

# In Toronto development, heritage retention is a team sport



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At Wellesley St. just west of Yonge St. in Toronto, we are able to see a steel retention frame holding up numbers 10 to 16. These two-and-a-half storey, bay windowed, Second Empire houses were built as speculative housing by Thomas Bryce of Bryce Brothers Construction in 1876. DYLAN AUTHORS

A construction hoarding, to most people, is an interruption in the streetscape. A temporary blight, or worse, a darkened place of possible danger to be avoided. But to some, it is a closed portal – a potential window on the future so tantalizing as to invite a peek behind the blank wall.

To those of us who love heritage architecture, a peek will sometimes offer up the lesson that there is more than one way to retain, restore, and reincorporate heritage into new construction.

For example, on a recent walkabout with engineer Mitch Gascoyne, who heads up development at the relatively new CentreCourt (founded in 2010), and architect Emad Ghattas of heritage-focused firm GBCA, we encountered three different methods at three of their projects.

We began our survey at a row of three-storey Georgian townhouses that span from 191 to 197 Church St. in Toronto. These handsome, solid, pre-Confederation buildings by architect John Tulley would have been residences for middle-class merchants, clerks, editors, architects and the like for their first hundred years, but were converted to retail and office spaces by the mid-twentieth century. Once part of a row of 10 townhouses, only these four remain (since one was rebuilt in 1981 after a fire, only three are technically original and an examination of their mortar bears this out), which means their continued existence on Church St. between Shuter and Dundas streets is crucial.

“The interesting thing about this retention is that we’re able to retain it without a structure,” says Mr. Gascoyne, “which is a lot easier for interacting with the street.”

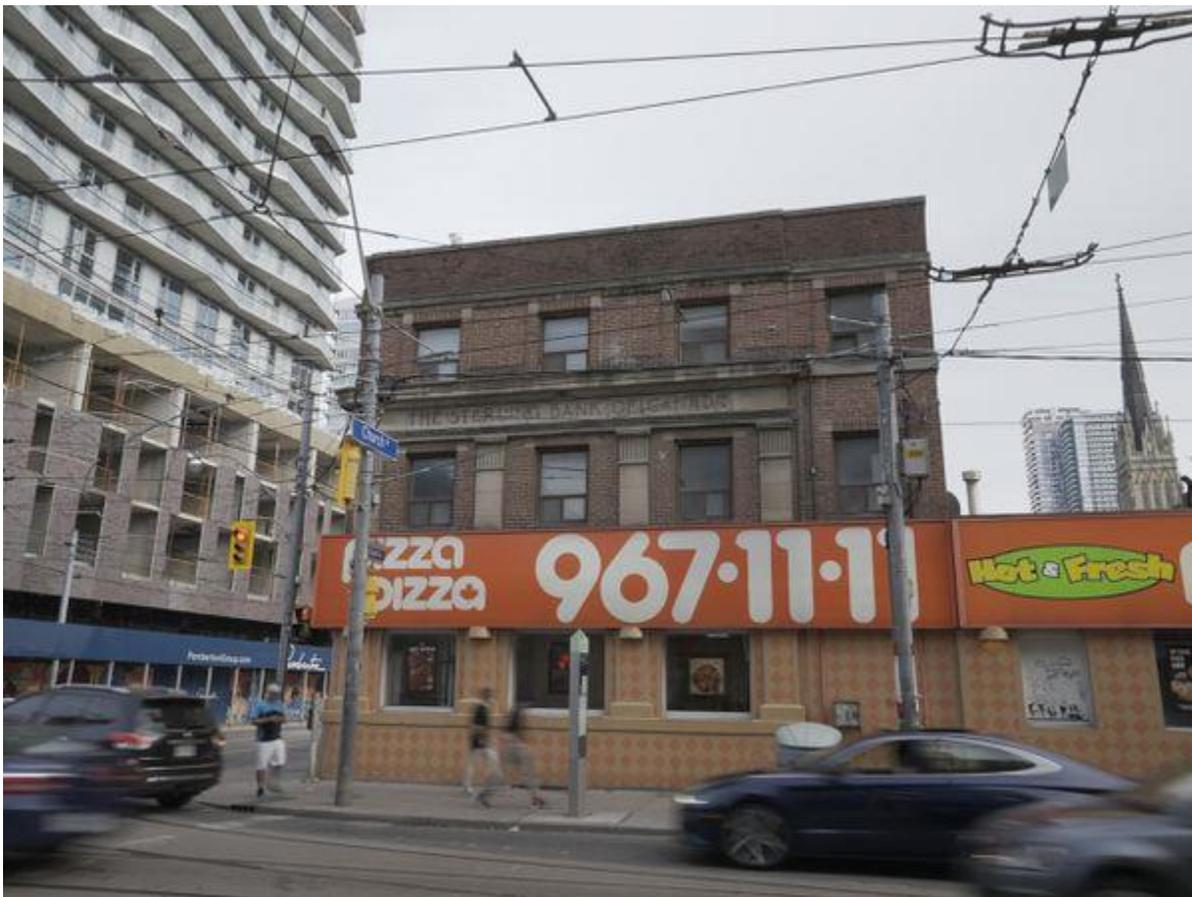
He’s right: the sidewalk has not been bumped out to accommodate a steel retention frame – that’s a bridge-like structure required to hold up thin façades – because a full three metres of depth has been retained. Those wrapping side walls not only make these Georgians self-supporting, they preserve the entry sequence for future generations.



