



Genesee Gateway and CityView's plan of restoration of the Genesee St. block in Buffalo

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I'd like to share a bit about our newest project in downtown Buffalo that is our planned restoration of the Genesee St. block between Oak and Ellicott.

When all is said and done, in the real estate development business, your projects say more about your company than anything else. They say it by standing the test of time. They say it by the emotion the final product generates every time someone walks by or goes into a building you built.

I think we are judged, as a city, not only by how we manage the present and plan for the future but also by how we respect our past. Respect it, not dwell on it. Buffalo is certainly a different city than it was at the turn of the last century. We have weathered our share of challenges, but in recent years have seen a great deal of positive changes. We may have fewer folks here, now, but the ones we have are outstanding supporters of a community worthy of that support. CityView consistently tries to act like a charter member of that Boost Buffalo Club.

From our earliest developments in the Main and Chippewa district we have followed a mission that promotes real estate development within the city limits and particularly, in the central business area. We have, for the most part, undertaken what some folks have described as difficult restorations. The Root Building on Chippewa St., now home to the Buffalo Public School's Emerson Culinary School, the former Nemmer Furniture Building on Main St., a/k/a City Centre and most recently, the Larkin at Exchange in the Larkin District. All of these projects involved taking buildings that had some former glory, good solid structures and a history that we could get excited about. These projects have reflected the philosophy of our various partnerships over the years; Find buildings that are pretty cool, seem like they would be fun to restore and then get them done. Granted, that plan doesn't work out every time, and there are times when it takes a while to meet the goals of cool and fun, and often even longer for these project to be profitable but, on the whole, they seem to work out.

At about the same time that the Erie Canal was opening, Joseph Ellicott's plan for the city of Buffalo was taking shape. These plans included the parcels that we are now focused on at Genesee and Oak Sts. In the earliest days, these parcels were just outside of the northeast boundary of the village of Buffalo. By the mid-1850s until the late 1800s, Buffalo's major growth was to the east on streets along Ellicott's radial grid such as Genesee and Broadway. Commercial, retail and residential occupancy was the norm all along this corridor. Occupants included shoemakers, watchmakers, harness makers, hat and furrier companies, grocery stores, etc. Often, the owners or employees lived in the apartments above the store.

The Genesee Gateway block stands today as one of the few remaining examples of Buffalo's 19th century commercial streetscape, and the only downtown block where both sides of the street represent that era's commercial development.

Like most of us in Buffalo and it's surrounds as well as the trustees of the Margaret L. Wendt

Foundation, we have been driving by these vacant and decaying buildings for years. To them, and to us, the appearance of this block seemed to nullify all the other good things that were happening in Buffalo. This block stands at the busiest entryway into the downtown core, immediately after exiting the Rte. 33 expressway. It creates the first and last impression most visitors and workers have of downtown Buffalo. The stars aligned late last year when we decided to undertake the redevelopment of this block with the cooperation of the Wendt Foundation. The Foundation's commitment to the development of Buffalo and their ability to provide very creative financing through a major program related investment, has allowed for the realization of this important project.

One of the first requirements of developing a project like this is engaging an architect who has the experience to work with historic structures and who shares the vision of the developer while understanding that there has to be a budget and that budget has to be respected. In Flynn Battaglia, we found that architect. Working diligently together, we evaluated the buildings and formulated a plan that would both respect the history of the block and while also providing leasable areas for future use.

The plan currently under construction will restore the exterior elevations to their original configuration. To do this, the architect used historical photos and sketches as much of the original fenestration was removed years ago from several of the buildings. Mid-block, where one of the original structures was demolished, we'll be adding a new infill building that will compliment, but not duplicate, the original building or the neighboring buildings. One of the most visible changes to the Genesee/Oak corner will be the removal of the cinder block fourth story, which will be replaced with the original mansard roof design. Almost all by itself, this restoration will dramatically change the feel and historic sense of the whole block.

All of the buildings have unique architectural qualities. The centerpiece of the block is the Werner Photography buildings. Designed by Richard Waite, a prominent buffalo architect of the period it was built in 1895 for Frederick Giesser as a store, photo studio and residence. It has a distinctive waterfall skylight that rises between the third and forth floors and is one of the most eye-catching landmarks in the area. This building is the subject of the famous Charles Burchfield painting. Burchfield was fascinated with Buffalo's streets, harbor and rail yards.

The restoration of the properties will provide highly visible first floor retail spaces with the opportunity to enter one or two large spaces or multiple smaller retail spaces depending on how the floor plates lease up. While the original streetscape was made up of multiple properties, over the course of the decades, the façades were blended with the primary delineation being done at the street level storefronts. We are working to restore this feeling at ground level.

The upper floors will be restored to accommodate commercial tenancy. Again, by refitting the current interior skeleton, the architects were able to achieve a design that, for the most part, will provide relatively large floor plates, with as much as 15 or 16,000 s/f for a single user or allow for multiple tenants to occupy smaller lease spaces.

All of the infrastructure will be replaced with new, modern, energy efficient systems from the heating and cooling to the elevators. Parking is being provided both by on-street spots and in the parking lot that was acquired on the corner of East Chippewa and Ellicott. The city, though council member Brian Davis and the Office of Strategic Planning are working with us to improve the streetscape with new sidewalks, plantings and street furniture.

Construction began in October 2008 and will take 12 to 18 months to complete. We are ramping up marketing efforts and are targeting both local and national retailers for the first floor, and a variety of

commercial tenants are being pursued for the upper floors both large and small, established and start-up.

I am proud of our partnership with Margaret L. Wendt Foundation and the trust they put in us and our staff, and our mission compels us to develop within the city of Buffalo's boundaries whenever possible. It is a particular honor to have the opportunity to work on a project that will have such a positive impact on Buffalo's image.

For more information on Genesee Gateway please visit our website:
www.greatspacedowntown.com.

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