



Sign Installation

For more than 50 years, the glow of the *Toronto Star's* signage served as a bright blue beacon along the city's lakeside skyline.

Photo © Scott Hearney | Dreamstime.com

One less 'star' along Toronto's skyline

By Carly McHugh

For more than 50 years, the glow of the *Toronto Star's* signage served as a bright blue beacon along the city's lakeside skyline. Signifying the presence of the newspaper's head office, it became a well-known landmark in Ontario's capital city.

The signage underwent a retrofit in 2014, to both prolong its life and make it easier to maintain for years to come. After LED Solutions of Hamilton completed the project, the signs sat virtually undisturbed for nearly a decade longer.

However, at the end of 2022, the *Toronto Star's* story at 1 Yonge St. came to its

conclusion. The building had been purchased and the newspaper was required to move out, calling for the removal of its iconic signage. Once again, LED Solutions returned to the site, this time to take down two sets of the big, blue channel letters.

While the signage itself may be gone from the building, its mark on the city of Toronto still remains. In its half-century of existence, it has experienced a new lease on life, the end of its residence on bustling Yonge Street, and now, the hope for its new home within the cityscape.

A brighter future

In 2014, the concept of LED retrofits had begun to break out in the sign industry. After receiving positive feedback on these types of projects, as well as how they contributed to energy savings and maintenance, LED Solutions sought to expand their portfolio with a variety of large-scale retrofits.

Therefore, when the opportunity came to work with the *Toronto Star*, on what would be the shop's largest retrofit project yet, they were eager to take on the repair of the four large building signs. After years of lakeside wind and weather conditions, the steel letters—ranging in height from 1.5 to 2.4 m (5 to 8 ft)—were battered and rusty and had large holes in them. The faces were broken, the vinyl was faded, and the trim caps were cracked. The five-stroke neon inside the letters was also exposed, and there was a dozen failed transformers amongst all elevations. At the time, the newspaper was spending tens of thousands of dollars on repairs each year, to keep the signs presentable.

Indeed, the project was complex, and already had multiple bidders. However, what secured it for LED Solutions was their ability to complete the retrofit without having to take the signs down, along with a glowing review from one of their long-time clients, entertainment company Cineplex.

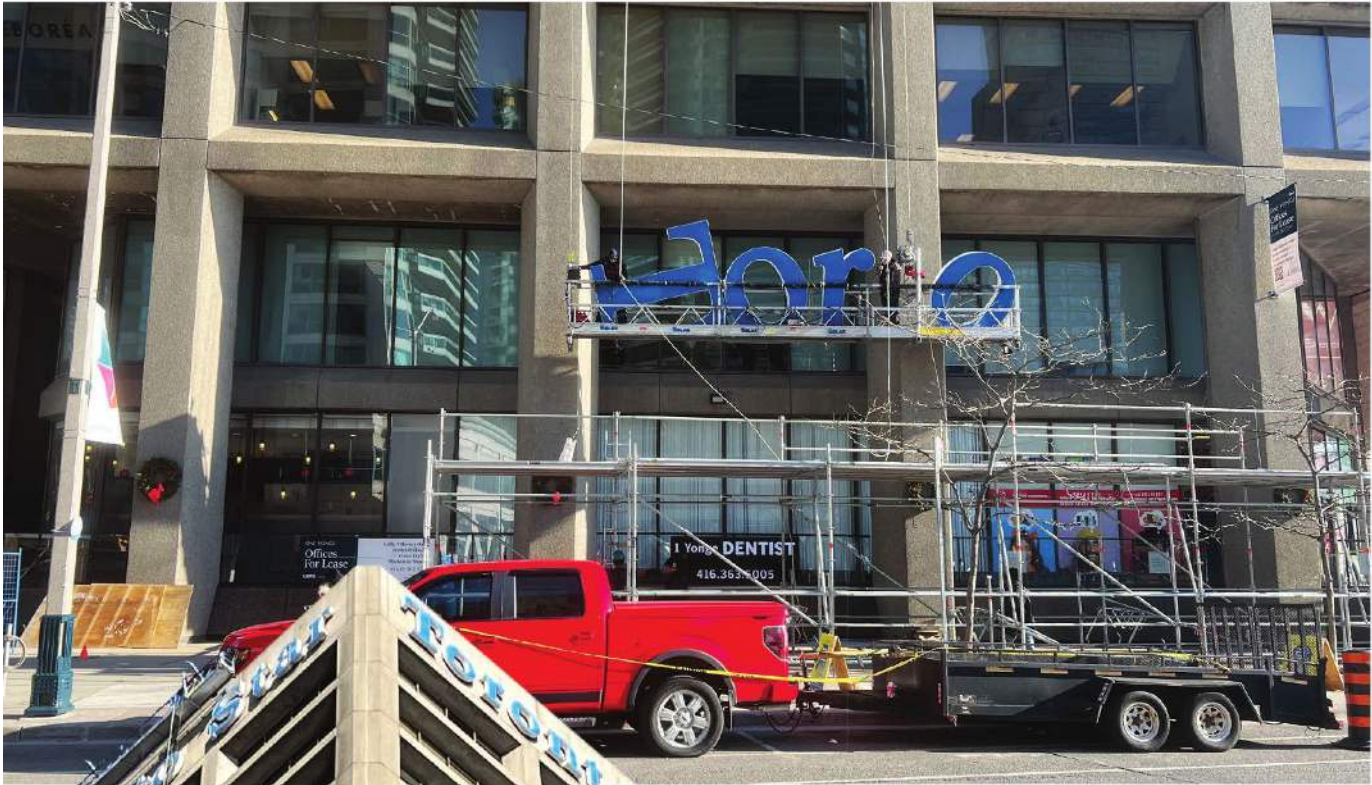
Once they exchanged all necessary paperwork, LED Solutions worked with a swing stage company as well as a scaffolding company to co-ordinate the necessary equipment for the job. This particular project required 51.8 m (170 ft) of engineered scaffolding, to create a pedestrian walkway for the building while the work was being conducted overhead. Throughout the process, two technicians worked from the swing stage, while another was positioned on the rooftop, and a fourth stayed on the ground to direct pedestrian traffic.

