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BUSINESS BREAKING NEWS

Winnipeg Free Press - ONLINE EDITION

It's not just bold, but beautiful

Electric Railway Chambers is a downtown jewel

By: Murray McNeill
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TREVOR.HAGAN@FREEPRESS.MB.CA [Enlarge Image](#)

Lions are on guard at the Electric Railway Chamber building at the corner of Notre Dame and Portage Avenue.

From time to time, the Free Press profiles one of Winnipeg's prominent or interesting commercial buildings. Here is the latest entry in that series:

The lion in the lobby should learn to relax.

There's a statue of a lion in the lobby of the Electric Railway Chambers Building on Notre Dame Avenue, and the poor creature looks like he's carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.



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Linda Capar in the marble lobby of the Electric Railway Chambers building. TREVOR.HAGEN@FREEPRESS.MB.CA

Avison Young real estate agent Linda Capar has no idea why the lion looks so worried. She said it can't be because of concern about the future of one of the city's oldest office buildings.

Capar handles the leasing for the 96-year-old complex. She said that not only is it considered one of the city's finest heritage structures, but also one of its most successful Class C office buildings.

Capar said there's only one vacancy in the 11-storey, 71,000-square-foot building, that's for a 900-square-foot office that just became available.

And given the building's track record, it likely won't stay vacant for long. Capar said she's been the listing agent since 1997, "and we've been pretty much running full occupancy that whole time."

There's also no reason to think that will change because the building's three main tenants are locked into long-term leases.

And two of them — the provincial departments of Culture, Heritage, Tourism and Sport, and Education, Citizenship and Youth — occupy eight of the building's 11 floors, while the third — NRG Research — leases two.

That leaves just one floor for multi-tenant use. And with the exception of that 900-square-foot office, the rest of the floor is also fully leased.

Capar and Cindy Tugwell, executive director of Heritage Winnipeg, said it's only fitting that the provincial heritage department has its office in the Electric Railway Chambers Building.

"I would say it's definitely a landmark building," Tugwell said.

"It symbolizes the history of our city... and to me, it also signifies the entrance to the Exchange District."

She's also impressed with the condition of the building.

"It's a fantastic building. I've been in pretty well most of the offices and they're all very well-maintained."

She said the building's high occupancy rate must have something to do with that.

"The fuller a building is, the more you maintain it and the more you invest in it."

One of the building's previous owners — Triple S Realty — spent several hundred thousand dollars in the 1980s on refurbishing the exterior of the building.

An acid wash was used to clean the granite and terra cotta walls, and 6,000 ornamental lights on the front facade were restored and hooked up to a timer.

Commercial real estate agent Helmut Sass, who owned Triple S at the time, said it was probably the first time since it was built that the exterior of the building was cleaned. He said

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it looked like a new building once the cleaning was completed.

Sass said that at its peak in the 1980s, Triple S owned 27 buildings in downtown Winnipeg, including the Grain Exchange Building, the Hamilton Building, and the heritage building at 177 Lombard Ave.

But the Electric Railway Chambers building was always one of his favourite. "The inside was unbelievable. In those days, they even lined the stairways with marble!" he said.

"I wish we could have kept it, because I really liked the aesthetics of it and the architecture."

Tugwell said the impressive thing about the Electric Railway Chamber Building is that while the interior and the mechanical systems have been updated and modernized over the years, the key historical features have also been painstakingly preserved.

That includes the Italian marble floors and wainscoting in the front lobby, hallways and washrooms, the ornamental iron and brass doors from the original cage elevators, and of course, the lion statue in the lobby.

Capar said they nearly lost the statue about five years ago when someone tried to steal it.

Maybe that's where that worried look came from, she added with a laugh.

"Now, it's bolted down."

Know of any interesting trends or developments in the local office, retail, or industrial real estate sectors? Let real estate reporter Murray McNeill know at the e-mail address below, or at 697-7254.

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