

# Young Toronto 'treasure' restores heritage buildings with care, love

Winston Churchill once said, "We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us."

Such wisdom applies to 31-year-old real estate developer Michael Tippin.

Developer? No. That's not what Tippin is about. The word suggests trade-in land, wrecking balls, cranes, towering structures.

Tippin collects old buildings. He restores them with love. And, in the process, is shaped by them. An excerpt from Tippin's bio says it all: "Michael has a passionate interest in historic urban architecture and neighbourhoods."

That passion is currently focused on an important corner of downtown Toronto, the eastern stretch of Wellington and Front Streets, a precinct anchored by the Flatiron building to the west and the St. Lawrence Market to the east.

Tippin now owns the Flatiron. But what was known as the Gooderham building when it opened in 1892 is not Tippin's first purchase in the historic district. He started in 1997 with another important landmark, the Milburn Building at 47 Colborne St., a commercial terrace designed by architect E. J. Lennox in 1886.

Tippin talks lovingly of the work of Lennox, whose legacy includes Toronto's Old City Hall. Tippin is able to trace the intricate detail of the Milburn facade to a host of other Lennox designs he has searched out across the city.

After adding the Flatiron building to his portfolio, Tippin picked up 87 Front St. E. and then 65 Front St. E. The first was constructed in 1858, the other in 1872. Both are corner properties on the same block and Tippin's aim is to gradually acquire the entire street frontage as adjacent older buildings come on the market.

In the meantime, Tippin is carefully restoring his small but growing real estate empire.

After graduating from York University in 1988 with a business degree, the youthful Tippin gained several years of experience with two major real estate investment and management firms. He branched out on his own in the mid-1990s, buying a handful of small residential and commercial properties in midtown Toronto before concentrating his efforts in the Flatiron neighbourhood.

Last week, Tippin took me on a tour of his cherished holdings, which he carefully tends more as close friends than vehicles for profit.

He quickly points out he's not renovating his charges. It's restoration he's into. He seeks out old photographs so any renewal remains true to the original. "You have to let the neighbourhood tell you what to do," Tippin says. "You can't change history. History is preserved in the walls of these buildings."

After removing a century of dark stain from the wood panels in the Flatiron Building, Tippin hired artists to restore the finish. He proudly points out that new windows in the Leadley building at 87 Front St. E. are constructed of wood in the original fashion. He hangs a carefully chosen antique light fixture in a window in the stairwell of the Flatiron building so that it can be seen from the street and enjoyed by passers-by.

And, it's a family affair. Tippin's wife Anne attends to much of the detail of restoration.

It's not that Tippin is not hard-headed about his babies. He sees himself as an animator, bringing together commercial tenants and historic rentals to the benefit of both sides. He leases at upscale rates so "what's inside supports history for the public."

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He tells prospective tenants how they can make a statement and burnish their image by identifying with an historic landmark and an historic neighbourhood as against burying their identity in a modern office tower.

It works. The 47 Colborne building is fully rented. Redwood, a British publisher, has moved into the newly restored Leadley building. Tippin convinced the LCBO to remain on the ground floor at the corner of Market and Front Streets.

Tippin revels in the community he's fashioning. "I'm in this for the people," he tells me. "They're so interesting. The buildings are nothing without the people."

One that got away is the former Toronto Dominion bank branch at the corner of Wellington and Church Streets. Tippin negotiated for the property only to find it traded to an entrepreneur and converted into a garish Pizza Pizza outlet.

But Tippin is here "here for the long haul."

Such corners of Toronto are safe while in the hands of the likes of Tippin. But we must be careful not to let him get away. He's already broadening his horizons and eyeing historic districts in Miami and San Francisco.

We have national treasures.

Heritage Toronto should designate Michael Tippin a Toronto treasure. And offer him the freedom of the city to allow him to work his magic in other historic nooks.

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**PRESERVING HISTORY:** The Flatiron Building in 1998 (top) and 1898 (above) is the focus of Front Street area restoration by Michael Tippin. "History is preserved in the walls of these buildings," Tippin says