

# Canadian Brownfields Case Studies

## The Tannery Building



Source: The-Communtech-Hub-2.JPG

Figure 1: The fully revitalized Tannery Building, full of office and retail uses with state of the art industrial heritage style renovations - Downtown Kitchener

### PROJECT SUMMARY

The Tannery Building, Figure 1, located within the heart of Kitchener, currently sits as a cornerstone development within a previously industrial area, now thriving tech hub. Originally home to the Lang Tanning Company, the project has become a representation of the city’s industrial history and growing innovation sector. Excavation and infill provided an efficient and effective remediation strategy to address the extent and diversity of contaminants within the site. Another key component was the role of the city investing in brownfield redevelopment financing assistance, as well as the establishment of district based zoning that allowed this project to evolve as a result of other developments and signal future development to formulate a new part of the city.

### Historical Background

The Lang Tanning company was one of the first industries in Canada and the city of Kitchener. The industrial giant operated in 1848, closing in the 1950s; the original Tannery was burnt down in 1853, and rebuilt in its new location <sup>1</sup>. Mr. Lang himself became part of the 1920’s City Growth plan board that looked to developing Kitchener as an industrial city with the Tannery playing an important role in that

development. By the mid 1920s there were around 15 Tanneries operating in the Waterloo Region, exemplifying the important role this industry played in the economic development of the area <sup>2</sup>. Founded by Rheinhold Lang, the factory served as the largest supplier of sole leather in the British Empire, playing a significant role in the provision of leather products during both World Wars. Lang was later elected to city council, contributing towards the “Factory

### QUICK FACTS

**Location**

Kitchener, Ontario

**Project Type**

Industrial Building Adaptive Reuse

**Site Size**

2.2 Hectares

**Land Uses**

Commercial Office and Retail

**Keywords**

Adaptive Reuse, Industrial Cleanup, Heritage Conservation

**Website**

<https://www.zehrgroup.ca/projects/the-tannery>

**Awards**

2011 Project of the Year  
2014 Peoples Choice, Best Project Of 15 Years

**Project address**

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Case studies were prepared as a course assignment by students enrolled in PL8312/PLE865: Brownfields & Sustainable Development, School of Urban and Regional Planning, Toronto Metropolitan University (Winter 2024). Information for the case studies was obtained from online sources, available reports, and, in some cases, site visits and direct communication with stakeholders.

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Policy”, developing tax breaks for new industrial enterprises<sup>3</sup>. The factory ceased operations in 1954 due to competition from synthetic manufacturing, and was sold to a contracting firm in 1973<sup>4</sup>. By 1979 it was the last standing building of what was once a booming tanning industry. As it stands now, the building serves as a tech hub within the innovation district of Kitchener as one of many recycled industrial buildings<sup>3</sup>.

### Site Characteristics

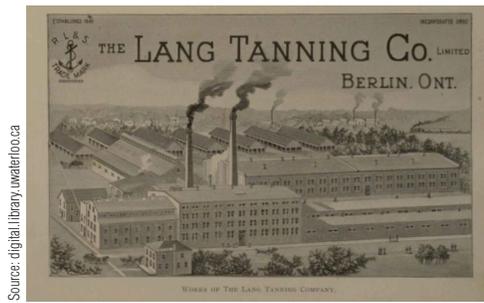
The initial site conditions included a mass structure of 13 interconnected buildings on a total land area of the site of 2.2 hectares, isolated within a city single block (Figure 2). The original building posed challenges for the assessment and excavation of the site as the building covered the majority of the property, forcing the project team to produce strategic assessments regarding planned removal and preservation of different building portions.

### Cleanup

Record of site condition number 45818 was filed on December 12th, 2008<sup>5</sup>. Phase 1 and 2 environmental assessments confirmed contaminants mainly pertaining to industrial activities including waste metals such as copper, lead, chromium, cobalt, barium, and zinc, along with petroleum hydrocarbons F3 and F4, and other harmful chemicals that were used in the processes of the previous industrial usage of the site<sup>5</sup>.

