

ADDING WITHOUT

by
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New Developments



Photo : Arthur Carter, Austen House

IT SUBTRACTING ent in Historic Districts



Photo : Arthur Carter, Austen House



Above and left: The last wooden “sailortown” structure on Halifax’s Upper Water Street, the Violet Clark Building was demolished to make way for the Waterside Centre’s planned main entrance.

The thud

and crash of demolition work last October signalled the destruction of a Halifax landmark. The former Violet Clark Building lost its heritage designation earlier in the year when Halifax developer The Armour Group unearthed a clerical error in the building’s registration process. For 25 years the 1800s wood frame structure had been home to the well-known Sweet Basil restaurant and formed part of the historic panorama that defines the city’s Historic Properties. The latter are a series of 19th century Georgian and Classical-styled buildings with brick and granite fronts noted, in part, as one of the earliest heritage preservation projects undertaken by the private sector in Canada. In fact, the Historic Properties was second only to San Francisco’s Ghiradelli Square and predated Boston’s Faneuil Hall.

All the more the irony, then, that the company responsible for the demolition of the Violet Clark Building was the very same developer who originally helped preserve the Historic Properties and transformed them into the appealing street scene they offer today.

Indeed, The Armour Group made its decision on the Violet Clark Building within a week of a split city council vote that turned down its proposal for a \$16-million commercial and office space development known as Waterside Centre that would preserve only the façades of four of the Historic Properties’ heritage buildings.

The issue of development in Canada’s historic neighbourhoods and districts is becoming increasingly contentious. Deciding on what is appropriate to save—while allowing modern design and intensification—is being hotly debated by municipal councils and conservation review bodies.

