for February 17, 2008?

Adaptive Reuse

Removing malt floor in Building 35 by Thane Lucas

Building 35 today

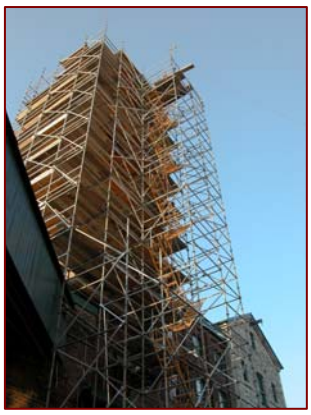
This is the first in an occasional series devoted to "adaptive reuse" at the Distillery Historic District. With over 40 heritage buildings, occupying 13 acres, that have been developed and redeveloped for industrial uses over the last 175 years, the Distillery District offers rich territory for grappling with some of the challenges, and celebrating some of the successes, associated with transforming a disused Victorian industrial site into a lively, revitalized part of the city.

Put at its simplest, "adaptive reuse" means finding new uses for old structures without destroying their heritage value. It involves preserving, restoring, and reconfiguring historic buildings and spaces to accommodate new uses, new technologies, and modern requirements. Success depends on deep understanding of the historic fabric, close attention to detail, and ability to fashion unique solutions to unique situations. One size definitely does not fit all.

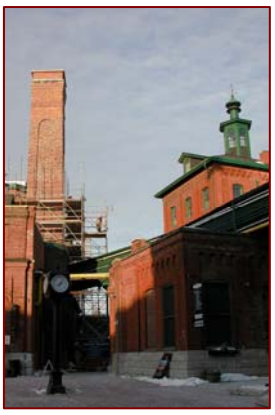
The challenges of adaptive reuse are legion. Which moment-in-time should guide restoration, especially when individual buildings have been altered, perhaps many times, during their working lives? How can old – perhaps discontinued – materials, and old construction techniques be reproduced? How can modern building codes, fire codes, and regulations be met without destroying heritage value? Are the carpenters, masons and other highly skilled craftspeople capable of doing historic restoration available? How can large, industrial artifacts – like column stills, scale tanks, and Victorian boilers – be accommodated in new tenant spaces? Are there tenants who would be not only willing, but even eager to retain and embrace the heritage artifacts and quirky built fabric? There are no pat answers to these kinds of questions.

Examples of adaptive reuse abound at the Distillery District where over 300,000 square feet of heritage space has already been adapted for modern uses. The adaptations and interventions range from small-sometimes-expensive alterations to major overhauls and reconfigurations.

Sometimes adaptive reuse has involved major, non-revenue generating interventions that enhance the overall heritage feel of the site. For example, the deteriorating, 100-foot chimney behind the Stone Distillery, was taken down and reconstructed, brick-by-heritage-brick. About 120,000 of the chimney's original bricks could be reused; and 20,000 "reclaimed bricks" – each costing 70-cents – were added. The distinctive old distillery skyline was retained, and one of Toronto's heritage chimneys saved.



Chimney Restoration



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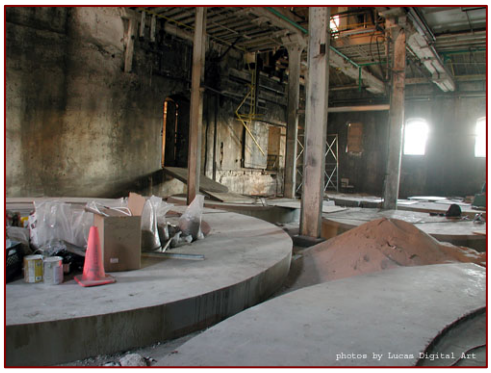
Many times, adaptive reuse has involved dramatically reconfiguring the interior space of a heritage building. For example, the 1863 Malt House originally contained three, low-ceilinged floors where barley was spread out, watered, and sprouted as the first step in the malt-making process. Few adults could stand up straight to do their work. Clearly, major change was required to accommodate modern uses. As a result, an entire floor was removed. This opened-up a cramped structure with 5-foot ceilings into a dramatic, modern retail space with 20-foot ceilings. The original, short timber columns were replaced with soaring columns of Douglas fir, the most common wood used on the Victorian site; and the same distinctive construction techniques found in the original structure were employed, such as double ceiling timbers laid on brick corbels. (See photographs at the top of this article.)

The 1860 Fermenting Cellar – now used as a major events venue - presented a different challenge. This rough, industrial building had once contained two-dozen, huge, copper "fermenting tuns" standing on individual bases. By the time Cityscape had taken over the site in 2001, the copper tanks had been removed, but their raised circular bases still occupied the entire floor, making the holding of large events nearly impossible. The solution? A new floor. Gravel was packed around all but two of the tank bases, and a new concrete floor was poured. Two tank bases were kept and incorporated into the new design to illustrate the old use of the building … and pique the curiosity of event-goers who imbibe a little Toronto history along with their event.



Fermenting Cellar by Thane Lucas

Meanwhile, the adjacent 1860 Stone Distillery presented major challenges for adaptive reuse. The distilling section, for example, contained huge, copper distilling columns that rose through four floors. First, fire regulations required that the forty-foot columns not become "chimneys," so measures had to be taken to cut the columns into impenetrable sections. Then, finding tenants willing to share their space with the hulking industrial artifacts was key. Both the ground-floor art gallery

and the fourth-floor graphic-design firm not only tolerate, but embrace 'their" artifacts. Not every distilling column was retained. But many were, with the interior space flowing around them and creating characterful contemporary work and display spaces.

Stone Distillery 4th floor in 2002 by Thane Lucas

Stone Distillery 4th floor today

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, sg@thedistillerydistrict.com.

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit www.distilleryheritage.com.