

History *with a* modern *twist*

ON THE MOVE

Last October, the Clifton Kok law firm moved next door after renovating the centre section of this group of buildings on Northumberland Street in Ayr. The facade was rebuilt to look like the original 1890s building.

ORIGINAL PLANS HELP LAWYERS REJUVENATE AYR OFFICE BUILDING

By Carolyn Gruske

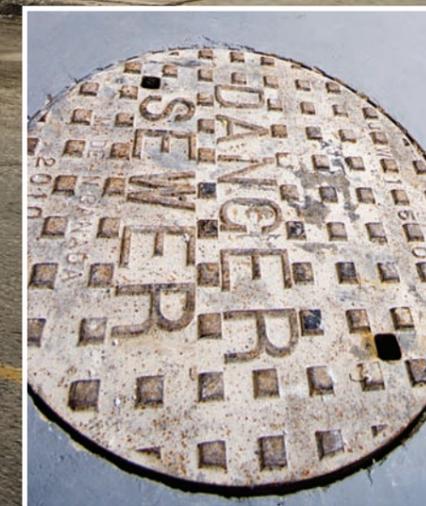
Photography • Jesse Brenneman

IT MAY SEEM ODD that the owners of a newly refurbished office building are eagerly awaiting a flood, but that seems to be the case at a law firm in Ayr.

No, the partners at Clifton Kok LLP don't intend to sue anybody for flood-related damage. Instead, they want to see just how well their extensive water-proofing measures work to prevent the spring meltdown from

swamping their office in a recently renovated, historic building.

"We find ourselves in the odd position of hoping for a flood, to see what happens," says Mark Kok. "We're the only ones in Ayr hoping for a flood." Kok and his partner, Michael Clifton, moved into the building at 12 Northumberland St. in October, but they are very familiar with just how high the river can rise. Prior to buying the property, they rented space in the adjacent building, owned by another law firm, Robson Carpenter LLP. ▶





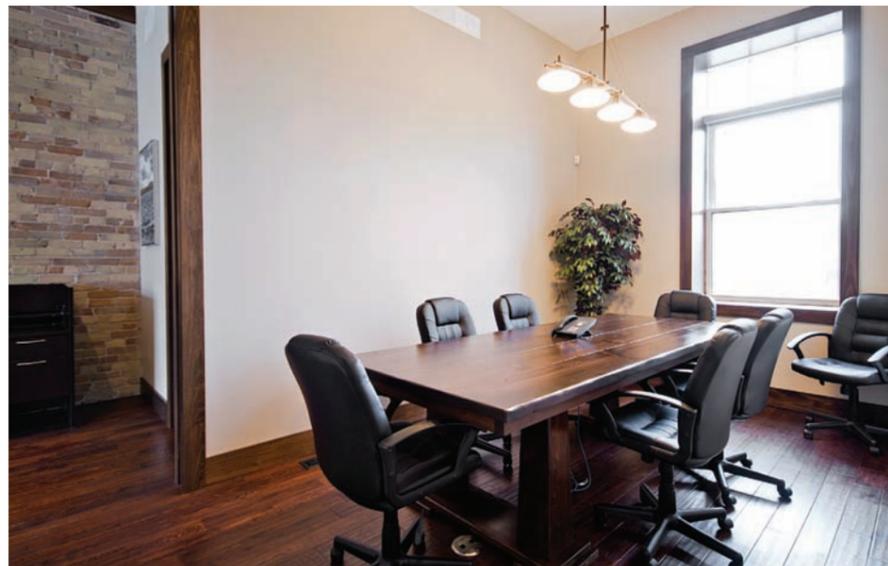
HAVE A SEAT

Both the second-floor coffee table (above) and the main floor conference table (right) feature pine salvaged from the building's original flooring. The second-storey doors had to be custom built because of the high ceilings. Transoms allow natural light to flow through even if doors are closed.

► “The Nith River floods right up to the back wall. So flood-proofing is a critical issue for any of the buildings along here,” says Kok. “We want to be here, but we want to be dry here.”

“The location is critical — the firms are affiliated — and it's beautiful, right downtown. But we know from renting here that flooding is just a fact of life here. So it's a matter of just dealing with it.”

