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Building George Brown
With David Clark

By Greg Dalgetty

When You Build It...

Building Origins

238 Portage Avenue was constructed in the early 1960s on the site of what was originally Winnipeg's main post office. Joseph Dreman, a grain trader, headed a consortium of buyers who purchased the former post office and turned it into a six-storey, mixed-use building. Dreman remained the owner of the building until his death at the age of 90 in the year 2000. In 2002, the building was officially named I. J. Dreman Place, although its name was removed when Royal Canadian Properties bought the building.

The building at 238 Portage Avenue in downtown Winnipeg, formerly known as Dreman Place, has undergone quite the change in recent years—both physically and mechanically.

Once exclusively an office building, the top five floors of the six-storey structure were converted into loft-style luxury condos in 2014. Today, the only remnants of the old building are the original concrete floors and walls. Everything else—including the plumbing and heating system—has been upgraded.

Larry Stefanec, president of Parsons Plumbing and Heating, and his team paired with MidCan Hydronics to install the domestic hot water, space heating and air makeup systems for the building.

"Winnipeg has a lot of up-and-coming condo projects where they're trying to get people downtown," Stefanec explained. "In the next five to 10 years, there's going to be more space offered for people to live downtown. It's like *Field of Dreams*—if you build it, they will come."

"In the next five to 10 years, there's going to be more space offered for people to live downtown."



Photos: John Woods

Out with the Old...

Before Stefanec entered the picture, the entirety of 238 Portage Avenue had been serviced by a large fire-tube boiler.

"It did the entire tower, the retail space and the parkade," he said.

But with the building now being separated for different purposes—commercial space on the ground floor and residential space above—Stefanec proposed installing separate systems.

"That was my proposal, and the owner agreed with me, to facilitate the lower operating costs and to separate the systems instead of having one big system," Stefanec said. "We were able to separate it quite easily and go high-efficiency, which obviously saves on operating costs."

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Less Is More

Stefanec has found that the smaller footprints of today's high-efficiency boilers have been a major selling point.

"All the boilers we're putting in have smaller footprints. We're doing a couple projects with big apartment buildings, and the footprint has been cut in half. That allows us to come up with a nice proposal for the owner. There's the space-saving aspect, efficiency, lower operating costs and installation efficiency."

Smaller equipment can also mean less costly installations.

"Something that would've cost half a million dollars can now be \$100,000 less just because the installation is easier. We don't have to bring in cranes or other big moving equipment that costs thousands and thousands of dollars."



Changing Times

The original tenants of 238 Portage Avenue were mostly financial institutions. Those tenants left as Winnipeg's downtown grew, and the building was mostly empty by the late 1990s—only Peace Hills Trust remained. Following Joseph Dreman's death, Sherrill Hershberg, Dreman's daughter, took over and managed to attract new tenants. The building even became a venue for the Winnipeg Fringe Festival.

The Sunrex Group of Companies purchased the building in 2011 and decided to convert the ground floor into two retail/commercial spaces and each of the above floors into a single, executive-style condo unit. The condos range from 1,250 to 2,000 square feet.



In with the New

- ▶ Stefanec's team selected a high-efficiency 400,000 BTUH condensing boiler to provide space heating for the condo units.

"We had the previous piping from the boiler room that went all the way down and did the main area, which wasn't being sold yet," Stefanec explained. "We needed to keep the pipes from freezing, obviously, so we tagged off of the boiler with a mixing system we designed ourselves to get enough heat to keep the temperature above zero."

A Satisfied Customer

Stefanec had promised a system that would deliver lower operating costs, and he came through in the end. "The owners have said there's been between 20 and 24 per cent savings in operating costs," he reported. "Our company is based on relationships. We manage to have some good partnerships with owners and property management companies that use us on a regular basis. They trust our judgment and look to us for the ability to get things done and research products."

The boiler was paired with an indirect water heater to provide space heating to the condos. For a time, it also fed the building's makeup air unit, but prior to the completion of the project, a 500,000 BTUH boiler was added, and it became the sole heat source for the makeup air unit.

"We wanted to split the system between the two titles so that the condos were on their own system," Stefanec recalled. "We ended up using the new boiler and connecting it directly to the makeup air unit and abandoning the old piping that ran from the other area."