Rendering of the heritage retention development from 191 to 197 Church St., in Toronto. CENTRECOURT

“The stairs are character-defining for Georgians,” says Mr. Ghattas, “but there were also stairs going down to the basement level.” These, he explains, won’t make it into the new development since “there’s no need to go to the basement from the street.” And, just as before, CentreCourt will be leasing these to retailers. With co-developer Parallax, the new portion of 199 Church St. will rise to 39 storeys.

A half-block to the north, our little group admires the stately countenance of the former 1913 Stirling Bank of Canada building by John M. Lyle, who would go on to design the Royal Alexandra Theatre and much of Union Station ... well, the second and third floors in any case, as the first has been completely covered in bright orange tile by a pizza chain. And about that tile: after some strategic removal, it was determined there are actually two layers.



The former Stirling Bank of Canada building, designed in 1913 by John M. Lyle. A 52-storey tower will rise on this site, with the bank building retained in full. DYLAN AUTHORS



A rendering of the building planned for the Stirling Bank of Canada building site. CENTRECOURT

“I just wanted to know what was the condition of the stone [underneath],” says Mr. Ghattas. “Was it damaged, was it dirty? And how difficult is it to remove the ceramic tiling? There’s actually a cement board protecting the stone, so I can anticipate it’s going to be easy.”

And while a 52-storey tower will rise on this site, CentreCourt is retaining the bank building in full and setting the tower back to ensure Lyle’s work will continue to occupy pride of place. Even the author of *A Progressive Traditionalist*: John M. Lyle, Architect (Coach House, 2009), Glenn McArthur, remarked on the “very good job” in balancing the two styles in *Daily Commercial News* in January, 2022. Most satisfying, to this author anyway, will be to see the flat pilasters drop right to the sidewalk once again.

#### STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT

At Wellesley St. just west of Yonge St., we are able to see a steel retention frame holding up numbers 10 to 16. These two-and-a-half storey, bay windowed, Second Empire houses were built as speculative housing by Thomas Bryce of Bryce Brothers Construction in 1876 and, according to GBCA’s Heritage Impact Assessment, are the “first and only buildings to have ever stood on this site.” Unfortunately, these little gems were covered over in stucco decades ago (a 1972 photo shows their brick detailing).



A rendering of the building planned for 8 Wellesley St. CENTRECOURT

“So the intent is to remove it and have a look,” explains Mr. Ghattas. “And we did do some exploratory openings, and we found that the brick was in fair condition, but I need to look more to see what we can do.”

For now, however, these façades will hang over the excavation from the frame that was custom built for them – since each façade is a different weight, length, height and made of different materials there aren’t off-the-shelfers – until the 55 storey tower can be tucked in behind (in partnership with Bazis). The development will also incorporate 7 St. Nicholas St., which once housed the legendary 1960s coffee house The Bohemian Embassy.

Asked if he seeks out heritage-heavy sites specifically, Mr. Gascoyne is frank: “We want to develop in good areas ... but I’m not seeking out anything in particular other than transit-connected, urban locations with good community that I can add to.”

In this market, however, those sites usually include a handsome pile of bricks from one hundred-plus years ago.

“What’s good is that we’re involved from the beginning,” finishes Mr. Ghattas. “It’s not like, ‘Oh, we just figure out it’s heritage, what do we do?’ we get to think in advance.”

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