

Hot Off the Press: Small-town Heritage Church Fighting for its Life

The Erie Street United Church in Ridgetown, Ontario, faces imminent demolition. But even though the pews and stained glass windows of this 1876 Gothic Revival-style church were recently removed, not everyone has given up hope on its salvation.

A local group began looking for funds to buy the church after the Chatham-Kent council approved the demolition permit for the landmark building on December 1. The group, whose primary donor is a retired schoolteacher who is not even a member of the congregation, made an offer in mid-December. The church trustees have countered with a figure twice as high.

It is thought that there has been another offer made by a developer who wants to put condos in the middle of this Victorian neighbourhood.

The chief building official had advised that the building was not structurally sound (work needs to be done on the prominent steeple, the foundations and roof)

and must be demolished if the improvements weren't made.

Since the shrinking congregation lacked the estimated \$1.2 million for repairs, the trustees for the Erie Street United Church applied for a demolition permit, despite its 1996

heritage designation. The congregation has moved into the nearby Salvation Army Church.

The Architectural Conservancy of Ontario (ACO) is also taking action against the demolition. Michael McClelland of E.R.A. Architects has written an ACO Preservation Works report to the effect that the building was not in any immediate danger and was in fact in relatively good condition for its age. The report was reviewed by Steve Adema of Tacoma Engineering of Guelph and Pieter Chung, P. Eng., and principal of Roof Tile Management. Both agreed the building was repairable and demolition was not warranted.

It has been suggested that the church would

make an ideal site for the local library. The current library needs to expand and studies have been made in that direction.

To gain time to negotiate with the church trustees and to gauge again the possibilities of finance, the ACO asked Ontario Minister of Culture Aileen Carroll to issue a stop work order on demolition of the church. In spite of intense negotiations and continuing research, the Minister denied the request. However, Peter Tabuns, MPP for Toronto-Danforth, raised the issue in the Ontario Legislature on December 10.

"Once again, the Minister of Culture has failed in her responsibility to protect Ontario's heritage ... We lost Alma College in St. Thomas to fire after the minister refused to act. At [this] rate we'll see an awful lot more buildings lost in this province," stated Mr. Tabuns.

According to the Ontario Heritage Trust, Henry Langley, the most prolific architect in 19th-century Ontario, designed the church in 1875. He left the implementation of his design to William G. Malcomson, who later became an award-winning international architect.

Despite the fight or perhaps because of it, something positive has resulted: a Chatham-Kent branch of the ACO has been formed, "which will help ensure closer monitoring of our built environment," said Marlee Robinson, a branch member. She added that all the media attention also has "helped educate people on the importance of our built heritage."

CK Times.ca, 12/02/08 and 12/16/08; Chatham-Kent, demolition application, 11/21/08 and Council minutes, 12/01/08; Architectural Conservancy of Ontario (www.archconserv.ca).

Developer Appeals Halifax Council's Decision on Controversial Waterside Centre Project

Developer Ben McCrea, principal of the Armour Group, is embroiled in a bitter dispute over his proposed \$16-million Waterside Centre project on Halifax's waterfront. At stake are four heritage buildings. The proposed development plan would incorporate only the façades of the four buildings into a new nine-storey office complex to be built on the site. At street level, the buildings would keep their century-old heritage look and merge three stories up with a modern glass tower.

The buildings occupy a downtown block facing the Halifax waterfront bounded by Upper Water



Photo: Robert Chauik, Sun Media Corp.

David Graham House

La maison David Graham

Street, Duke Street, Hollis Street and the Cogswell interchange. They comprise the 1820 Harrington MacDonald-Briggs Building (the oldest remaining commercial building in Halifax), the 1861 Fishwick & Company Building, the 1926 Imperial Oil Building and the 1840 building that housed the Sweet Basil restaurant, the last wooden “sailortown” structure on Halifax’s Water Street. All, except Sweet Basil, are registered historic properties.

Phil Pacey, president of the Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia, explained that Sweet Basil had heritage status for 26 years until the Armour Group found a clerical error in the registration process.



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The heritage buildings on the block were saved from destruction in the 1970s when local heritage advocates stopped a planned harbourfront expressway which would have demolished all older buildings on the waterfront. The move was seen as key to reviving the Halifax waterfront and Halifax’s downtown tourism.

Last fall, the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) council rejected Mr. McCrea’s plan to redevelop this historic block on the Halifax waterfront, despite approval by HRM staff.

At issue was concern that the design did not conform closely enough to bylaws requiring that additions to heritage buildings be “subordinate” to existing structures. Heritage groups criticized the plan for preserving the façades only and not adequately protecting the buildings’ overall heritage value.

Part of the controversy stems from the interpretation of legal restrictions concerning registered historic sites. Provincial heritage regulation applies only to the façades of registered buildings and not to the interior portions of the buildings.

The Halifax planning code, however, requires that new construction around historically registered buildings meet undefined standards for scale and compatibility. Ultimately, these interpretations are up to council.

For now, the fate of the Waterside Centre is in the hands of the Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board (UARB). The Armour Group announced its appeal to the UARB to overturn Halifax Regional Municipality council’s decision on the same day it began demolishing the building that housed the Sweet Basil restaurant. The appeal will be heard in January.

Mr. McCrea said the Waterside Centre proposal was the only financially feasible way to preserve the buildings’ heritage. He has devoted much of his career to preserving heritage properties in downtown Halifax, receiving kudos for such projects as Historic Properties and Founders Square.

If his Waterside Centre appeal is rejected, he warns of what he calls the “logical consequence” for downtown Halifax—“boarded up buildings and parking lots.”

The remaining heritage buildings are now in limbo—waiting the required one-year period for heritage demolitions.

At a September public meeting, many condemned the project and said nothing of worth would be achieved by saving only the shell of a historic building. A petition with over 690 names opposing the development was presented to city council in October. Waterside is “the most egregious example of historic destruction since the proposal to tear down the Historic Properties and [represents] deplorable Disneyfication,” said Halifax resident and historic property owner Michael Goodyear.

Judith Cabrita, former president of the Nova Scotia Tourism Industry, pointed out that tourism brings \$600 million to the province annually and is the largest industry in Nova Scotia. Tourism depends on maintaining an “authentic” cityscape, she said.

Possible solutions have been suggested including a land swap or a compromise development, but to date all have been rejected.

Chronicle Herald, 11/03/08, 11/04/08, 11/07/08, 12/04/08; *The Coast*, Halifax’s website, 09/18/08 and 10/31/09; *Globe and Mail*, 12/03/08; www.thecoast.ca, 09/18/08.