

# Welcome back, Wellesley

Renovation of semi-detached homes into office space helps urban health institute reconnect with its roots

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The London planetree is the ultimate urban tree. Not only does it grow tall, with broad leaves for shade-giving, it thrives in hot weather, while its bark flakes off periodically. So, while other trees suffer from oxygen-starvation as pollutants clog their pores, the planetree breathes freely ... while cleaning our air at the same time.

And, at some point next year, a good, sturdy example will stand in a small garden behind 201-203 Gerrard St. E. Long ribbon windows will allow those working in the former 1887 semi-detached houses (once owned by Cecilia Lloyd, a widow, and Harry Rosser, described in the 1888 tax assessment roll as a "traveller") to gaze upon this symbol of urban regeneration.

"This idea of rebirth and re-growth, and the idea of thinking about urban regeneration is important," says Dr. Kwame McKenzie, chief executive of the Wellesley Institute, which studies urban communities and the social determinants of health. "And one of the things we know about health is access to green space, seeing green space, is good for your health."

Up until this point, the 21-year-old non-profit that rose from the ashes of Wellesley Central Hospital had relied on leased space to play host to its big thinkers. In fact, for the past nine years, those thinkers have been located in a rather "swanky" part of town, Yonge and Summerhill. This, says Dr. McKenzie, his London accent still prominent after more than a dozen years in Canada, made "no sense. We had a long lease, but we broke the lease to come back to our roots."

Indeed, the corner of Gerrard Street East and Sherbourne Street is a 10-minute walk from where the old hospital stood. It's an area, the doctor continues, that "hasn't really moved with the rest of Toronto, and people are moving out, and we wanted to come back [to] the people who need the policy changes that we try to produce."

Those people are in evidence as our small group gathers at the windowless openings that will soon frame that London planetree, but currently frame the network of alleyways that provide secondary circulation routes for the neighbourhood.

Barreling down Oskenonton Lane, a grizzled man piloting a cart full of bicycle parts shouts for customers to inspect his wares; in the unnamed intersecting lane, a hardened woman announces to her partner that she's off to the beer store.

"You really get all that interesting stuff going on," says architect Adam Thom, taking it all in. "When these houses were built, nobody cared about the garden side, it was a place to hang your laundry, maybe the kids could play there, but it wasn't viewed like the little oasis that we see nowadays ... that there's activity here that's allowed to be seen is really important."

It's also important for Mr. Thom, his Agathom Co. business partner (and wife), Katja Aga Sachse Thom, and site superintendent Jay Marples (of contractor Duffy & Associates) to keep more than a memory of the Victorian era contained within these two semis while also stitching them together to create a modern, energy-efficient, 5,300-square-foot office for the Wellesley's 24 staff.

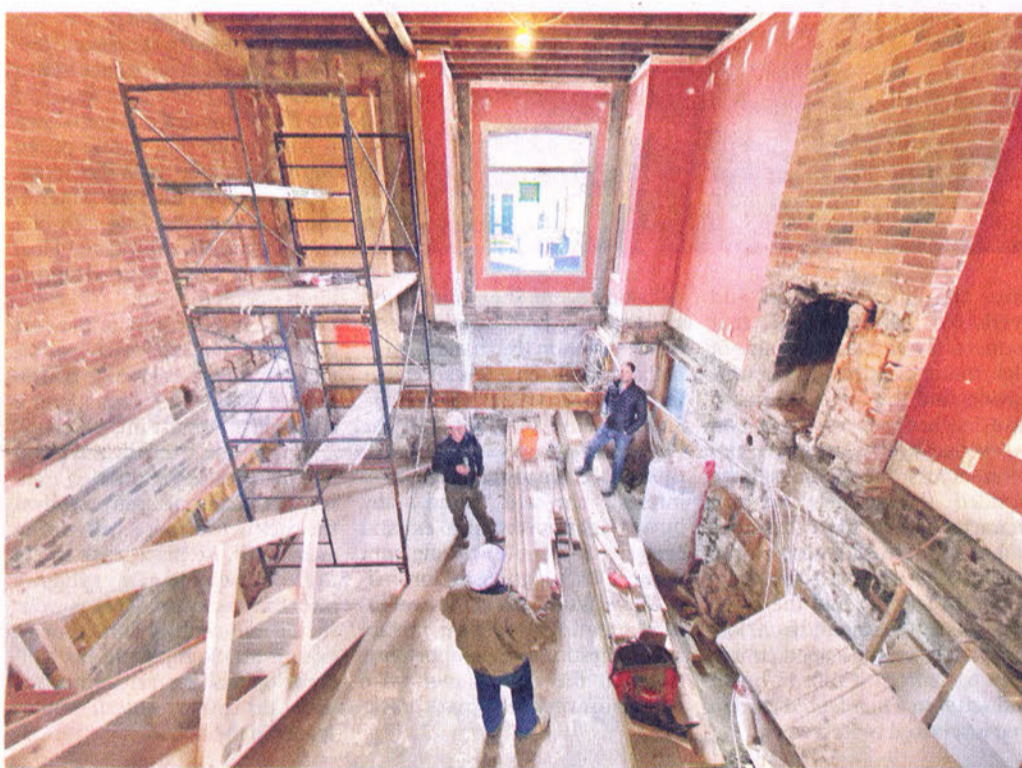
To wit, while the rear façade has been completely redrawn – not just for larger window-openings but also for the generous stairwell required in an office building – Rex Cole of Stone Age masonry has painstakingly "re-toothed" the corners with original brick so the two sidewalls "wrap" around it, rather than presenting as a sliced off afterthought. Mr. Cole has done the same for every interior opening as well.

