



This building at St. Clair Avenue West and Westmount Avenue in Toronto was renovated by Dubbeldam Architecture + Design; part of the building serves as its office. Dubbeldam sought out tenants that would enrich the neighbourhood, settling on coffee shop Wallace Espresso and community-based marketing agency Dog and Pony Studios. PHOTOS BY SCOTT NORSWORTHY

## Renovating for enriched retail and an enriched community

Neglected building in Toronto's Corso Italia has been redeveloped into a mixed-use neighbourhood hub

**DAVE LeBLANC**  
ARCHITOURIST



Because it's a mild 4 C on this overcast November Saturday, the lineup for the morning's java-jolt is five deep at Wallace Espresso. By the time the high of 6 C is reached around 1 p.m., there will likely be more, and the lone jogger streaming past the corner of St. Clair Avenue West and Westmount Avenue in Toronto – the gateway to Corso Italia – will have turned into a group, and the door to the co-working space, Lokaal, will be glad for its well-lubricated hinges.

But it wasn't always this way. If 2020 has taught the architecture world anything, it's the importance of neighbourhoods. Specifically, how to create and foster them and then help them thrive – even in difficult times.

Of course, the folks at Dubbeldam Architecture + Design have thought about this for almost two decades. About five years ago, however, it was at top of mind when Heather Dubbeldam and her life/business partner Kevin McIntosh began looking to purchase a home for their award-winning practice.

Because the commute to their leased quarters at Richmond Street West and Spadina Avenue was becoming tiresome, the couple decided that, ideally, their new building should allow them to walk to work. That set the parameters to Bathurst Street to the east, Dufferin Street to the west, north to St. Clair Avenue and south to Dundas Street (although they admit Dundas might have been a little too far). Problem was, much of what was available was small and their staff was growing: "A lot of these little storefronts on main streets were two storey, sometimes three, long and narrow, no windows [on the sides]," Ms. Dubbeldam says, "and we couldn't make the numbers work."

To make matters worse, the heated Toronto market meant that many of those too-small buildings they'd toured in 2015 had gone up in price by 30 per cent or 40 per cent a year later.

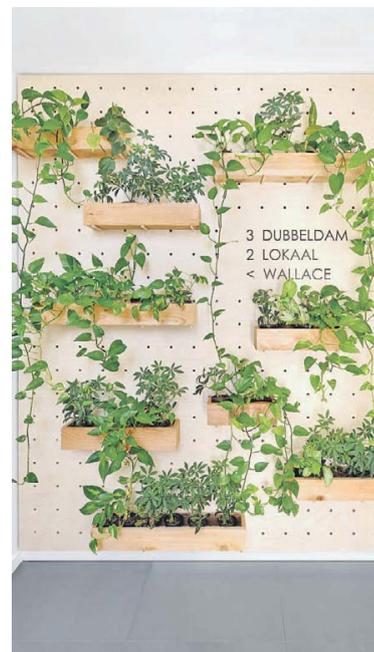
Finally, the pair spotted a skinny, but long, three-storey, corner building – meaning lots of windows – at the gateway to Corso Italia. "It was in horrible condition, absolutely unsafe in some areas," Ms. Dubbeldam says.

"And Heather was thinking: 'This is perfect,'" her husband says with a laugh. Why? Because to an architect tuned into sustainability, as well as healthy neighbourhoods, it's a drag to rip out perfectly good millwork only because it doesn't suit one's needs. Luckily, this grand, somewhat neglected 100-year-old dame had no good millwork to speak of.

On the exterior, the building sported some pebbly stucco on the front (complete with arches) and tired, graffitied brickwork on the side. Inside, there was asbestos-laden plaster in some spots and rotting floorboards where a former ground-floor florist's coolers had parked for decades. Other floors weren't in



The office space for Dubbeldam Architecture + Design has a larger corner window that offers a nearly seamless view of the street.



much better shape.

After some minor demolition and a year of planning and permitting, the Dubbeldam office got to work, with the knowledge that the firm would eventually occupy the top floor, and that the two retail spaces, front and rear, would remain, as would the small basement residential unit, since this would indeed "make the numbers work."

But beyond that, what sort of retail would create a richer experience for locals?

"We really wanted to have a community hub, so getting a coffee shop in here was absolutely essential," answers Mr. McIntosh, a self-confessed "coffeeholic." Ironically, Mr. McIntosh had drawn up a list of his 10 favourite indie coffee shops and was working through contacting them when the owner of Wallace Espresso (who was on the list) walked into the temporary office Dubbeldam was renting a few blocks away.

As for the retail facing St. Clair, the pair knew they didn't want a tenant who would place frosted film on the glass, Ms. Dubbeldam says: "We entertained at least 50 different people ... hair salons, weed shops, a real estate agent, lots of doctors and physiotherapy clinics. But we wanted something that was a bit more community-based." The marketing agency they chose, Dog and Pony Studios, is "very community involved," says Mr. McIntosh, who is also vice-chair of the Corso Italia BIA.

While the original plan for the second floor had been to offer it raw, Mr. McIntosh's love of co-working spaces won the day (he's involved in the co-working community), despite the tight construction budget. So, for Lokaal (Dutch for "local," since Ms. Dubbeldam is half Dutch), they created a "cheap and cheerful" space with exposed brick walls and some IKEA-hacks using their own elbow grease, sweat and tears.

Not that the average person would notice; a walkabout offers up a luxurious, textured wall by Kathryn Walter's Felt Studio, a big, professional presentation area facing St. Clair, interesting ecofelt desk-dividers Dubbeldam created post-COVID-19 and a cozy communal kitchen where desk-jockeys and office-renters can swap stories – in fact, one of Lokaal's desk-renters is a building envelope consultant Dubbeldam now works with.

And speaking of building envelopes, what was once a hodgepodge of mostly small windows on all floors has become a logical grouping of large and extra-large windows, with many operable to create cross-ventilation. And once the brick was repaired on the front façade – it had been badly damaged by the application of stucco decades ago – the entire building was tinted a warm grey. To keep things playful, each window sports a fake drop-shadow, but cast in a different direction.

The largest window, of course, belongs to the Dubbeldam office – a lovely composition of Baltic birch ply, ecofelt and exposed brick – where a steel post was inserted to create an almost-seamless corner unit with a commanding view of the street. As Mr. McIntosh looks down onto that street, he explains that while Corso Italia was bursting with small retailers, such as shoe stores and coffee shops in the "heyday" of 1970s and 80s, today 60 per cent of the storefronts contain services that snuff out street life.

But using design to "transform communities" can make a difference, Ms. Dubbeldam says: "I think this building was a bit of a catalyst in terms of people thinking about this neighbourhood differently, there has been a lot of great things happening and we were at the starting point of the transformation, the second wave of Corso Italia."

Ask anyone queuing up for espresso and they'd probably agree.