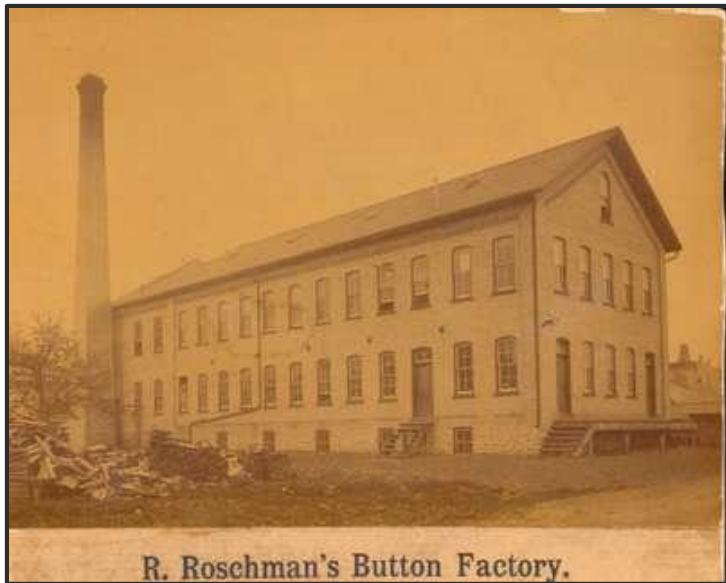


MAKING SPACES FOR ART

BUTTON FACTORY ARTS

Going with the Flow: Button Factory Arts and the City of Waterloo

The old Button Factory is a staple of Uptown Waterloo. Right in the heart of the city, the building itself stands out in stark contrast to its more modern neighbours. Now a protected heritage site, the old factory



The home of Button Factory Arts – photo from Waterloo Public Library

has a new life as a community arts hub and home to aptly named not-for-profit organization Button Factory Arts.

Dating back to 1886, Berlin, Ontario (now Waterloo Region) had a thriving button industry with five local factories. Opening in 1886, the building now known as Button Factory Arts operated for over half a century making artisanal buttons and cufflinks, employing more than 100 men and women. The factory (and most others)

closed in 1946, when an influx of cheap plastic

buttons from Japan and the introduction of the zipper made their asymmetrical, hand-punched buttons obsolete. After a brief stint as a glove factory and lumber company, the building became protected property of the City of Waterloo as a prime example of the Region's rich manufacturing past. It sat empty until a group of citizens approached the City with an idea for a community arts hub.

Button Factory Arts has operated out of its home in the old Button Factory for twenty-two years. Originally known as the Waterloo Community Arts Centre, their building was so iconic and well-known across the region that the non-profit group rebranded as Button Factory Arts. Button Factory Arts offers art classes, studio space, gallery exhibitions and community arts programs to its some 400 members and the Waterloo Region at large. The heritage space is a good fit for the community arts hub, with a certain ambiance you don't get in an ultra-modern building. Everyone from children to seniors feel comfortable to come in and

get messy, creative and inspired. Outside of programming initiatives, 24 local organizations call the Button Factory home through regular space rentals. The historic building was bustling with artists of all ages, until the City of Waterloo notified the Button Factory team of serious necessary structural repairs.

Recently reopened after a month of shuttered doors, at first glance there is no evidence of major renovation in the space. All the structural updates were internal, meaning that while the space is now more structurally sound, visitors, members and even staff have to look closely to notice a difference. Crews replaced two pillars in the basement and reinforced every beam on each of the three floors, up to the



[The 130-year-old Button Factory](#)

buttresses in the attic. Of course, as with any major renovation, heritage spaces come with their own unique set of challenges and surprises. Crews were surprised to discover there were no fittings under the pillars, so during construction they had to dig four feet beneath the floor to lay concrete. Below the building they found a layer of discarded shells and buttons so thick it almost couldn't be dug through. As we discussed the project, Button Factory Executive Director Heather Franklin produced a hunk of concrete filled with pieces of clam shell and mother-of-pearl, dotted with holes where buttons had been punched out – a remnant of the Factory's history. Heather calls the construction, "an adventure [...] it's never one of those things where you come in and it's the same every day." From sprinklers being set off to lights hanging from the ceiling, the five-week construction project wrapped and Button Factory Arts has resumed their daily operations.

When asked if she had any advice for organizations working with a municipality or operating out of a municipal space, Heather offers this tidbit of knowledge: go with the flow. The asset management department of the City handled most elements of the construction project, but kept the Button Factory team in the loop with weekly site visits and regular progress reports. Button Factory Arts 'went with the flow' by halting their regular operations during the construction period, and pushing back their usual September fall program start. While the building was closed, they hosted offsite programming and continued to run their weekly Artist's Alley in the alley adjacent to the building. When it comes to

construction, Heather likens it to her medium of choice, print-making. She says, “It’s always a happy accident, how it turns out, because it’s never the way you plan. As a printmaker, you make all the plans and think about how you’re going to do it... it isn’t until you put it in the press that you can say, ‘oh, that’s what happened.’ We always say, happy coincidences.”

In terms of what’s next for Button Factory, accessibility improvements are the next project on the docket. As a three-floor facility, they’ve had to move programs from the second floor to the first to better accommodate members, visitors and renters. As a community hub, they want everyone to be able to access and enjoy the space they call home. Until the next project, with newly reinforced pillars, beams and floors, and an even sturdier support system with the City of Waterloo, we suspect the old Button Factory will be around for many years to come.