

## Restaurant Profits Restore Gibbard Block to Former Glory

# The Renaissance on 112th Avenue

If the Highlands is loved among residents for its beautiful old homes, shaded avenues and proximity to the river, it's known by most others in the city as that neat old neighborhood around La Boheme.

A decade ago, the sturdy Gibbard Block was seedy, and the locale around was viewed by outsiders as just an extension of Beverly with some interesting, if dilapidated homes.

A young man trying to make a go of it with a new cultural magazine named *Interface* saw potential in the old Redcliff brick structure. At least, he recognized opportunity after he had delved into the magazine business, and then sold out in 1982.

Ernst Eder sees life as a journey where one takes whichever route looks interesting at a particular time. Stuck with a lease for the ground floor of a rundown building, and for the first time in his life some money in his pockets, what else to do but open a bistro and art gallery. The dancer-turned-magazine publisher-turned restaurant owner didn't know a thing about how to be a success in the restaurant business.

But he set off anyways, scouring auctions for classy old chairs at \$10 a piece and anything else which a bistro might need.

Too close to opening night, he realized he had better line up a chef - and hired the first one to apply to his newspaper ad.

Eder went along with the sumptuous meals dished out by this whiz. So what if the \$15 meals were worth \$30.

"It was the best advertising we could have done, we got a name right away, we made a splash. But it wasn't planned," he says.

La Boheme was a success from the beginning in 1982. Eder slowing began buying out the eight owners of the Gibbard block. He says he loved the building, and wanted to restore it as money began coming in from his restaurant.

But as a tenant, he couldn't. Within three years, he paid the owners \$330,000 - a figure he admits was too high. Critical improvements followed - new plumbing, heating and other interior renovations worth \$250,000.

The 1913 Gibbard Block was recently recognized as a city historical resource. In January, Eder put the plaque on one side of his entrance, the other spot reserved for provincial designation.

The building has been approved, and Eder says it will all be official very soon.

And with the provincial plaque comes an assistance program that he says will make it possible to continue the restoration.

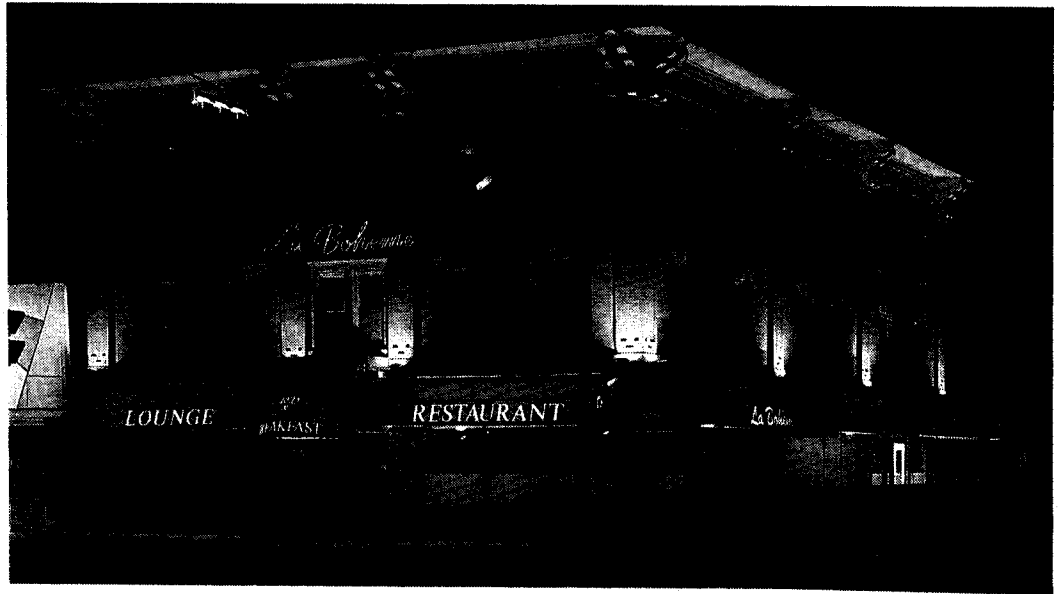
Eder expects it will cost another \$250,000 to complete work on the roof and exterior, including replacing the "modernized" windows installed when aluminum was all the rage.

Eder says if he left the restaurant business tomorrow, the Gibbard block and the good name of La Boheme could fetch \$1 million.

"What we've done is use a business to save a building," he says, adding the concept isn't unique - but one that might catch on for other buildings in the city, and other cities.

When Eder took up his lease in 1978, he joined a grocery store, hair salon, empty hardware store and a struggling firm selling home intercom systems. Upstairs were eight apartments in very poor shape.

"The place was a slum," he says. "And when I bought it, I felt like a slum landlord."



The restored Gibbard Block on 112th Avenue is the commercial anchor for the Highlands, and now an official historical resource

The suites have all been redone, decorated with period pieces Eder bought at auctions. The claw-footed tubs have been refinished, but that's about all that remains from the apartment rental days.

Each suite has a different layout, and its own character, much as it did in the heydays of old Edmonton when the Gibbard rooms competed with the Arlington and Le Marchand Mansion as the most modern and ritziest places to live.

Repeat visitors have their favorites.

"We have people from across Canada, the U.S. and Europe who stay with us, and just love the area," he says.

One particular American executive was working in Fort Saskatchewan for several weeks, but stayed at La Boheme and biked through the river valley trails daily.

"It's what makes a stay in the city very special. These people have travelled and know what they want. They don't want a big downtown hotel," says Eder.

The Gibbard Block is structurally sound, with a concrete basement and 12 by 12 inch timbers. The main restaurant features the original Edwardian ornamental ceiling of pressed tin, one of few left in Edmonton.

Maple floors are found throughout, and a huge skylight brings light to the upstairs hallway. Restoring the skylight is at the top of Eder's renovation list.

Eighty years ago, Edmonton was in the midst of a development boom not repeated until the mid-1970s. Tycoons J.W. Magrath and Bidwell Holgate developed the Highlands as a high-priced neighborhood, but turned to W.T. Gibbard to put up a \$90,000 apartment building.

The Gibbard family of Napanee, Ontario, owned the luxury furniture company of the same name which still sells its products nationally.

No expense was spared in building the apartments, which featured an intercom system connecting the suites with an exchange in the terrazo-floored foyer, and hot water at the turn of a tap.

Gibbard's apartments in 1913 lay far east of the downtown core in the middle of farmland.

It took foresight to visualize the community which would grow up around the Ada Boulevard mansions and Gibbard Block.

And after the land crash of 1914, that vision became very longterm.

Dave Cooper