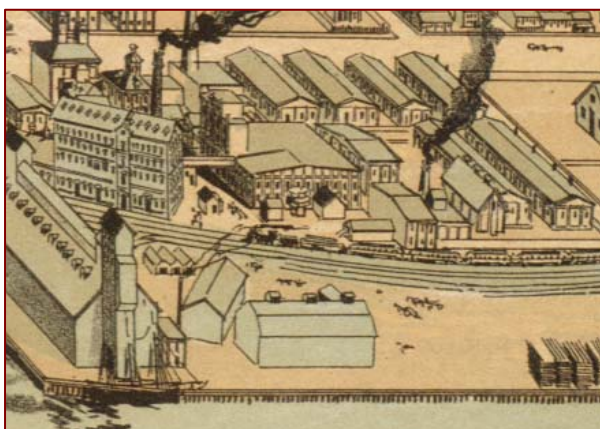


Adaptive Reuse: Buildings 49 & 50 Young Centre for the Performing Arts

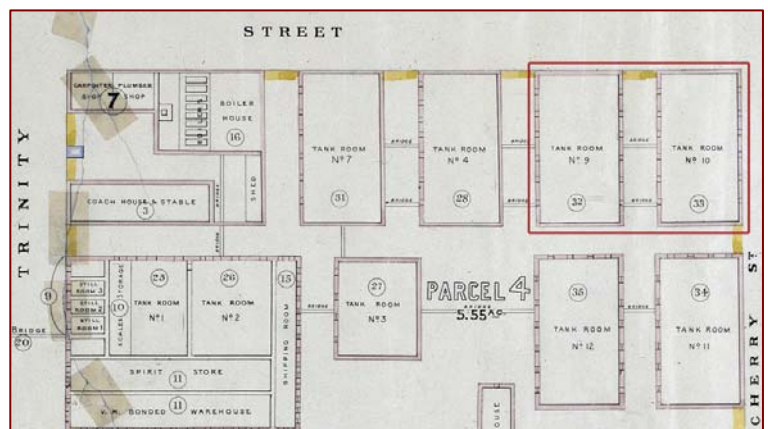


Day and Night at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts

The Distillery District provides a spectacular showcase for different approaches to the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings. Among the more ambitious and striking examples involves the transformation of two Victorian tank storage houses into a modern theatrical centre for the performing arts. The challenge here, as elsewhere, was to honour the heritage structures while accommodating the functional needs of a completely different, modern use.



Tank Houses (right), 1892 TPL



Tank Houses on G&W Plan, 1889 DHD

For over a hundred years, Buildings 49 and 50 stored Gooderham & Worts alcohol in great copper tanks. Known as Tank Houses 9 and 10, the original structures were designed as a pair of free-standing structures in 1888 by David Roberts, Jr. Their construction was part of the great campaign to increase storage facilities to meet the Government of Canada's 1885 regulation that whisky had to be aged for two years. (Before that, whisky could be – and often was – consumed almost immediately.)

During this period, about a dozen barrel and tank storehouses were constructed at various locations around the site. Buildings 49 and 50 completed the north side of what became known as Tank House Lane.

Like their neighbours, Buildings 49 and 50 are essentially one-storey brick boxes resting on narrow stone bases and covered by slightly pitched roofs. Their red-brick walls are divided into projecting piers and recessed panels that are surmounted by a decorative sawtooth brick course running along the top of the panels. Each building is punctuated by green-shuttered windows where needed. Storing alcohol, of course, required relatively little light, but high security. As a result, there are no windows on the Mill Street facade, protecting the alcohol from possible intruders and providing a pleasing definition to the south side of that street. Most of the light filtered through windows on the east or west facades. All these features are common on the site, endowing it with the harmony and distinctive Victorian industrial feel later appreciated by heritage advocates.

Both buildings functioned as tank houses for their entire distillery working lives, storing whisky in the early days, and other products in later days, especially after whisky distilling halted in 1957. A 1986 plan indicates that each contained 28, individually numbered tanks standing on wooden decks supported by stone or concrete bases about a metre high. The huge tanks – 12-feet high and 10-feet in diameter – were arranged in four north-south rows of seven tanks each. The tanks were covered by tops made of maple, connected by a network of wooden catwalks, and lit by strategically placed, barred windows about 10-feet above ground.



