

# Beyond textbook 'period restoration'

Petrie Building and other Guelph heritage structures benefit from couple's commitment to community

BY PHIL ANDREWS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEAN PALMER

**K**irk Roberts and Peregrine Wood were doing online research from their living-room couch when they noted something Roberts terms "a funny coincidence."

They were looking at a family photo of A.B. Petrie, a former Guelph pharmacist, businessman, city councillor and bank president, when they realized they were just paces from the exact location where the yesteryear photo had been taken.

The couple had known for some time that their 19th-century home had once been Petrie's residence. But the photo underlined their connections with the former titan of Guelph society. After all, their online research involved a building Petrie had built in the 1880s – a locally infamous, long-derelict building Roberts and Wood were looking to purchase and save from ruin.

Roberts, 57, and Wood, 58, and their Tyrcahlen Partners Inc. firm have since done much to restore honour to Petrie's best-known legacy.

In fact, their years of work to restore the Petrie Building have earned national recognition to say nothing of abundant local praise. That's even though finishing touches remain to be done on the monumentally challenging project – by far the

most difficult and ambitious tackled by Tyrcahlen.

"I think we both get a thrill seeing that building lit up and occupied and active and vibrant. I think that was our goal from day one. Just to have activity happening and vibrancy," says Wood.

After reaching a state where the architecturally significant Wyndham Street structure was a local and national poster site for so-called "demolition by neglect," the site re-opened this year. It's a jewel of a building – again clad with a striking metal façade and alive with a craft-brewery business operating on its main floor and a bridal shop occupying the upper two floors.

"We're not into textbook 'period restoration,'" says Roberts. "We're into more rehabilitation of properties and trying to blend old and new, trying to create interesting new spaces that will last much longer than we do. Like something like the Petrie Building, it's been around for 135 years and hopefully, with this project, the bones are there to last at least that long again."

**I**f that sounds like something other than typical "developer-speak," it's not surprising. Roberts and Wood, spouses and principals in Tyrcahlen – a two-person operation – are atypical players in the realms of real-estate acquisition, restoration and property management.

Kirk Roberts and Peregrine Wood pose with the updated version of the iconic mortar and pestle on the roof of the Petrie Building on Wyndham Street in Guelph. The Basilica of Our Lady Immaculate can be seen in the background.



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Both pursued environmental studies in university and worked for non-profit, non-governmental organizations early in their careers. They were both working for environmental groups when they first met – while attending the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992.

Wood later taught environmental studies at York University. For his part, Roberts became an executive with Internet giant Open Text – via what he accurately calls a most “circuitous” route. He had been a central figure in a non-profit company’s development of an online computer network “way before the Internet” for use by environmental and international aid organizations. Before long, this enterprise and Roberts himself came to be commodities of interest to Open Text.

With his arrival among the senior ranks of Waterloo-based Open Text, the couple decided to move from Toronto to Guelph – as a convenient and comfortable middle-ground for them and their two children. But the final years of their Toronto experience influenced what they would come to later tackle in the Royal City.

In Toronto, they had been tenants at 401 Richmond St., when the historic former industrial building – once a tin factory – was purchased, redeveloped and reimagined by Margaret (Margie) Zeidler in 1994. They witnessed Zeidler lay the groundwork for a makeover of the space. Today, it houses an array of tenants and is an arts and culture hub in the city. And, they liked what they saw.

The move to Guelph came in 1997. They purchased a residence a year later – the one where Alexander Bain Petrie and family had also lived. The 1850s-era mansion was originally named Tyrcahlen – the inspiration for the title for Tyrcahlen Partners Inc.

**W**hen Wood and Roberts and family bought the St. George’s Park neighbourhood property – later and still named Ker Cavan – it needed a lot of work. “Water came in in 18 places and not through the roof, on four levels. We just had massive water issues,” Roberts recalls.

There were also other issues – damage by legions of carpenter ants among them.

“It was a three-year restoration project that Peregrine managed. And, out of that, we decided we liked that (sort of work) – as opposed to hated it – and, for better or worse, decided to keep going. And, at the time, I was looking for a career change, so we made the change.”

Thus, was born Tyrcahlen Partners Inc. “We had a vision that this would be certainly less than full time – and certainly less than double-time. So, we did an experiment and we restored a 7,000-sq.-ft. Queen Anne Victorian eight-plex,” says Roberts.

That Exhibition Park residential experiment began in 2010, ended successfully and it led to other projects.

Next was the Granary Building at 111 Farquhar St. This property is Guelph’s oldest industrial structure. It was erected in 1858 to store grain and has transformed many times since. It had last been renovated in the early 1990s and required a variety of updates and upgrades such as a new roof and a heating and cooling system.

Today, it is home to the Guelph Chamber of Commerce and a variety of other tenants. It’s also the destination for mail sent to Tyrcahlen Partners. Wood and Roberts have repeatedly set up an office in the complex – only to meet prospective tenants seeking just such a space and moving out to allow for its rental to them.

The deal to purchase the Granary Building closed in May 2012. As work on that project unfolded, Tyrcahlen finalized a purchase of another piece of Guelph history – a Dublin Street building that had previously been a host of things including a boarding house and the site of the Guelph Civic Museum. The sale went through in November 2012. On the night it closed, Roberts and Wood permitted their kids to have a parentally supervised party in the site – still arranged as a museum.

“All of their friends talk about the ‘Night at the Museum’ party,” says Wood.

“It’s a neat property and we had tremendous support from various corners of the

arts community to acquire that building and try and do something with an arts focus there,” says Roberts.

In fact, their Boarding House Arts project that 6 Dublin St. has become is an echo of the Zeidler rejuvenation at 401 Richmond St. in Toronto. It’s a place of artists’ studios, non-profit arts sector tenants, a law office and more. It’s also home to an arts incubator program Tyrcahlen is backing.

