



Genesee Gateway principal Douglas G. Swift oversees progress at the Genesee Gateway complex.

Derek Gee/Buffalo News

Facelift under way for downtown eyesore

Untouched building will be restored after 30 years

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At the corner of Genesee and Oak streets sits an eyesore of a building. It's rough around the edges -- and throughout its interior -- because it has sat untouched for nearly 30 years.

It's the first thing anyone sees coming downtown from the Kensington Expressway.

Constructed in the pre-Civil War era, sometime in the 1850s, the building sat windowless for years, open to the weather. Water flooded each of the floors of the four-story building on gusty, rainy days.

"It became an icon for everything that was wrong in Buffalo and our local economy," Douglas G. Swift said, shaking his head that a building with such a rich history could be lost so quickly. "We have a chance to change that. It can now be a symbol of determination and new ideals. This city is slowly growing, but there is hope for downtown yet."

The once-abandoned building's look is changing rapidly, thanks to Swift and a team of construction workers gutting and remodeling it -- even connecting it to a neighboring building on Genesee Street.

The site is designated as Genesee Gateway, a project that will bring the string of decades-vacant structures to function as a single, 60,000-square-foot building, housing a mix of commercial uses.

Swift, a principal in City View Construction Management, is a lead partner in the Genesee Gateway effort. He said the \$12 million project will be completed by next spring and be open for possible tenants to view within three months.

Ken Swanekamp, director of business assistance for Erie County, said this is the kind of stuff urban planners live for. The surrounding block is filled with loft apartments, he said, making the once-dead street live again.

"It's filling in the holes and gaps," Swanekamp said. "It's starting to turn into a neighborhood. It's really a spectacular sight. What was once the same old, same old is transforming into something new and exciting. It's something this corner has needed and is long overdue."

Swift, 53, bought the properties last fall for \$25,000. His goal was to salvage as much as possible.

He has been able to do just that, using many of the steel girders and beams, as well as the floors, but he said many renovations are planned.

"There were all kinds of what we like to call 'hidden conditions,' but we're through all of those, we hope," he said, watching as construction workers began placing steel beams into the lot between the Genesee Street buildings. The lot will turn into the joint structure of the buildings, a hallway available on every floor.

"This is a milestone," he said. "People have been waiting to see something here for years. Now that we are kind of opened up and we can see its progress, the light at the end of the tunnel is closer than ever."

In addition to City View, the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation is a key partner in the block's revival. The project got a boost from the Erie County Industrial Development Agency last year in the form of some \$435,000 in tax breaks.

Swift said the project will become more visible every day, expecting the steel beams to be in place by week's end.

"It doesn't get sexy until you get windows up and in place," he said. "And it surely doesn't hurt getting the steel up. It's looking great. I can't wait to see the finished product."