Full Tank Houses photographed by Larry Turner, ca. 1986

Building 49: 28 tall tanks on stone bases

Building 50: catwalks among the tank tops

Individual tanks could store about 56,000 litres and their combined capacity was an astonishing 3.2 million litres of alcohol. When all distilling was halted in the summer of 1990, the old copper tanks in Building 49 (Tank House 9) contained industrial alcohol. And the relatively new steel tanks in Building 50 (Tank House 10) contained “fine alcohol,” such as brandy and rum used for blending. Occasionally wine would be stored for either Brights or Andres.

On June 4, 1990, the last alcohol was distilled, ending 158 years of continuous industrial activity at Gooderham & Worts and plunging the recently designated National Heritage Site into a period of uncertainty. The tanks were removed in the 1990s, leaving the buildings with only tank bases and rows of 10-inch squared posts.

When Cityscape purchased the area in late 2001 to transform the vacated Victorian industrial heritage site into a vibrant centre for arts and entertainment, negotiations to create a major theatre complex in Buildings 49 and 50 began with the George Brown Theatre School and Soulpepper Theatre. Such a complex would enliven a dark and remote corner of the heritage site – day and night, in winter as well as summer.

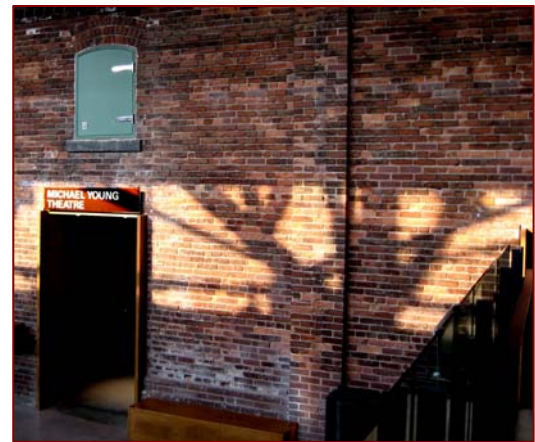
Negotiations were successful. The firm of Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects was hired to design a 44,000 square-foot theatre complex containing four flexible indoor theatres, rehearsal studios, classrooms, wardrobe and administrative spaces. On June 4, 2004 – exactly 14 years after distilling had been halted at G&W – Albert Schultz, founding artistic director of Soulpepper Theatre, and Anne Sado, president of George Brown College, presided over the ground-breaking ceremony for the Young Centre for the Performing Arts.



Looking south along east wall of atrium



Window in west wall of Building 50



Natural light plays on west wall of atrium

Eighteen months later, on January 15, 2006, the Young Centre opened to rave reviews from theatre-goers, Distillery District visitors, and heritage advocates alike. It was clear that the architects had performed their tasks with style, subtlety, and respect for the industrial heritage of the site. For example, traditional materials were not only retained, but celebrated (e.g., exposed red-brick walls, segmental-headed wood windows with metal bars and shutters), construction techniques common to the site were emulated (e.g. rough, timber-truss support systems), and an industrial aesthetic was reinforced (e.g., using utilitarian finishes such as concrete floors and exposed masonry walls).

Modern conversion required sensitive restructuring of the heritage spaces, including the dramatic insertion of a two-storey lobby into the laneway that had separated the two tank houses. The architects described their creation:

The lobby, which is the heart of the Centre, is captured in the existing space between the buildings by spanning a new roof and clerestory supported by massive neo-primitive Douglas fir timber trusses across the bearing walls of the respective Tank houses 9 and 10. This contemporary intervention appears to levitate over the historic masonry walls. The walls remain deliberately raw and untreated, their surfaces and textures animated by the diurnal rhythms of natural daylight and, in the evenings, by artificial light sources strategically positioned to create dramatic and festive effects.

Lofty language to describe the feeling of light, history, and occasion created by the atrium. Clearly, as a result of the collaboration among client, architect, and distillery developer, new life began flowing into another part of the National Historic Site.

Many thanks to Jim White for sharing his knowledge about the tank houses and their contents.

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, sg@thedistillerydistrict.com.

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit www.distilleryheritage.com.

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