whole truth. History ends up getting rewritten. Sometimes unwittingly.

The Lister Block is one such example.

It was a sunny, snowless Wednesday morning in mid-January that I, along with a number of others, took a tour of the nearly completed Lister Block.

The event was hosted by Renew Hamilton, a group that has grown out of the Hamilton Economic Summit, sponsored by the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. David Adameš, the new President of the Chamber was there. As were Steve Kulakowsky, Glen Norton, Jeff Feswick, David Premi, Paul Shaker, Diane Dent, Kathy Drewitt, Paul Berton, Richard Allen, Jeff Paikin, Annette Paiement, Frank Vismeg. There were probably another dozen people. One of them was special guest Christopher Hume, award winning architecture columnist for the Toronto Star. Taking notes. Offering comments. Announcing an upcoming series of lectures he would be hosting and moderating in Hamilton about Hamilton as part of the Renew Hamilton project.

The tour of the building was made possible by LIUNA, and was led by Carolyn Samko, the heritage

specialist who worked directly on the restoration project and who now works for the City of Hamilton. She knows her stuff.

We toured the main floor and the second floor. I was impressed. Very impressed.

What they could save, they did. Like 95% of the glazed terra cotta cladding. Like two intact, original store fronts, one on King William and the other on James, including leaded glass, copper, bronze, oak. Like the unbelievable marble mosaic floors on the main level and each of the hallways upstairs. Like the white marble stair treads to the second floor. It's for these and other reasons I'm happy to give LIUNA an A+.

Joe Mancinelli, head of LIUNA, did what he said he would do - a first class job of restoration. Admittedly, the citizens of Hamilton paid handsomely for that restoration, and for the building itself. We own it now. But the fact is, we have a heritage jewel that shines proudly in the heart of our downtown. Just like it used to when it was first built in 1923. When you see it for yourself, you won't be disappointed. In fact, the restoration work is of such quality that your kids won't be disappointed either, even when they reach your

age.

Those are the latest facts. Not hype. Not half truths. Having said that, I feel it's important to connect the latest facts with the facts that preceded them to be sure we don't get so caught up in the goodness we see before us that we end up forgetting how we got here.

This amazing piece of restoration almost didn't happen. LIUNA's stood beside then-Mayor Larry Dilanni and announced they planned to demolish the Lister and replace it with a vertically stretched replica. Heritage specialists and supporters were horrified. Many pushed back. Through letters. Presentations. Posters. Phone calls. Demonstrations. Things got ugly before they got collaborative. The debate involved Ministers of Culture, MPP's, the Premier, Mayors, the Liberal government, Councillors, and thankfully the public. It also involved money. Doesn't it always? Money from the provincial government and from the municipal government. Millions, in fact. Many millions.

Moving from demolition to restoration didn't just happen because a politician and a developer had a vision. It happened because citizens rose up and said no to wasteful and shortsighted demolition. Citizens of

all ages, from all parts of this city, had had enough of the endless circular arguments. Enough of the eyesore that the Lister had become. Enough of the messages its shocking decay sent to Hamiltonians, to visitors, and to potential investors alike. Enough of what it said about us. That we were broken. Careless. Done.

I never really understood how an organization like LIUNA, that had reinvented the old train station into a first class banquet facility, not to mention the great job they did on their own headquarters on Hughson St., would want to knock down the Lister Block. Clearly, they knew how to restore a building. But that was not what they had in mind for the Lister Block. At least not the day I first heard them speak before Council in what would be a memorable re-introduction to Hamilton politics for me as I had just returned to the city after 25 years in Toronto. I watched spokespeople and citizens present their passionate, compelling and articulate arguments for saving the building. People such as Freiburger, Hamilton, Buttrum, Butler, Dent, Jelly. I have since come to know many of the people I heard speak that day. In fact, I'm proud to call many of them friends.

I marveled at the eloquence, the tenacity, the vision people had for their city. In their vision, Hamilton was not broken, or careless, or done. The energy I felt for all 14 hours of that debate in Council Chambers was inspiring. As I reflect on it today, I'm still inspired by their words, even if the reality of Hamilton politics has tempered my enthusiasm. It's for these and other reasons I'm happy to give citizen advocates an A+.

What saved the Lister Block was a combination of the battled waged by citizens against convenience and short-sightedness combined with the quality of work done by LIUNA and its tradespeople. Let's remember and celebrate both. Doing so ensures neither side holds a grudge. Doing so ensures we see the power of citizens and craftspeople working together to achieve something worthy of our city.

The Lister Block is back. Remember its history. Celebrate its beauty. And perhaps above all else, continue to defend our heritage.

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