

History at Work RG - June 2001

“It’s one thing to restore an old building,” notes architect Ian Gordon, a director of Entasis Architecture, “but it has to have a useful life.” Crow Lane House, which was renovated by Entasis last year, is a case in point.

The building, which dates in part from the 18th century and has housed a coffee house or bakery on the premises for most of its existence, is a Hamilton landmark at the Foot of the Lane and marks the beginning of East Broadway. The eastern section was originally used for storing hay and a hoist used for lifting hay from delivering carts, can still be seen above the modern bakery entrance. Once earmarked for demolition when East Broadway was redeveloped in the 1980s, Crow Lane House today remains very much a viable working property.

The owners, Ms. Hart and Mrs. Morley, still live in the upstairs apartment while below, the Crow Lane Bakery shop has been opened up into an attractive glass and tile retail space. Next door, financial and insurance consultants ISIS Ltd have squirreled offices, boardrooms filing cabinets and desks into every corner of both floors. The space also doubles as the headquarters for the company’s charitable arm, the ISIS Foundation and is fully wired for information age yards of cables running under the newly installed mahogany floors.

A middle section remains undeveloped at this stage but has been earmarked as a coffee shop by the bakery. Historically this would bring the property full circle as a Mrs. Mary Wright once ran a coffee house here and, according to Sister Jean Kennedy’s Biography of a Colonial Town, in 1790 by the Royal Commission set up to acquire land for the planned new town of Hamilton.

As Gordon stresses, the “useful life” of a renovated building needs to be a long-term one because of the costs involved in trying to blend old world charm with modern facilities. “In this particular case, if this hasn’t become office space, it probably would not have been viable to carry out this type of renovation.

“We tried to respect the character of the building even though that gave us a few challenges. For example, the roof is not a truce pitch and runs to several different angles.”

The space where ISIS is now based, says Gordon, was in “abysmal” condition when work started. Entasis virtually gutted the building, replacing the termite-ridden floor and adding a stained pine staircase. The original access to upstairs was via exterior steps on the western end. At the owner’s request the stairs have been retained, although a windows has replaced the door.

“The clients have been very sensitive,” notes Gordon. “This is not a listed building so they needn’t have done what they did. For example, it would have been easier to take up the large original cedar beam on the ground floor but they took the time and money to keep it and retain the character of the building.” Keeping the beam involved specially treating the wood to meet Fire Department standards for fireproofing.

In addition to modern wiring, the office has been enhanced by attractive lighting and use of colour. “We chose earthy tones to help with the psychology of the space,” adds Gordon. Track lighting was used not only to allow light to be focused for specific tasks but aesthetically it allowed to open beams to be retained instead of installing a false ceiling and harsh fluorescent lighting.

“Frankly, it’s my opinion that this should be a listed building,” says Gordon. “With the way the landscaping of East Broadway has matured, I think it makes a great and interesting entrance to the city.”

CNK Enterprises carried out the construction and interior decoration was by Michael Mello.