The on-site team began by removing all the old faces, as well as the glass neon and transformers inside the letters. Meanwhile, another team at the shop was busy prefabricating retrofit inserts out of aluminum composite material (ACM), to apply the new, blue LED modules. Next, the technicians on the swing stage rebuilt the sign cans with aluminum patches, filler, and resin, then sanded and hand-painted them. Once the LED inserts



were ready, they were screwed in, and brand-new, intense blue vinyl faces were affixed to the sign structures.

Additionally, with the transformers removed from inside each letter, LED Solutions installed the power supplies



During the removal, three or four letters were brought down at a time, from the top of the 25-storey building.

Photos courtesy LED Solutions



signs. However, with proper planning and communication with the entire team, LED Solutions was able to complete the retrofit on time and on budget. The final result was four improved signs, which remained true to the *Toronto Star's* signature colour.

After the retrofit was finished, the signage stood strong for eight years. During that time, LED Solutions worked on a variety of projects with the *Toronto Star's* parent company, Metroland Media Group, but was only called back twice to change power supplies at 1 Yonge St. However, everything changed at the end of 2022, when the company received a different kind of project request from the newspaper.

'The end of an era'

Last December, LED Solutions answered a call from the *Toronto Star*, asking if they could conduct a sign removal before the Christmas holidays. After more than five decades in the building, the property had been purchased by Vancouver-based builder Pinnacle, and the newspaper had until the end of the month to move out before the new owner began to remodel. As part of the lease

remotely, to help simplify the sign's maintenance. This involved running the wires inside the building and putting the power supplies in the mechanical room. Thus, if one of the LED power supplies needed to be repaired, all a technician would need to do was go up the elevator and change it.

Of course, one of the main challenges for the team throughout the process was the weather, as the proximity to Lake Ontario meant the wind could unexpectedly pick up. The swing stage also needed to be moved eight times over the course of the project, to provide the proper reach while working on the 19.5-m (64-ft)



Prior to their LED retrofit in 2014, the sign's steel letters were battered and rusty and had large holes in them.

agreement, two of the four signs had to be removed prior to their departure.

Not only was the project on a tight timeline, but the team also had to once again account for the fact the building was on busy Yonge Street. Several precautions needed to be taken to ensure a safe sign removal—including the placement of 24.3 m (80 ft) of overhead scaffolding, which needed to be engineered and permitted to operate much quicker than the previous project.

Similar to the retrofit, LED Solutions used a 9.1-m (30-ft) long swing stage for the removal, which spanned about half the length of each sign. In both instances, once the first portion was dismantled, the swing stage would be brought down, re-rigged, moved over, and sent back up to work on the second portion.

Since the signs had been up for more than 50 years, and were originally made out of heavy steel, thoughtful effort was required to detach them from the building's exterior. Due to their weight, there were restrictions on how many letters could be put inside the swing stage at one time. For each trip, three or four letters were brought down from the top of the 25-storey building. Once the letters were lowered, the team had to go all the way back up again to prepare for their next trip to the ground. Luckily, they had good weather during the project, and were able to conduct one removal per day.

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After the retrofit was finished, the signs stood strong for eight years, until their removal in December 2022.

When both signs were down in their entirety, LED Solutions filled all the remaining holes with silicone and ensured they were watertight, as well as capped all the electrical sources and removed all the power supplies from inside the building.

Given the well-known reputation of the *Toronto Star*, the project gained a great deal of media attention. Throughout the process, pedestrians and reporters visited the site and took photos of the signs being removed—including the newspaper's own team of journalists, and one of its rival publications, the *Globe and Mail*. Local news and culture website *blogTO* even referred to the sign's removal as “the end of an era.”

However, the *Toronto Star* was still drafting new plans for its illustrious nameplate.

A new beginning

With two signs removed, and the other two powered off until the building's new owner began facade work, the question remained as to what to do with the two signs in the project team's possession. The *Toronto Star* opted to keep one set of letters, from the west elevation, while the other set was sent out to be recycled.

For now, the sign has found a new, temporary home in a storage facility. The likely plan is for LED Solutions to refurbish the letters at a later date, for the newspaper to use however they wish, at their new facility at Front Street West and Spadina Avenue.

No matter the sign's future, one fact remains: Toronto will never forget the bright blue “star” that once graced its lakefront skyline. ●