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HEARTWOOD PLACE

Core slabs are delivered to the Heartwood Place affordable housing site in Cambridge, Ont.

Building on brownfield land makes way for affordable housing complex

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When it comes to building on a brownfield, on-site contamination is often just part of the story. It's a reality a charitable organization in southwestern Ontario discovered when it embarked on converting an empty building.

Heartwood Place, which builds and manages affordable housing in the Waterloo Region, already had a facility in Kitchener and wanted to develop one in Cambridge, at 26 Ainslie Street South in downtown Galt.

The existing building, vacant for several years, had housed the *Cambridge Reporter* daily newspaper and an accompanying printing facility for 40 years. So it was almost certain there would be residues from inks used for printing. However, environmental studies revealed further contamination, including chemicals in the groundwater.

Mary Bales, Heartwood Place founder and board chair, said affordable housing needs to be built in urban centres rather than in suburban areas because tenants need to be close to public transportation and services. So, it's difficult to avoid brownfield properties.

"Our first building (in Kitchener) is around the corner from a bus terminal, this building (Cambridge) is across the street from a bus terminal, and our next one will probably be along a major bus route," Bales said.

Franz Environmental of Mississauga, which conducted environmental assessment and risk-management work, dealt with regulation, reviewed historical information, and undertook soil and groundwater investigations and testing as well as a human health and ecological risk assessment leading to a record of site condition and certificate of property use.

The site was being used for industrial purposes, so the change in land use required extensive environmental assessment, said Thomas Gnanayudam, a senior hydrogeologist with Franz Environmental.

The process proved costly and time consuming, with submissions to the Ontario Ministry of Environment followed by a flurry of comments back and forth.

Heartwood Place made an offer on the property in 2003 and worked with Franz Environmental for more than five years to obtain a record of site condition from the ministry.

Because fill brought in for site grading decades earlier came from foundries and contained lead, metal and brick, and the groundwater contained perchloroethylene and other chemicals, the project team opted for a risk assessment approach to manage contaminants on the site.

This methodology made particular sense given the relatively high bedrock. "The bedrock is not contaminated so there was no point in removing it — it's the groundwater eight metres below that's contaminated," Gnanayudam explained.

With the Grand River a block away, and the edge of the flood plain running through the property, work crews had to meet Grand River Conservation Authority flood plain requirements.

Crews also used a protective geotextile membrane beyond the building's exterior to contain contaminants.

And, because the *Recorder* building shared a wall with one neighbour, and there were multiple old foundations underneath, demolition needed to be done carefully.

Even with the seven-storey building, with 66 apartments, a café, community room and courtyard, finally occupied, Franz Environmental continues to monitor the soil and groundwater.

Premier Project Consultants of Kitchener served as project manager, co-ordinating design and tendering, overseeing demolition, construction and related activities. Company owner and president Al Way said construction and demolition personnel worked closely with environmental engineers to protect wells drilled to test the groundwater.

"From a construction aspect, that was probably the most difficult part of the job," Way said.

Way added that the various trades and sub-trades kicked in more than \$300,000 in donations to assist with financing, and government and philanthropic grants contributed significantly towards the project's estimated \$10.6-million cost.

The project has already attracted outside attention. At Canadian Brownfields in 2010 in November, the Canadian Urban Institute awarded Heartwood Place a Brownie for best small-scale project.

Glenn Miller, the institute's vice-president of education and research, said the project proves small organizations such as non-profit and charitable groups, and not just large developers, can take on a brownfield challenge.

"This would have been surprising even five years ago," Miller said. "It's quite an achievement and a reflection not just on the quality of the project but on the fact that the environment for improving a brownfield has improved."

Bales said developing a brownfield site is a long and costly process and it's important to have good environmental engineering and construction firms on board, along with solid management contracts to spell out roles, responsibilities and expectations.

"A lot of charitable organizations get into this kind of project and don't have the experience around the table," Bales said.

"Fortunately I have background in this and a strong board to support it, and we're thrilled with the outcome."



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