

Report: Ontario Heritage Conference: Stratford 2016

Stratford is a beautiful city that is a great example of a community that assigns priority to the preservation and reuse of its heritage landscape.

The centre of the town is a large open hub with streets that run at angles from the town centre like spokes in wheel. The city planners get an A+ for the wide streets and the large square that allows great site lines and ample parking space. The planners understood the importance of open space and open sightlines in each direction in the town core.

Stratford illustrates the importance of open space and open sight-lines in heritage districts.

Newmarket's market square with its view of heritage buildings on its perimeter is a distinct asset we currently enjoy that must be recognized as integral to our town's heritage character, and something that will be lost forever if the massive Clock-tower building allowed to proceed. The current sight-lines allow our Town Hall to be visible from the sidewalk on Park Ave, and most of the Trinity United Church from Botsford Street. The proposed Clock-tower development will erase these lines of sight and the open feeling of market square forever.

At the centre of the Stratford Town centre is a marvelous 19th century town hall with a wonderful Victorian period stone exterior. The building has been carefully restored twice – most recently in the past fifteen years or so.

The Stratford Town hall's exterior red sandstone is clean and in good condition with restoration work carried out on an ongoing basis, and promptly when needed. One part of the two exterior stairwells was closed on the day we were there for repairs to the concrete steps.

The town hall continues to serve as a vibrant hub for the community housing both the council chambers and a large theatre auditorium/multipurpose room with an elegant stage. This large room with a thirty foot frescoed ceiling boasts a wonderful balcony with significant seating.

There are various offices for town departments in the building and the interior woodwork and decoration is lovingly restored to original beauty and maintained while modern additions such as elevators and air-conditioning have been installed in a manner that does not detract from the building's heritage appearance.

The retail stores that line the perimeter of the town square are located, for the most part, in heritage buildings lovingly restored. The shop signs are tasteful and range from the traditional to the contemporary with most adding to an overall ambiance that is pleasing,

neither prescribed or Disneyland in character, but rather a pleasing mixture of the quality heritage and modern design.

There are many lovely historic homes in the centre of the town that have been lovingly restored and maintained in their 19th and early 20th century style.

Stratford is not without its own struggles over heritage preservation versus modern development. For example is a wonderful brick Georgian Manor house with columns in the Stratford town centre whose owner is seeking a demolition permit to redevelop the site. The white paint has been deliberately scraped from the exterior as if being prepped for repainting but apparently has been left in this condition for some-time, demolition to give the property less visual appeal. This lovely home, now in peril, is an example of the need for town council to use proactive designation of especially significant buildings where efforts to engage the owners interest in preservation and designation have failed.

The Stratford community is keenly aware and proud of its past heritage as a railway centre where locomotives were repaired and serviced in an immense building near the town centre. That building is currently the subject of discussions as to how the building, and the overall site that covers several blocks, can be repurposed. Likely, part of the building exterior will be repurposed to maintain the railway heritage. The rest of the building will likely be demolished to permit redevelopment of the site that once employed several thousand workers working on railway locomotives.

The Stratford town council and community had the foresight in the early 1950's to invest in the creation of the Shakespearean festival which now boasts several theatres, supports a vibrant bed and breakfast industry in the heritage district as well as many fine restaurants in the heritage district. Tourism is a major contributor to the local economy. In recent years, other industrial buildings have been repurposed to house a satellite campus of the University of Waterloo. Already this campus has spawned local high tech start-ups that will diversify the tax base and provide quality local jobs.

Bike trails, gardens and the Festival Theatre grace the banks of the meandering Avon River.

Heritage Conference hi-lites

Wayne Morgan:

- Dealing with change means considering/thinking about the needs of other stakeholders whose priority is not heritage.
- Critical to ensure that the role of heritage is understood by the public and other stakeholders.
- We cannot simply be reactive or passive in our role.
- "We must be cultural warriors."

David Prosser: Director of the Stratford Festival address:

- The imperfection of old buildings does not diminish their worth – it enhances their worth, just as we ourselves are imperfect beings.
- Buildings are not static – they are organic, evolutionary, interesting in their imperfection.
- Architecture is a primary means whereby form and structure are given to our experience of the world.
- Heritage enlarges our sense of what we are as humans individually and collectively.
- Parklands, buildings, landscape are a legacy we leave. They confirm that civilization is alive.

Panel Discussion: Heritage preservation – a political perspective.

- Responses to heritage too often reactive rather than proactive.
- It is essential that councils, communities, be prepared to "walk the walk" when it comes to heritage preservation.
- We need to encourage champions who can imagine/manage adaptive re-use of heritage buildings.
- Celebrate heritage with walking tours, story- telling, lectures
- Story-telling is very important. History telling is important.
- Municipal secondary plans can be catalysts for heritage awareness and preservation.
- OMB reform: The OMB needs to assign more priority to heritage.
- There must be funding for heritage preservation projects. Owners, church congregations, cannot be expected to fund heritage preservation alone.

- Museums and libraries are support services for heritage. They are venues for discussion and public awareness of heritage. There must be more money for these services and heritage outreach to the public, the real estate brokers, and developers.
- How do we prioritize heritage projects: The public must be engaged in this process and provide the “push” to the elected representatives.
- There need to be significant activation grants for heritage building repair and façade development.
- Problem of silos: Various committees related to heritage, development, planning, culture ... operate in isolation from one another rather than operating as part of an overall scheme. For example, water conservation may be focused only on fish while ignoring other elements of watercourses including heritage elements.
- Heritage issues need to be reframed as opportunities as opposed to problems or obstacles.
- There must be an overriding positive and proactive attitude to heritage by town councils that will resonate and establish an overall awareness and priority to heritage with town staff and department policies.
- Architectural design, landscape and town planning efforts must enhance and reflect and showcase the activities of the community within.

Other Issues:

The conference noted the significant “graying” of heritage advocates. Ways must be found to involve young people in awareness and activities related to heritage preservation.

- Have young people use volunteer hours to help museums, libraries, heritage committee. Involve them in interesting projects such as walking tours, Facebook pages, reenactment of important heritage and historical events related to heritage properties.
- Young people must be engaged in the culture of heritage preservation from early years if they are going to be supportive of heritage in the future.

Malcolm Watts - Heritage Newmarket