"That's a really sweet detail," Mr. Thom says. "I know it sounds like a small thing, but to get it on a budget like this is a real win."

And speaking of interiors, while decades of non-residential



Adam Thom, left, Jay Marples and Dave LeBlanc look over the renovation of 201-203 Gerrard St. E. in Toronto. The Victorian houses are being turned into new offices for the Wellesley Institute, which studies urban communities and the social determinants of health. PHOTOS COURTESY AGATHOM CO.



usage means little has survived, what was found under drywall, namely the two dwellings' eight fireplaces, will be incorporated into the interior scheme. And, interestingly, since there are now various level changes that don't correspond to the originals, many of these will be "flying fireplaces."

One reason for changing levels is accessibility. On old Victorians, the main floor is often raised up from street level, which necessitates a short flight of stairs to a small porch. So, rather than keeping that configuration and adding a complicated (and space-hogging) wheelchair ramp, Agathom decided to drop the original door to street level and lengthen the transom window above. Quirky, but effective.

And when a visitor walks through that door, Dr. McKenzie hopes folks aren't too impressed: "You know how people walk into new buildings and they [say], 'Wow!' – that's not what I'm looking for," he says with a chuckle. "I'm looking for people to feel at home, and feel comfortable, and feel that nobody is trying to be super flash – we're not Deloitte – it's well proportioned, it's well considered, it's functional but smart."

Smart is how one might describe how circulation has been handled. On the right side of the reception desk, there will be a wide stair that leads to a wide corridor called "The Avenue"; this will terminate at an art-glass/sculpture wall (both Mr. and Ms. Thom are trained sculptors) that will allow south light to penetrate into the front of the building (while also drawing visitors to the boardroom at the back; Dr. McKenzie plans to lend this to other community groups). On the left, there will be a lift for wheelchair-bound visitors to get to that level. And, all along the original party wall there will be generous openings to allow views across the space.

To emphasize this, Mr. Thom places your humble Architourist into the extreme corner of the reception area and commands: "Look at the piercing of these two [spaces]; we did some interesting carving, surgery to the building." He's right: While we all expect that long, semi-dark, rectangular floor plan when we walk into a Victorian, here one is dazzled by a big, square plan that enjoys light coming in from all sides. It's glorious. And it's interesting to view it at the stage before all of the niceties go in, and all the hard work of jacking up sagging floors and the reinforcement of the single wythe party wall (which no one had seen before) is still in evidence.

That hard work, Dr. McKenzie says in closing, has not gone unnoticed. "Adam and Katja have been amazing at finding architectural solutions that will work for an organization that isn't flush with money. ... For us, it's more than offices, it's a home, and where you live and how you live significantly changes what you do and what you're interested in."



A rendering shows what the exterior of the new Wellesley Institute offices will look like. Inside, the building will have 5,300 square feet of space for the 24 staff members.