George McKay remembers the Heritage Tower as the gilded home of rare coin collections and stirring holiday concerts.

As a boy, McKay, now 70, would visit the building that housed the bank where his father and grandfather worked. He was in awe of the huge vaults rumored to hold valuable coins, and he remembered watching workers repair stenciling and gold-leaf details to the lobby’s vaulted ceiling after a fire damaged parts of the building in the 1950s.

And he remembers the sound of choirs filling the lobby at Christmas.

“It was an amazing place to sing because the acoustics were so wonderful,” McKay said. “It was all hard surfaces. There wasn’t anything to absorb the sound. The only thing you heard that you had to shut off when they were going to sing was the escalator that went up and down either side of the big staircase there.”

But now that the Heritage Tower has become largely dark, empty and quiet, McKay’s attitude toward the building once named after his grandfather has changed.

“I don’t particularly like going down there,” he said. “I find it kind of depressing at this point.”

Aside from tenants leaving 25 W. Michigan Ave., there have been few signs of change to the historic 19-story building since new owners took it over in 2008. The building remains condemned from the fifth story up, and its lower floors are mostly vacant.

Entrances are now locked to curious pedestrians interested in assessing the condition of interior details like the mosaic ceiling that made the building a Midwest showpiece early on in its life.

When the tower opened in 1931 as the home of Merchants National Bank and Trust Co., it touted 30 teller windows and claimed to have not only the first escalator in Battle Creek but the first escalator in any bank in the world. A news story at the time said one man worked year-round cleaning the tower’s windows.

The building with its Indiana limestone, black granite exterior details, marble floors and art deco murals was built for $1.7
million, or the equivalent of more than $25 million today.

A promotional brochure from the same period pitched the building as a prime spot for businesses. “The location of the building in the center of the business district, made the ground floor highly desirable … and more desirable for rent-producing occupancy than for banking purposes,” it reportedly said.

But in recent years its high-profile location and stature hasn’t made the Heritage Tower immune to the problems facing downtown Battle Creek, and many of its tenants have moved out. Barista Blues Café left its Michigan Avenue storefront at the tower’s base in early 2011 and reopened a couple of blocks west. Securitas security services moved out later that year.

Florida-based Random Acquisitions Inc. purchased the tower in 2008. President Tim Hogan said that along with a ground floor space rented by WWMT (Channel 3), the building still has a couple of other small business tenants.

Hogan said having tenants scattered around the building makes it difficult to perform major repairs, so the company has preferred to see tenants leave when their leases end.

A down economy has made it hard to find funding to put toward the building he said, but the company has upgraded the boiler system and is doing ongoing roof repairs.

Hogan believed the Heritage Tower was in better condition now that it was when his company purchased it. Random Acquisitions is still trying to put together a vision for the tower, he said.

“We’re not made of money, and we’re trying to do it right,” he said. “I think we’ve got a great spot and a great building, and I hope that in the near future we’re able to do some really great things with it.”

Radio station WIN 98.5 operated out of the Heritage Tower for 14 years before leaving in July 2010. The county music station now broadcasts from the seventh floor of the Battle Creek Tower, the Heritage Tower’s near-twin at 70 W. Michigan.

“Our space (in the Heritage Tower) was experiencing some issues with the mechanical equipment, and there were some issues controlling the air conditioning and the heat at a temperature most people would consider comfortable,” said Peter Tanz, vice president at Midwest Communications, which runs the station.
“There wasn’t anything they could do while we were still there.”

So when the station’s lease was up, the company decided to take advantage of tax breaks at the Battle Creek Tower and move the station into a newer, more functioning space.

Tanz said he’s witnessed the reversal of futures for the two towers. In the 1990s, it was the Heritage Tower that was full and the Battle Creek Tower that needed help.

“It really has been the tale of two cities,” he said. “You have one very prosperous tower, and you have one tower that is very definitely a redevelopment option.”

One reason for the success of the Battle Creek Tower is the site’s designation as a Renaissance Zone, which exempts the owner and tenants from some taxes.

The Renaissance Zone status is no longer available to sites like the Heritage Tower, but Karl Dehn, CEO of Battle Creek Unlimited, said there are other incentives available that would help offset the cost of investment or entice new tenants to the building.

Finding new tenants for the Heritage Tower is a matter of finding businesses with needs that match the specifications of the building, Dehn said. He acknowledged that the building needs “considerable improvements,” but said Random Acquisitions appears to have made some small progress with repairs.

Ideally, Dehn said he’d like to see the Heritage Tower become a successful mixed-use property. He said gradual improvements to individual floors or sections would be more likely than a full-scale renovation.

McKay remembered his father struggling to keep up with repairs on the building, so he was sympathetic to the challenges facing the current owner.

“I have no idea what will be the ultimate fate of that building,” McKay said. “It’s a hard place to maintain. On the other hand, what do you do with it? How would you take it down? It was built to last, but unfortunately with the mechanics inside, things wear out, things have to be replaced.”
The Heritage Tower, in the foreground, is nearly empty and in need of rehabilitation, while the Battle Creek Tower, a few blocks away on Michigan Avenue, is a vibrant home for people and businesses. / John Grap/The Enquirer

Timeline for a landmark

• May 1930: Construction begins.
• Aug. 15, 1931: Merchants National Bank and Trust Co. Tower opens to the public.
• June 1935: The building, closed during the Great Depression, reopens as Security National Bank.
• 1978: The building is renamed George C. McKay Tower after the first chairman of Security National Bank.
• 1982: Comerica Bank buys the tower.
• 1993: Dore International Development Inc. buys the building, renames it Heritage Tower.
• May 2007: Building is listed for sale on eBay.
• August 2008: Heritage Tower is sold for $700,000 to Florida-based Random Acquisitions.