Kok and Clifton purchased the building in the summer of 2010, but it took the law firm, which specializes in condominium development and management, more than a year to relocate because of extensive renovations.



“The second floor had such a tremendous ‘wow’ in it we had to essentially bring the entire structure down. The entire front façade came down. This was essentially a big cave at one point,” says Kok.

“So when you're outside and you look at

the building, all of that is brand new, but it is modelled to look more like the building did in the 1890s,” says Clifton.

Unlike the waterproofing measures, which are essentially invisible, the new façade is obvious to all.



The plain glass front, which dated from the building's period as a Little Short Stop variety store, is gone. It has been replaced by dark, wooden pilasters reaching up to a cornice separating the first and second floors.

The oversized front door is crowned by an arched window, and there are two more large, main-floor arches, each topping the triple-panelled windows flanking the door. There are additional arches on the second storey.

The lower level features a dark, rich brown wood; the upper storey is intricately patterned brick in muted tones of red, yellow and brown.

Bricklayers relied on the building's original blueprints and photos to recreate a false front parapet that extended the front wall vertically past the flat roof. The decorative structure was long gone, so it was rebuilt in a more masculine design with more straight edges.

“It looks stronger, but it is also about the building code,” says Clifton. “You used to be able to carve bricks in a way you can't do anymore. It looked better, but they did manage to recreate the arch at the top.”

Looking at the building now, it's almost impossible to envision what it looked like before the renovation, but it fits the architectural revival beginning to happen in Ayr.

“Every building on this block has done something except this building, and we really had to do our part,” says Kok.

“The town was very pleased,” adds Clifton. “I think they were thrilled that we were giving the town a facelift.”

The building was built in 1886 by James Stark. The main floor was designed to be a grocery store. It has also served as a butcher's shop and a hobby store. The second floor was created as residential space.

“When you look at architectural drawings, this was intended to be an apartment.

ENTRANCEWAY

Arched windows and a large doorway set off the lobby area of the law office. Originally, the main floor of the building was designed to be a grocery store.

We are told, although we haven't seen any historical documents, that it was probably a brothel. How appropriate now that lawyers are here,” Clifton jokes.

The building's last residential tenant, a children's entertainer who is known professionally as Zoe the Clown, gave up her lease shortly before the sale of the building.

The process of turning the badly neglected, mixed residential and retail space — which had been on the market for over a year — into a professional office took much longer than Clifton and Kok expected. They took possession in summer 2010 and spent the rest of the year planning.

They hired Jo Redman of the design firm Redman Watson to come up with the basic layout and interior design. Then they ►

► hired John Dorey, owner and president of Cambridge-based RJ Construction Ventures Inc., to act as the contractor. Demolition began in January 2011.

“The first target for completion was July. The second target was August. The third was Oct. 1. We actually added a whole month in there,” says Clifton. “We actually got in Oct. 1, but it wasn’t complete to this level until the end of November.

“Then there are still little bits of touchup. Every time you turn around you say, ‘Oh that needs to be done,’ or ‘We need some hardware for the door.’ Or the fact that we forgot about putting power up on the roof so we could light up the Christmas wreath.”

He says that although the project turned out to be a bit more expensive than planned, there were also elements that were cheaper than expected.

“Putting the new second floor in turned out to be cheaper and easier than working with the existing floor,” he says. “And likewise, building the front façade. We were able to make really good choices that turned out to be economically beneficial.”

Among the choices was the decision to salvage parts of the building’s original pine flooring to create shelving, the main floor conference table and the second floor coffee table.

“Back in the 1800s, you can see by what materials they used, what their budget was,” says Dorey. “This obviously wasn’t a high-budget building. A lot of the wood that was in it — as far as the wood planking — was not salvageable.”

The two-by-14s used in the structure of the floor were another matter. “It was pine, but good luck finding two-by-14s in pine nowadays. We cut our trees down so young.”

Dorey says he still has some of it stored in his shop “ready to use whenever we need to build with reclaimed wood.”

The interior also features numerous varieties of darkly stained wood. The deep windowsills are sapele mahogany from Africa. The flooring is oak. The interior doors are solid poplar.



