

best of Central Vermont

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COMMUNITIES AND LIFESTYLE IN THE HEART OF THE GREEN MOUNTAINS



BLANCHARD BLOCK
REVIVAL

WEST BRANCH
GALLERY

GREEN MOUNTAIN
PERFORMING ARTS

A DOWNTOWN CORNERSTONE TAKES
ITS PLACE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Barre's Blanchard Block *Reborn*





The Blanchard Block is one of those buildings where, for many decades, just about everyone from Barre spent time. Either they were shopping at J.C. Penney's or the Lash Furniture Store, attending Masonic events or the Chess and Checker Club, or going to appointments in lawyers' offices, doctors' offices, or hair salons. Barre residents had plenty of reasons to go there. Since 1904 and for much of the 20th century, this handsome brick building buzzed with activity. But after a 2003 fire struck a cruel blow to Lash Furniture, the Blanchard Block fell dark.

Now, after a monumental basement-to-attic renovation, the Blanchard Block is back, beautifully restored and fitted out with all the latest technology. Two local couples, John and Pamela Benoit and Mark and Robin Nicholson, formed Granite City Developers and have totally rehabbed the 48,000-square-foot building. While meticulously maintaining the Blanchard Block's historic character, they have outfitted it for the 21st century. On a fast track, the Benois and Nicholsons started this \$5,000,000 project in March 2013. The first offices were occupied this winter and more businesses are on the way. Today, the Blanchard Block proudly takes its place as a cornerstone of Barre's "renaissance."

FROM THE PROGRESSIVE ERA TO THE INFORMATION AGE

"The Blanchard Block now has every modern convenience, but it still has the charm of a



110-year-old building, and it is an unbelievable building,” says John Benoit, standing in the light-filled atrium entrance, the entry on the Merchant’s Row side. As John, his wife Pamela, and partner Mark Nicholson point out architectural details including restored tin ceiling panels overhead and massive brick structural walls, people arrive for appointments. The arrivals probably don’t know that the Otis elevator whisking them from the atrium entrance to the upper floors is the first of this latest-generation elevator in Vermont and just one of the many modern features in the building.

For the Benois and the Nicholsons, redeveloping a historic property is a new endeavor, although both couples have years of construction trade experience with their successful local businesses. The Benois’ company—Benoit Electric, Inc., which they

founded in 1986—is now one of the state’s leading electrical contractors. The Nicholsons’ Nicom Coatings Corporation, founded in 1981, specializes in sealing and waterproofing buildings and roads.

“We are excited about what is going on in Barre, and we wanted to be part of it,” says Mark Nicholson. “The Blanchard Block had been sitting empty for 11 years. As we were looking at possible projects, we just kept coming back to it. It’s such a beautiful, solid building and in such a big location.” Right next-door to Barre City Hall and Barre Opera House, the Blanchard Block on North Main Street faces the intersection, park, and the statue named *Youth Triumphant*.

Along with the enthusiasm and expertise they brought to the project, the Benois and Nicholsons knew that the Blanchard Block’s price tag would be hefty. Fortunately, local,

state, and federal opportunities contributed to making the renovation possible. The City of Barre is granting tax stabilization for the building, and because of the Blanchard Block’s historic significance and its inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places, it qualifies for federal tax credits provided the rehab maintains its historic character. Vermont’s Downtown and Village Center Tax Credit Program also offers attractive benefits for properties in designated areas, including Barre’s downtown.

BELOVED LANDMARK AND HUB OF ACTIVITY

“The Blanchard Block is such a prominent building. To have it languishing for so many years was really sad. Now it is the perfect symbol of the new optimism in Barre,” says Caitlin Corkins, who is the tax credits and



grants coordinator with the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development. Caitlin worked closely with the partners on the renovation. There is no cookie-cutter formula for historic preservation tax credits, she explains. “The crux of it is preserving the historic character of the building, allowing change but preserving those elements that make it his-

toric, interesting, and aesthetically pleasing.”

From its beginning in 1904, when it was built to replace an earlier structure that had burned, the Blanchard Block has been a mixed-use building. Every floor has a different floor plan. The ground floor, with high ceilings and expanses of open space, accommodates retail. Upstairs, the building has al-

Opposite: 219 Blanchard Block exterior. This page: The original trusses in the penthouse suites. The north half of the third floor showing the original hardwood floors and tin ceilings.



New England Oral Surgery's staff lounge. The four owners who restored Blanchard Block (l to r): John Benoit, Pam Benoit, Robin Nicholson, Mark Nicholson.

ways held offices—30 when it opened. Back in the day, Barre had many active fraternal organizations. The Blanchard Block includes large, open halls on the upper floors—the former Masons' banquet hall even had a grand brick fireplace that remains.

For Barre residents, Blanchard Block's retail stores provided housewares and more. B.W. Hooker's furniture company was there

first, with their casket and undertaking business in part of the space. In 1905, Frank McWhorter's clothing store moved in. J.C. Penney was the new retail anchor in 1937, with reportedly the greatest amount of main-floor space of any of the company's New England stores. In the 1950s, Lash Furniture opened and remained a family-owned institution for decades.

With the restoration by the Benois and Nicholsons, the basement and attic spaces are also part of the building's future. Flowers by Emslie and Company is moving into the lower level, a space with light cascading in through the atrium. The attic, with its grid of massive beams, has plenty of windows and perhaps the best views in Barre, looking out over the rooftops.

Throughout the Blanchard Block, the partners have installed state-of-the-art systems. "It has every single modern convenience," says John Benoit. "We have fiber optics from the curb all the way to your desktop. We have conduit paths for all the latest technology that is available today or will be in the future. It is all completely rewired. The lighting control system can be controlled with a laptop. The energy management system is on a computer, monitoring our heating and cooling and energy recovery unit. And we have closed-circuit TV."

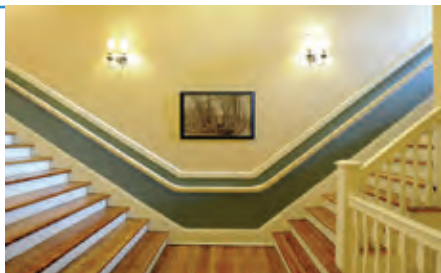
BARRE'S RENAISSANCE CONTINUES

The completion of the \$17 million road, utility, and streetscape project—Barre’s “Big Dig”—has transformed Main Street. Just down Main Street from the Blanchard Block, between Studio Place Arts and the Paramount Theater, Barre’s City Place is bringing new life and jobs to downtown. With 82,500 square feet of space, City Place already has tenants including the Vermont Department of Education, the Rehab Gym, and Central Vermont Medical Center. Owned by DEW Properties, City Place opened its doors this past winter.

The paint and plaster have dried, beautiful floors and trim have re-emerged, original windows have been replaced with energy efficient ones, and the elevator is humming. It looks like another good century is beginning for the Blanchard Block. 🌸

Blanchard Block

14 North Main Street
 Barre, VT
 Pam Benoit: (802) 371-8074
 Robin Nicholson: (802) 249-0148
<http://blanchardblock.com>



GALLERY EXTRA

Many more photos of the beautiful restoration of Blanchard Block are online at www.bestofcentralvt.com.

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