

Transforming One of Canada's Most Notorious Jails

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Paul Sapounzi has done plenty of time in the Don Jail.

So much so, he has become quite an authority on the history of the big house that was once home to some of Canada's most notorious criminals.

But he's no crook.

Sapounzi is an architect and a partner at +VG Architects - The Ventin Group in Brantford, the firm that has rehabilitated the oldest section of the historic jail and transformed it into a modern office building. The building, which once held the bank-robbing Boyd Gang of Toronto, is now occupied by administrators of Bridgepoint Active Health, a rehabilitation health care facility with a rich past of its own.

"This, to me, is one of the most unique places," Sapounzi says as he pulls open a door in the lower level of the former jail. "This is the area under the stairs and you would think that the solitary confinement cell would have a special place but actually it was just the areas under the stairs.

"Imagine this room as being a place you might spend a few days in. It didn't have a bed or lights."

The room is about four-by-six feet and the standing room is very limited because it's underneath a staircase, he adds.

The solitary confinement rooms – there are two – are just a couple of the many historical and unique features of the former jail which have been retained. The brackets, which hold up the balconies circling the rotunda, are also topics of conversation.

There are two types of brackets. On the inside of the balconies the brackets are ornamented in the shape of a dragon while the brackets on the outside of the rotunda are in the shape of a serpent.

"I think corrections was a very different business back then," Sapounzi says. "It was definitely focused more on punishment than rehabilitation and that's what's interesting about this.

"I believe that the brackets and the way they are positioned in here and the detail of the brackets is an attempt to conjure hell and to instill a real sense of punishment on the inmates."

The balconies were where the guards would walk to watch over prisoners in the rotunda. The jail had three levels and included in the building were cell areas for inmates, an administration block, as well as a governors' residence. The residence is still intact as part of the restoration, one of many historical references throughout the building.

Constructed in the late 1850s and early 1960s, the oldest former section of the Don Jail sits on a parcel of land that was once a farm. It was purchased by the city of Toronto from the estate of the family that owned it with the idea of using it for a jail, house of refuge and house of corrections.

The Boyd Gang spent time in the jail back in the 1950s and the last hanging took place in December 1962 when two inmates – Ronald Turpin and Arthur Lucas – were executed.

Both men were executed for murder. Turpin for the murder of Toronto police officer Frederick Nash and Lucas for the murder of a police informant from Detroit whom Lucas killed in Toronto.

The original building was closed in the 1970s and had deteriorated badly when plans for it to be transformed into an office and administration building got underway.

“Our project was to really bring this to a state of completeness as it would have been at the turn of the century and we’ve been able to achieve that,” Sapounzi said. “Our process for restoring this space (the rotunda) was to restore the skylight primarily so we took it right down to bare metal and we re-glazed it and added a second layer for weather – something that is really needed.

“If you look down to the floor of the rotunda, you’ll notice there is a glass floor at the centre of it. The structure beneath that is original cast iron structure and we have reapplied a new glazed floor system on top of it.”

The glazing helps bring natural light to the lower level as well. The lower level had jail cells, the solitary confinement rooms and at one time, early in the history of the jail – death row.

Death row was later moved to an upper level, closer to the administration, and was closely associated with the gallows which have been preserved within the building, he says.

“The challenge for us was to convince the administration of the hospital that this building could be a beautiful office environment,” Sapounzi said. “The Don Jail is a notorious jail in Canada’s history and has many stories of notorious criminals who lived here and that stigma, that notoriety and reputation was probably the biggest obstacle for us to get over with this group.

“That applies to many projects related to jail conversions.”

The effort here was to convince the administration that this was not a jail building, he added.

“Really, this is not a jail building. This is a beautiful Italian palazzo which is what it exactly is,” Sapounzi said. “The overall design of the building is that of a classical European building so converting it to an administration build would be a very easy switch and at the end of the day what you have is a really lovely historical building.”

The Ventin Group has offices throughout the province but the firm’s head office is at 50 Dalhousie St. in downtown Brantford. It moved to the city’s downtown in 2008 and the conversion of the Don Jail is just one of many interesting projects in the firm’s portfolio.

The Mattamy Theatre – Milton Centre for the Arts, the Markham Museum, Hamilton City Hall and the Elgin Courthouse are just a couple of the noteworthy projects the firm has been involved with in recent years.

Locally, the firm was behind construction of the building which houses both Walter Gretzky Elementary School and St. Basil Catholic School in West Brant.

In addition to its head office in Brantford, the firm has offices in Toronto, Kitchener and Belleville.

To learn more about +VG Architects check out www.plusvg.com

