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Heritage building to get remake

By: Murray McNeill

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A prominent downtown heritage building near the heart of Winnipeg's financial district is about to get a multimillion-dollar makeover.

The Brick's Fine Furniture building at 111 Lombard Ave. has been sold to a group of investors that plans to spend millions of dollars over the next two years to upgrade the six-storey, 118,000-square-foot structure to LEED Silver energy-efficiency standards. But exactly how much hasn't yet been determined.

"We're still at the very beginning stages and we're working with an architect," said Joe Diner, a veteran commercial real estate agent with DTZ Barnicke Winnipeg and one of the listing agents for the building.

"The architect has come up with about half a dozen (design) concepts... but I'm convinced it will be the highest-quality office space in the city."

Diner said the purchasers are represented by United Equities Group, a Winnipeg-based property management and development firm that is a division of yet another local property manager and developer -- MPN Holdings Ltd.

MPN Holdings/United Equities also owns and redeveloped the five-storey heritage building at 93 Lombard, next door to the Brick's building. They built and co-own Wellington West Capital Inc.'s four-storey corporate headquarters at the foot of the same block.

Diner said he didn't know who else was in the group of investors that bought the Brick's Building. Wellington West was rumoured to be a member of the group, but officials for that firm and United Equity could not be reached Wednesday for comment.

Diner said the plan is to upgrade the building to Canadian Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Silver-plus standards for energy-efficient and environmentally sustainable buildings.

Among other things, that will mean upgrading the mechanical systems and making extensive use of recycled building materials during construction.

Brick's Fine Furniture had owned the building since 1976, and recently spent more than \$200,000 to have the exterior bricks repointed and the roof replaced, company co-owner Cynthia Brick said Wednesday.

Brick said she and her husband, Fred, hadn't even listed the building for sale. It was only after being approached earlier this year about selling that they decided that might be a good idea because of the spiralling cost of owning and maintaining such a large building.

Brick admits she has mixed feelings about giving up the building.

"We've been here 32 years," she said. "It's like giving up your baby."

She said she worked out an agreement with the new owners that will enable Brick's and three other tenants in the building -- Art Upholstery, Marx Furniture Manufacturing Co., and Omega Posture Systems -- to remain until

Sept. 15 of next year. And her son, Ira, who operates Ira's Deli in the basement, has reached an agreement with the new owners to remain there for another 20 years, she said.

Brick said she'd like to stay beyond Sept. 15, but she's not sure whether that would fit in with the new owner's long-term plans.

If Brick's Fine Furniture has to move, she said she'll look for small quarters -- about 5,000 square feet -- somewhere else in the Exchange District.

"I like being here," she said, adding one possibility might be to relocate the store to the main floor of one of the new condominium developments on nearby Waterfront Drive.

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