To make it happen took creativity, vision and some work. The building was well maintained by the City. But it also had some oddities from its period as a museum – such as having its window boxes sealed on the inside, with concrete and rebar, to keep out light and to protect artifacts from the elements outside. Most of the windows required jackhammering to be opened. HVAC work also came to be needed.

**T**hese projects, however, even working at them concurrently, proved only a warm-up for what came next – and what may be Tyrcahlen’s final project: the renovation of the Petrie Building.

By the time they bought the structure and a building block adjoining it to the north in March 2015, it had made National Trust for Canada’s “Top 10 Endangered Places List.” Perhaps best known for its metal façade – topped with a mortar and pestle, befitting the pharmacist-service Petrie provided – the building had not seen meaningful maintenance in decades. Its upper-floor windows had been long boarded up. The façade was rusted, crumbling, in decay.

Roberts says he assumed the metal-cladding effort would be the most daunting aspect of the project. He was incorrect.

“You look at a project and you always have some worst-case scenarios,” says Roberts. “You know, this could happen. Or that could happen. Or this could happen. Or all of the above could happen. Plus this could happen.”

That’s what happened with this project.

“The building had great bones and structures and we were able to retain a lot of it. But we just had massive structural,

foundation, just all kinds of issues,” says Roberts.

The first nine months of the effort constituted a clean-out and demolition, he says.

Painstakingly, over months, Tyrcahlen also managed to have the City of Guelph approve a work plan for the site and the north-side building it was attached to – but not aligned with. Even the floors on levels of the structures failed to line up. Then there was the fact the building was erected on sand – requiring a series of pilings to be sunk to anchor its foundation. It also lacked a heating and cooling system and an elevator – things very complicated to bring to a narrow, uniquely crafted building.

“Our mantra was one day at a time. One day at a time. That’s all we could do. Sometimes we’d see the light at the end of the tunnel and then it would go black again. We see the light now though,” says Wood.

Roberts says he and Wood have worked “full-out” on the Petrie project and more than full time on it since becoming its owners.

“Once you’re in, you’re kind of stuck,” he says.

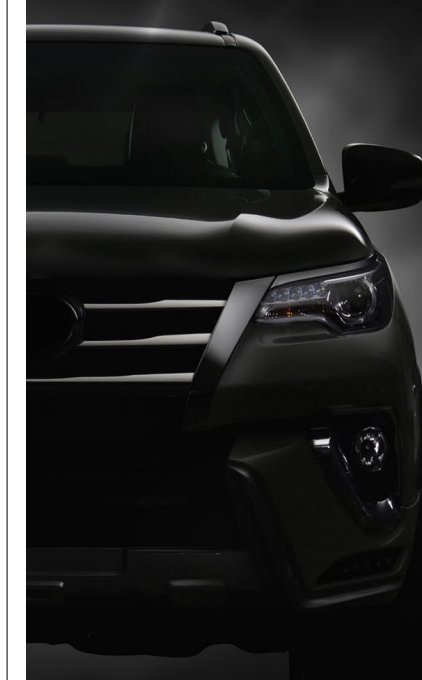
Final touches yet unfold. An effort is underway to add a design portion to the metal façade just above the first storey, something that will stretch beyond this year. Thought is also being given to placing some form of recognition within the structure of the contributions of the scores of tradespeople involved in the project.

“There are just fantastic trades in Guelph and the people we work with every day we respect and like and admire,” says Roberts. “There’s a lot of people – particularly with the Petrie project – who wanted to work on the project and really cared about what they were doing every step of the way.”

As is the case with all their buildings, Wood and Roberts take pride in the community formed within the Petrie structure.

“We do all the screening of tenants and part of that is we’re really looking for

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"I think we both get a thrill seeing that (Petrie) building lit up and occupied and active and vibrant," says Peregrine Wood, seen here on the neighbouring roof with her partner, Kirk Roberts.

synergies and like-minded tenants in buildings," says Wood. "We're committed to this community and committed to heritage buildings. We have a passion for them and a passion for communities."

Tyrcathlen Inc.'s next phase will focus on attending to the needs of its current properties.

"I think we're pretty happy with the amount of buildings we have right now and the calibre of the buildings in terms of historical significance," says Wood.

#### TYRCATHLEN'S HOLDINGS

Tyrcathlen Partners has purchased, restored and or upgraded and now manages these four historic Guelph properties:

**Boarding House Arts, 6 Dublin St. S.** – This building is the largest constructed in Guelph before 1850. It operated for many years as a boarding house, later becoming (among other things) an inn, a store, a school, a professional offices site, premises for a lumber merchant and the Guelph Civic Museum.

**Clontarf, 71 Park Ave.** – A historic home built in the Queen Anne style. This property in the Exhibition Park neighbourhood is now a multi-unit residential property.

**The Granary Building, 111 Farquhar St.** – First erected in 1858 as a railway-side structure to store grain for a Toronto distillery, this is Guelph's oldest industrial building. It's now home to the Guelph Chamber of Commerce and several other tenants.

**The Petrie Building, 19 Wyndham St. N.** – The iconic, downtown building opened in 1882. It was designed for A.B. Petrie, who ran a pharmacy on the ground floor. It's considered a unique structure in part for its metal clad front façade.

Source: Tyrcathlen Partners Inc. and the City of Guelph

"Our strategy really was to purchase, redevelop and hold for the long term," says Roberts, adding that the Petrie building won't make economic sense unless they hold it for 10 years.

"Petrie has been so overwhelming that there is a long list of things to do at our other buildings," he says. "And . . . part of our intention was not to build a big organization and a staff. If we took on a fifth building, we would probably need to change that and hire people." 



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