Even a main-floor storage area (above) has a stylish look with its rich floor, wooden shelves and vibrant colours.



The basement of the building had to be dug out to provide more head room and to accommodate underground reservoirs in case of flooding. There are two maintenance holes, such as the one above, just in case. Under the flooring are weeping tiles, insulation, floor drains and pumps.

The doors were made by Mennonites in northern Ontario, custom-ordered due to their size: the main-floor doors are roughly 10 feet (three metres) in height and the second-floor doors are eight feet (2.4 metres) high — plus transoms — so as not to look out of proportion with the high ceilings, which Clifton estimates to be 13 to 14 feet.

Since all the second-floor windows open into offices, the transoms allow natural light to flow through the area, even when the doors are closed. The space between the

three front offices (which look toward the centre of the village) and the three back offices (which have a river view) is used as a casual meeting area, with club chairs and the reclaimed pine coffee table. The walls feature the exposed brick exterior.

Natural light is also abundant on the main floor — thanks to the grand windows — which helps to balance and brighten the dark wood staircase and landing and the hammered, wrought-iron railing.

The vertical scale of the building is particularly evident in the lobby and reception

area — the building’s exterior door opens onto a sunken floor.

The basement, which now houses the lunch room and long-term file storage, presented problems.

“I’m not a tall man, I’m only 5 foot 10, 5 foot 11, and there were a lot of spots I had to walk in a way that was being conscious of the ceiling,” Dorey says.

“We had to take it down probably three-and-a-half feet, close to four feet in spots, for new footing. Probably a little bit lower.”

As well as providing more head room, the basement had to be dug deep to accommodate underground reservoirs to hold the Nith River’s flood waters.

“We have two manholes (in the basement floor). And they go into a reservoir. The two of them join together underground. Down each manhole is a pump that separately pumps and discharges water out,” explains Dorey.

“We have numerous circles of weeping tile underneath the floor to address the ground water. We have six floor drains to address any water that may hit the floor. I think the groundwater weeping tile is what’s going to be the most effective because if the river floods, so does the groundwater flood.”

Art provides the finishing touches

Original artwork adorns some of the walls in the Clifton and Kok office.

Michael Clifton says that when they first opened their law firm they decided to treat themselves to “one beautiful asset,” and they bought a painting.

“Now we have five, so we’re getting there.”

The art includes a small abstract with squares of golds and blues, and a large, wildlife piece of a polar bear created with strong strokes of blues and purples by an artist based in Yellowknife.

Another is an impressionistic landscape with a deep, watery foreground and autumnal forest in the background.

“I like the hopefulness of the land,” explains Clifton. “He likes the desperate

The weeping tiles are sealed by spray-foam insulation, which keeps the water away from the cement floor.

“Underneath the walls everything is completely spray-foamed. It’s water-tight. It also has the highest R-value. The spray foam in itself — a good two-pound foam — is its own vapour barrier, water barrier and air barrier, all in that one product,” Dorey says.

So, as long as the building manages to stay dry, Clifton and Kok easily envision staying put for the next 20 years.

“When we set out to set the firm up (five years ago), we wanted our own freedom. Masters of our own destiny, so to speak,” Kok says. “We surrounded ourselves with people we like. We like everybody we work with. You get to work with people you enjoy, get to do work you enjoy, in a place that’s beautiful.”

Clifton is equally happy with the building.

“It feels good. It feels like home. I have to admit there was a while when it seemed like it was taking so long to get finished that the lustre would have worn off before we got in, but now that it’s here, I feel good. I enjoy going into my office.”

fear of drowning in the front. So as long as we balance our interests.”

“It comes down to trying to find something we both appreciate. We have differing sensibilities. So we have to agree on a piece, and so far we have on a few,” adds Kok.

In addition to the art, there is one other thing that Clifton wants to frame and hang: a 1948 licence plate. “It was the only truly historical item that was found in the building.

“I was really hoping that there’d be some more significant things they’d find in the walls. I guess with all the transitions this place had and because it was more retail than residential, things got cleared out. Unfortunately.”

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