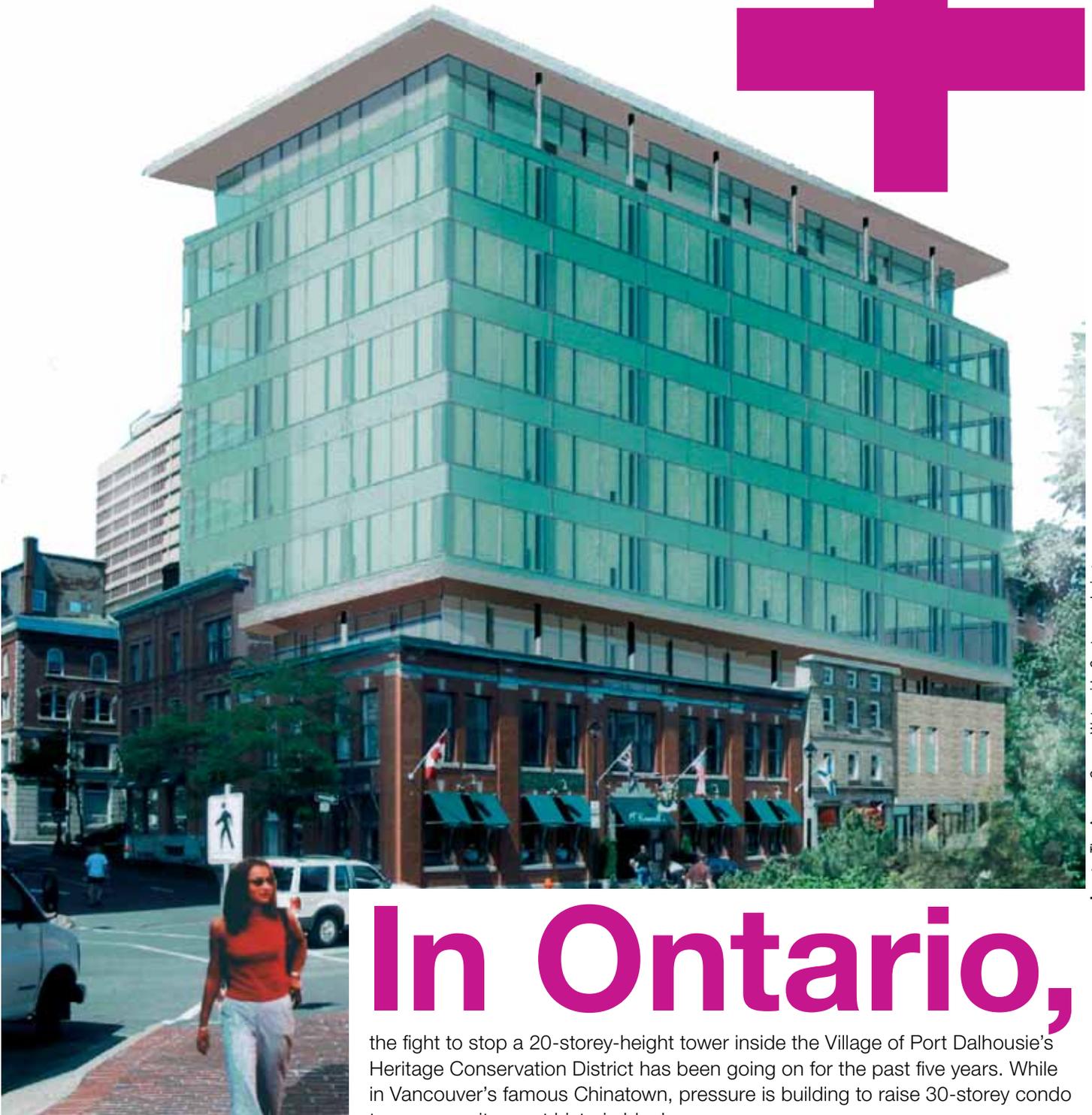


Image: The Armour Group, Waterside Centre rendering

A computer generated rendering of the proposed Waterside Centre facing Upper Water Street.

In Ontario,

the fight to stop a 20-storey-height tower inside the Village of Port Dalhousie's Heritage Conservation District has been going on for the past five years. While in Vancouver's famous Chinatown, pressure is building to raise 30-storey condo towers near its most historic blocks.

Back in Halifax, Ben McCrea is frustrated. Chair of The Armour Group, he says the Violet Clark Building was "out of whack with everything else," and sat where the main entrance would be situated to the new contemporary office complex he wants to build.

McCrea's previous developments have won civic, national and international awards for preservation. Besides the aforementioned Historic Properties, The Armour also developed Founders Square in downtown Halifax in 1986, a 21,400-sq.-m., 16-storey building that preserved the façades of a block of historic structures downtown. Waterside Centre takes much the same approach, proposing to retain the façades of the Historic Properties' buildings, while erecting a nine-storey contemporary office tower behind and above them.

Illustration: From "PDVC Proposal Heritage Evaluation," Goldsmith Borgal & Co. Ltd.



Photo : PROUD



■ The five-year struggle to block a massive 20-storey-height condo tower, hotel and theatre in the low-rise heritage conservation district of Port Dalhousie has generated great concern in Ontario's heritage community. In February 2009, after a grueling 21-week hearing, heritage advocates were astonished when the Ontario Municipal Board ruled in favour of the condo development. Despite this set back, efforts to stop the development continue. The situation underscores the limited protection provided by heritage designation and how the decisions about the size and scale of infill can become politically contentious.

Originally the northern entry to the first three Welland canals (1829 -1930), the historic village of Port Dalhousie (now part of the City of St. Catharines) still possesses much of its canal village streetscape of commercial and residential buildings dating back to the mid-to late-19th century. In December 2003 a large part of the village, including its commercial core, was designated a heritage district under the *Ontario Heritage Act* with a height limit of three storeys in the zoning bylaw and heritage guidelines. Five months later, a proposal surfaced from the Port Dalhousie Vitalization Corporation (PDVC) to construct a 33-storey condo tower in the centre of the district. The volunteer community organization PROUD (Port Realizing Our Unique Distinction) was subsequently formed.

Of primary concern was that the condo development did not respect the heritage values of the designated heritage district and had a strong negative impact on heritage fabric. The PDVC development designs required the demolition of some buildings and showed the tower looming over Port Dalhousie's small stone jail, one of the oldest prisons in Ontario (photos at left). Those in favour PDVC proposal argued that selective demolition of heritage buildings and the scale of the development were necessary to secure the long-term development of Port Dalhousie.

Port Dalhousie's Condo Tower



Photo : Arthur Carter, Austen House

Above: The Shaw Building anchors the corner of Hollis and Duke Streets, part of the Historic Properties block to be developed by The Armour Group.

Right: The Violet Clark Building was part of the historic streetscape.

But a lot

has changed in the conservation movement over past twenty years since the development of Founders Square. Many heritage professionals, planners and advocates now consider the retention of historic façades alone as token preservation and are looking for more extensive integration of historic buildings into new designs.