To address the extent of contamination, the method of excavation, disposal, and infill was selected as a basic, cost-effective approach for a site of this size and conditions. Completely removing the soil allowed for the assessment and decontamination to occur off-site, while infilled clean soil would then present the opportunity for more rapid development and site usage. The total extent of this cleanup resulted in the excavation of 787m<sup>3</sup> of soil being removed and taken off-site, entirely replaced with clean soil<sup>5</sup>. The risk assessment and continuous groundwater monitoring processes were used to identify any additional risk involved with the scope of development and ensure monitoring of any potential remaining contaminants within the site.

The total remediation removed the contaminants identified within the site to a full depth, potable water standard, as identified



Source: digital.library.uwaterloo.ca



Source: Media archive.com

Figure 2: A collection of historical sketch images depicting the original Lang Tanning Company industrial building

within the record of site condition under Ontario regulation 153/04, section 36 standards<sup>6</sup>. The intention of remediation was a proposed commercial/community use and was certified as such on 22, October 2008. The report confirmed that there are no longer any risk posing contaminants, as all remaining quantities are within regulation standards.

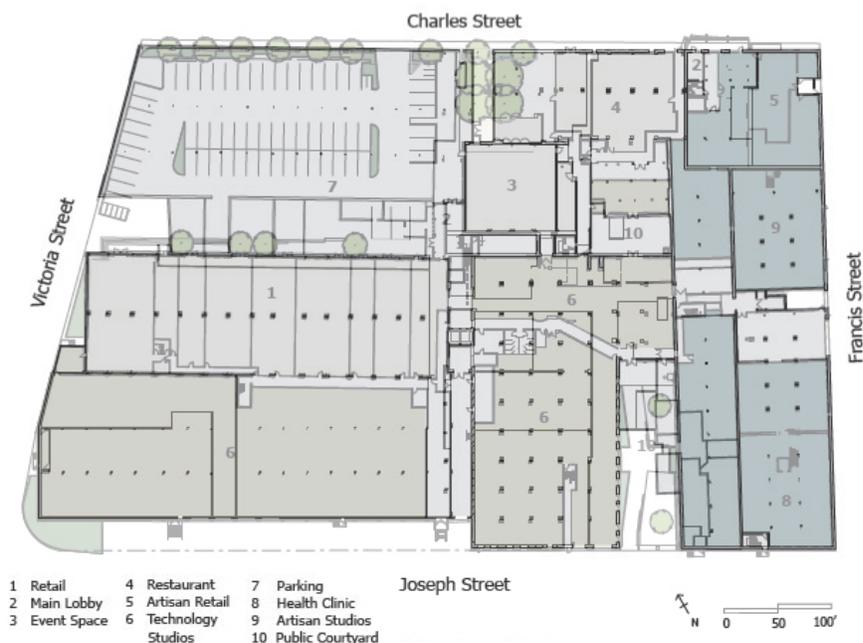
### Building Preservation

Another key component of the revitalization and cleanup of the site was the strategic design and planned adaptive reuse of the original structure's remaining building. The project team tasked with this utilized principles of RAW design in collaboration with Zehr architects, considering strategic preservation of the building to serve the future intent. This involved the identification of key structural components and repeated surveying and monitoring of the building throughout the removal of the northwest portion<sup>12</sup>. To adequately serve proposed commercial retail uses, the space was drastically

opened up. Core elements of bike racks and computer servers were brought with the intent of maintaining the industrial heritage and character of the building in reusing its core structure, all while providing key elements that would enhance the space to serve as office retail for targeted tech and innovation residents<sup>12</sup>.

As it sits currently, the development includes 9 of the original buildings, up to a maximum of 4 stories, totaling 332,554 square feet (Figure 3). This is divided into 92% office space and 8% retail commercial space including a cafe, restaurant, and hair salon, among other businesses. The development also added a parking lot to serve the new retail uses and a variety of indoor and outdoor public common spaces<sup>7,8</sup>. Located within the downtown core, the site lies within walking distance of urban public transit and the regional Kitchener GO station, along with being within the commercial core boundary<sup>9</sup>.

