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LE&A lands new home in Heartside

Public relations and investor relations firm Lambert Edwards & Associates will soon contribute to the bustling Heartside district as the company renovates an old auto body and repair shop to house the growing firm. Collaborating on the project are, (L-R) Jeff Lambert, president of Lambert Edwards & Associates; Tim Schowalter, president of Pioneer Construction; and Michael Wychers, associate at Cornerstone Architects. SEE PAGE 5B

PHOTO: DELUZIMACZ

INSIDE SECTION B

DESIGN+BUILD	
BIM-basic	2B
HEALTHCARE	
Hauenstein as economic driver	9B
Hospitals looking to start dialogue with WMU over med school	6B
HUMAN RESOURCES	
Third in a series: Retooling Michigan's workforce	13B
Increasing financial literacy	14B
Column: The Human Factor	15B

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LE&A lands home in Heartside

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GRAND RAPIDS – ArtPrize will be remembered for many reasons, but for **Lambert Edwards & Associates Inc.**, the competition helped the firm find a new home in the city's historical Heartside district.

The public relations and investor relations firm was "looking at a lot of different options" back in March and came across 47 Commerce when it was looking for an ArtPrize venue to share with clients **Pioneer Construction Inc.** and **Adtegrity.com**. The trio would lease the partially restored site for ArtPrize, but eventually LE&A realized the 10,000-square-foot space could be ideal as a new location.

"We wanted our own home," Jeff Lambert, president of LE&A, told *MiBiz*. "We went in and took a look at (47 Commerce), and it was perfect for us."

LE&A currently occupies about 7,500 square feet spread over two floors in the National City building. Lambert said his company was looking for "more efficient" space where his 25 Grand Rapids employees could be on the same floor. And as a company that has grown for the past 11 years straight, he needed to ensure any new home would have the capability to expand with the firm. Lambert said he's found the right spot at 47 Commerce.

The building, formerly an auto body repair shop, was rehabilitated in 2005 and 2006 by Pioneer Construction and **Cornerstone Architects Inc.**, who again partnered for the build-out for LE&A. The previous project cost about \$1.2 million and resulted in the replacement of the many windows on the one-story building, as well as a new roof, said Michael Wychers RA, LEED AP, an associate at Cornerstone Architects.



Tim Schowalter of Pioneer Construction, Jeff Lambert of Lambert Edwards & Associates, and Michael Wychers of Cornerstone Architects stand atop the roof of 47 Commerce, the future home of Lambert's company. A rooftop deck – currently with a view of the construction of 38 Commerce, another Pioneer project, shown in the foreground – is in the works for the building.

PHOTO: DELUXEMAGES@YAHOO.COM



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With the build-out, Lambert said he expects to invest about \$500,000 in the building.

The availability of enclosed lower-level parking and the possibility of a rooftop deck helped seal the deal for Lambert, who is working with Wychers on the design of a partial green roof, which Lambert says is key for his employees' quality of life. Lambert said he plans to pursue LEED certification for the project.

"When we did the rehab, we knew the deck would be important so we added the elevators and stairs to the deck so (the new owner) would have a lot of options," Wychers told *MiBiz*.

Tim Schowalter, president of Pioneer Construction, said the building is in great structural shape. Since it was built to hold automobiles, he said it would more than support LE&A and the rooftop deck. LE&A also has the roof rights if it chooses to expand upward.

"It would be a crime to tear down a building like this," Schowalter told *MiBiz*. "It's part of what the neighborhood is."

Wychers said the building itself doesn't have any historical significance, but it's a part of the historic Heartside neighborhood.

For the project, which should get underway in the next couple of weeks, Schowalter and his crews won't have to go far. The company is already well entrenched across the street as they're working on the 38 Commerce project. As such, getting in equipment for 47 Commerce shouldn't pose any problems, Schowalter said, especially considering most of the work will take place inside the building envelope.

The timing of the LERA project in conjunction with the 38 Commerce project – the future home of Adtegrity – and the nearby Gallery on Fulton is not lost on Lambert.

"From a macro view, the timing of all the projects provides an instant revitalization of this neighborhood," Lambert said.

Schowalter said about 75-100 construction employees will be on-site during the height of the build-out, which should conclude before spring.

FYI

Future home of Lambert Edwards & Associates

General contractor: Pioneer Construction Inc.

Architect: Cornerstone Architects Inc.

Location: 47 Commerce, part of Grand Rapids' Heartside

Size: 10,000 square feet, one-story building

Features: Future rooftop deck with elevator access, covered lower-level parking

Investment: \$500,000, following a \$1.2M rehabilitation in 2005-06

Owners will pursue LEED certification

Culture reflection

Inside, Lambert and Wychers have been working closely to develop a design that fits the LE&A culture.

See **LE&A** | page 4B

LE&A

Continued from page 3B

"What we were looking for, in terms of office space, was professional cool," Lambert said.

The investor relations side of the business is more "buttoned up," but the public relations practice is more "fun," and Lambert wanted the design to capture both of those elements.

"We're not a law firm. We wanted a mix," he said. "The building has great character and with a professional build-out with a lot of glass and natural light, it will create a space that's very comfortable for people."

The offices will be a mix of open and enclosed spaces featuring products from a number of manufacturers. Wychers said much of the existing architecture, including the exposed steel and brick and a partially covered wall mural, would be maintained. A raised mezzanine area will feature a conference room and flexible lounge space. Lambert has plans for a media training center for clients that will be outfitted with technology ready for interviews and satellite connections.

Lambert and Wychers are also working to incorporate a life-sized Scrabble board on the floor in part of the office space. "Our business is about words, but it will also be fun," Lambert said.

Wychers said he paid special attention to the pedestrian corridor outside of the structure, and noted that Lambert plans to install feature walls near the windows to hang up artwork visible to the outside and allow in available light. Lambert purchased one piece of artwork from the ArtPrize competition and said he might pick up others to display at the new headquarters. He added that LE&A is a minority investor in the building itself.

"We're making an investment," he said. "Originally, we wanted to buy a building outright, but we're experts in communications, not real estate development. We're going to be invested in the building, and that helps our operating costs. Our capital should be deployed in growing the business, not a (real estate) investment portfolio."

Room to grow

Lambert confidently believes the timing was right for the 11-year-old company to get its own space. In the current price market, "we're getting more space for a comparable cost and making an investment in today's dollars that will appreciate over time, plus we have the opportunity to have a place that's ours and that we control and own. It's a better representation of who we are."

In August, LE&A announced it purchased Troy-based John Bailey & Associates, creating a statewide, more than 40-person company with revenues topping \$6 million. The move gets LE&A into the automotive industry — it will handle public relations for the North American International Auto Show, for instance — and public affairs, and gives it a presence in Detroit and Lansing.

"Similar to our investment in real estate, we made an investment in Detroit at a good time," Lambert said. "And from a people perspective, we were buying talent."

The firm is now the largest of its kind in West Michigan and in the top 10 in the Midwest. LE&A also has a one-person office in California. After the acquisition of JB&A, the company boasts a client roster of more than 110 publicly traded and privately held clients in 20 states and five countries. **MR&E**