Halifax preservation advocate Philip Pacey is one of many in the city who object to Waterside Centre. Pacey, past-president of the Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia, contends maintaining only the façades of the historic buildings (including the Harrington Building, the oldest remaining commercial building in Halifax) does not satisfy either Nova Scotia legislation that protects the exterior appearance of buildings—meaning four walls and a roof—or the city’s planning strategy. That strategy includes bylaws requiring that new construction be “subordinate” to existing heritage structures and that it meet standards for scale and compatibility. The problem is that standards—even when based on the National Standards and Guidelines—have left terms like “compatibility” open to interpretation.

Also at issue is the disruption of three blocks of historic buildings with the insertion of an office tower in the central block. “To have a nine-storey glass tower sticking up in what is the city’s most prized historic precinct would be most unfortunate,” says Pacey wryly.

For his part, McCrea is drawn to the bottom line. Since the Nova Scotia College of Art left the Historic Properties to move to a new campus on the waterfront, operating costs to maintain the vacant buildings have cost The Armour Group about \$250,000 annually, he claims.



Photo : Arthur Carter, Austen House



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Historic Properties' pedestrian courtyard.

In the case

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of the Waterside Centre, the rejection of McCrea's plan by the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) council was overturned by the Nova Scotia Utility Review Board (URB) in an appeal in the spring, which concluded that the Heritage Trust and the City interpreted the Regional Municipal Planning Strategy too narrowly.

While the URB noted Waterside Centre's construction costs would be nearly three times that of preserving the historic buildings, it also pointed out that the estimated \$5.8 million would just bring the buildings up to current code. The URB opined that the cost of Waterside's features such as increased space and better air ventilation will make the project "likely to be, but just barely, economically viable."

The uproar over Waterside Centre came just as the City was reviewing building restrictions in the downtown core and the development quickly became a flash point and symbol of the ensuing debate. The resulting so-called HRMbyDesign blueprint for development, which claims to draw a balance between heritage preservation and modern development, would allow for higher density and taller towers in the downtown. It is unclear, however, whether Waterside Centre would have been approved under the HRMbyDesign guidelines. Height would be limited to about seven storeys and larger setbacks would be required.

Regardless, Pacey advocates for preservation of entire structures, arguing that it also makes ecological sense because all the building materials are retained, instead of being hauled to landfill. As for McCrea, when asked if he would do anything differently if he needs to get approval for a development such as Waterside again, the developer replied: "Yeah. Take out a demolition permit."

Vancouver's Chinatown



Photo : Vancouver Sun

■ The question of how to fit new buildings into historic districts has been plaguing Vancouver's Chinatown for years. With business on the decline and a lagging economy, local heritage advocates are at odds with developers and city planners as to whether the answer lies in condominium towers.

Four plots of land in the historical neighbourhood, mostly owned by developers, have been named "special sites" by the City because of developer interest in building towers of condos. So far, these proposed sites have only been a topic of discussion, not a concrete plan.

Before 2007 developers took advantage of the now-suspended Transfer of Density Program, part of Vancouver's Heritage Building Rehabilitation Program. The "bank" of density available to be purchased and transferred to other development sites had ballooned to 1.45 million sq. ft. City council froze the creation of any new density fearing that adding to the supply would devalue it. Under the program, property developers were allowed to offset the extra costs of heritage rehabilitation by obtaining bonus density. They could then use the bonus density, transfer it to another site, or place the bonus density into the "bank" for purchase. With a weak economy, there have been fewer buyers for the bonuses leaving an oversupply.

With the lack of significant financial incentives coupled

with the threat of over-sized development, the future of Chinatown's heritage is very uncertain.

Other 30- to 40-storey towers, like the ones proposed for Chinatown's Heritage Conservation District, have been built elsewhere in Vancouver. But massive towers have not translated into business for areas such as the CityGate and International Village developments—both large condo tower projects nearby. According to Fred Mah (pictured above), president of the Chinatown Society Heritage Building Association, business in these areas has not increased, and they become places where people drive in to their underground parking, and drive out again.

"You need restoration and new vitality," said Joe Wai, a local architect who was part of the protest to save Chinatown from being demolished for a freeway. "But it should be unique—and not in the three most historic blocks in the core. I'm not against redevelopment at all. It will be essential for Chinatown."

According to Wai, nothing further has happened with the plan for the towers in Chinatown, but he expects a showdown later this fall. "The opposition to this development is very loud at this point, so it may be a while before it goes to council. It's a highly territorial debate," said Wai. "At this point, I keep asking people if they can see a 30-storey building in the middle of Quebec City—most say they can't, so why would we put one right in the middle of historic Chinatown?"