Figure 3: Historical building layout of the original Tannery Building overlaid with the proposed building layout (in colour)



Source: Architecturalrecord.com

## Planning and Redevelopment

The Lang Tannery project had a number of policies working in its favour. Both the Municipality of Kitchener and the Region of Waterloo have incentives and policies to support brownfield redevelopment<sup>10,11</sup>. Heavy involvement from the municipalities sent a strong signal that development would be supported immediately and in the future. The change in zoning from industrial to mixed-use allowed for greater flexibility in development and more financial opportunities. Various other developments and shifts in the urban landscape including the moving in of the University of Waterloo's School of Pharmacy, Wilfred Laurier University's Faculty of Social Work, and the projected future (now existent) regional LRT line. In each case, these adjacent planning shifts and developments both supported Cadan Inc.'s interest, justification, and ease of promoting the site as a potential revitalization opportunity. However, one policy barrier was the preservation of the industrial heritage of the tannery while designing a space for offices and community programs. Mixed-use design in combination with good public space allowed for good access and movement within the site, increasing economic opportunities.

Strategic planning and investing in other post-secondary institutional developments, formulation of the tech district, and future transit development provoked interest and value in the site. Kitchener and the Region of Waterloo moved post-secondary school facilities to and

near the site and started an adult digital media club on-site, giving businesses on site more access to workers and consumers<sup>12</sup>. This is an excellent example of supporting brownfield development by expanding investment to the surrounding area. Overall, good brownfield policy promotes not only the initial development, but supports the site and surrounding area over time. Remediation and revitalization benefit the specific site as well as the surrounding area and vice-versa.

## Financing

Due to the extensive contamination of the site, the costs for remediation and redevelopment were significant, leaving the area unviable for pure market development. In order to spur development and ensure that brownfield sites are remediated, Kitchener and the Region of Waterloo have many incentive programs to aid private developers in brownfield remediation<sup>10</sup>. These programs include reductions in development charges, tax incentives, and financial assistance in remediation. The Lang Tannery development took advantage of these programs to redevelop the site. Additionally, the municipalities invested in the surrounding area to ensure that the site and surrounding area would see long-term economic benefits.

Kitchener's financial incentives included a tax levy of 1.25% for 10 years, \$891,000 towards remediating the site, \$500,000 to create a digital media club for adults, and \$30 million to create a

location for the Waterloo Pharmacy School<sup>11</sup>. In the surrounding area, the municipality spent \$6.5 million to move the Wilfred Laurier Social Work School near the site. Overall, redevelopment of the site cost approximately \$56 Million<sup>13</sup>. Investments from the municipality successfully removed immediate barriers and ensured the long-term viability of the site. The Lang Tannery project is an excellent example of a successful public-private partnership that created a sustainable hub for residents and businesses.

## Lessons Learned

The Lang Tannery brownfield revitalization project was a success, winning multiple awards including the 2011 Brownie Award<sup>14</sup>. The success of this project was due to a variety of factors including cross-industry collaboration, effective policy, good planning, and a strong vision for the site. From a planning perspective, zoning changes allowed more freedom for developers to build on the site. While initial costs for remediation were high, joint funding from Kitchener and the Region of Waterloo made the cost of remediation more tenable for the developers<sup>12</sup>. A 10-year tax incentive in combination with creating schools and community activities in the area helped spur economic activity, further adding to the long-term feasibility of the project. The site's proximity to buses, trains, banks, schools, restaurants, coffee shops, and grocers has cemented the site into the community<sup>15</sup>. Future transit stations are still in development for the area showing the region's commitment to growing the site. What was once an old industrial building is now a hub for workers, customers, and residents to work, shop, and enjoy the once-contaminated space. The site has experienced dramatic changes over the past 150+ years, starting as a center for industrial development then becoming a symbol of a lost industry<sup>2</sup>.

As it currently stands, it is one of many sites within the area that celebrate the foundation of downtown Kitchener. This shows that what at the time can be a stable and productive industry can change over time due to new technologies and innovations. It is important that sites remain flexible to these changes and the ability for them to be converted be taken into account. Overall, strong financial incentives, good planning, and flexible policy were key to the successful remediation and redevelopment of the Lang Tannery brownfield site, giving a good example going forward of how other sites may also succeed.



Figure 4: A map sources from Allied REIT overviewing the current development within the neighbourhood context, showing transit connections, adjacent uses and other major innovation based properties

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## Endnotes

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