

FIRST CANADIAN PLACE

Peter Kuitenbrouwer: Peeling marble off First Canadian Place fosters Toronto pride



Michael Brodigan examines a panel on the suspended elevated platform, which construction crews are using to replace the marble cladding with glass panels at First Canadian Place. Tyler Anderson/National Post

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Comment

When executives at Brookfield, the real estate giant, sit to brief me about the Herculean task of replacing the marble on First Canadian Place, Michael Brodigan, project superintendent with EllisDon, does not take off his hard hat.

It is a lively lid, covered with decals from various jobs and unions, and he peers from underneath it, his chin propped in his hands. He wears an expression that says, “Please let me back on the scaffolding, or into my bed.”

Mr. Brodigan had risen at 4 a.m., as he does six days a week, and arrived in Toronto’s financial core shortly after 5 a.m., to ride the hoists (elevators that carry workers and equipment up the outsides of buildings) to his job “choreographing” the tradesmen toiling on Canada’s tallest office tower. Last June, on the 72nd floor, workers began peeling the Italian Carrera marble off the building and replacing it with triple-layered, fritted, sparkling white glass, baked a little closer to home, in Brampton.

When one looks at the job from afar, it appears workers are peeling a giant banana in slow motion, leaving a shimmering white tower.

“Now you’ve replaced it with a clean, white sheet,” enthuses Mr. Brodigan, who arrived here after completing another job for Brookfield, the 51-storey Bay-Adelaide Centre.

“Our goal is to get down as fast as possible,” adds Mike Fitzgibbon, project manager with EllisDon. “We were up there for one winter and it was a tough place to be.”

First Canadian Place, designed by Edward Durell Stone, opened in 1975. In 2007 a slab of marble fell off the building’s 54th floor, forcing police to close King Street. “Marble hasn’t performed the way the architects envisioned,” Mr. Fitzgibbon says. It is porous and water works its way in and rusts the brackets. And so Brookfield began a \$100-million job to take the marble down.

To help convey the size of the task, they dress photographer Tyler Anderson and I in hard hats, steel-toed boots, safety glasses and elaborate harnesses, and take us up the hoist, a metal box that rattles like an old roller coaster, to the job site.

Workers have hung 14 suspended elevated platforms around the circumference of the building, attached to the roof by cables that run through the window-washer channels. These platforms are three storeys high.

“Can we start on the Clifford Deck please?” Mr. Brodigan asks the hoist operator.

We get off at the 54th floor, where workers with Clifford Restoration are in the midst of removing the 100-kilogram sheets of marble.

The job requires three workers; One slices the putty with an Xacto knife, another pries off the slab with a nail bar and the three then heave it onto a wooden rack to schlep down the hoist for recycling. Marble in good condition they cut into smaller slabs for exterior use, some lesser pieces become tiles; the rest they crush and use for landscaping chips or as clean fill.

The middle level of the platform is empty; here bolts and turnbuckles affix the work site to the office tower.

On the top platform — the 56th floor, on Thursday — workers with Sota Glazing Inc. use huge steel arms with electric suction cups to affix new 8-foot by 10-foot sheets of triple-layer glass on brackets that steelworkers have attached to the building. Each sheet replaces eight pieces of marble.

“The guys are happy. Morale is a big thing,” says a smiling Nino Pastore, general foreman for Sota. He has 26 guys working the day shift, 13 at night, and now four for the midnight shift.

“We had a rough winter,” he adds. “My job is to motivate the guys, keep spirits up. They don’t get full paycheques when we close the job during bad weather [if the wind tops 50 km/h or the temperature falls below -16C]. But they bounced back pretty good.”

On Thursday an anemometer on the hoist reads a pleasant breeze of 4 km/h.

Another challenge, Mr. Pastore says, is fostering “harmony” between two unions — glaziers and ironworkers — on this deck, especially since, “sometimes we’re under the gun for time, to make sure we’re on time.” Still, he says, “We’re doing pretty well.”

In nine months, workers replaced the marble on 16 storeys. Recently they have picked up the pace and say they can complete one floor per week and be done before winter returns. But with 54 storeys to go, it will be a challenge to finish by the year-end deadline.

Nevertheless, as the new, shining tower takes its place in the skyline, Mr. Pastore and the 100 other workers on the job here feel a sense of accomplishment.

“It’s an icon of the city,” says Mr. Pastore, standing on the corner of the cold platform on the 56th floor, with fog and the spires of Toronto spreading out below him. “We feel pretty proud.”