

Historical Society revives role as advocate for heritage preservation

By Brock Weir

The Aurora Historical Society was founded over 55 years ago to fight for the preservation of local heritage and helping to secure, in the words of Society founder Dr. Leslie Oliver, Aurora's 'jewels in the crown.'

Over its first half-century, it worked diligently to preserve reminders of our past, but once the 'Aurora Collection' was transferred to the stewardship of the Town of Aurora five years ago for the re-establishment of the Aurora Museum of Archives, much of the Society's work has focused on the preservation of Hillary House, Aurora's only National Historic Site.

That important work continues, of course, but now the Aurora Historical Society (AHS) is looking to get back to basics, re-establishing itself as a passionate voice for the preservation of the Town's built heritage.

'Keeping up the house is a chore - a welcome chore - that takes a lot of effort, but I think it is important to branch out and look at other buildings and other issues in Town,' says Erika Baird, Executive Director of the AHS. 'This is a step in the right direction. There was a time when people were less inclined to step out from Hillary House or say, 'What happens outside is maybe not our concern' and it has been a little bit refreshing to say that things have changed.'

'When (AHS Board President) John Green and (Past-President) Bill Albino came to me with this [advocacy role] I was really excited that this is what we are going to do and we would be taking on that role again because we felt very strongly about it. The reaction from our members and people in our community was nothing but positive. I got a number of positive emails saying, 'thank you for doing this. Thank you for taking on this role again.' They were thrilled and it was great to hear we were doing the right thing.'

Helping to spur this move back to advocacy work were a series of proposals for Aurora's traditional downtown business core. In recent years, a number of the historic office blocks on the south side of Yonge and Wellington have been bought up by one owner. Council this summer, following a recommendation from Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee, passed a resolution to put 15 of these buildings, eight of which are owned by one individual, under historical designation. However, a lawyer on behalf of this client, formally objected to the measures.

The process is still underway.

'There was a feeling at the time that if they were going to remove all of this, Aurora is just going to be a whistle-stop,' says Mr. Green, on any ideas to demolish and rebuild these historic buildings to allow for the widening of Yonge Street. 'When there was this talk of smashing things down, we said, 'Wait a minute!''

Over the years, Mr. Green has seen a number of instances of property owners promising to preserve components of heritage buildings - such as facades - or rebuild them to exact specifications in a slightly different location, with varying - and often negative - degrees of success.

'One wonders whether this is deliberate or whether they are accidents,' says Mr. Green, referencing attempts to integrate the façade of the historic Doane House on Wellington Street East opposite Victoria Street into the entrance of a new apartment complex, a project that was abandoned after the remaining sliver of building was suddenly found to be structurally unsound. 'Other times, buildings are purchased and left to literally sit there, rot and become a hazard. They ask for permission to take them down because it is not worth saving. You can see the patterns we go through. I can see [the developers'] point of view: they buy a property and think this thing is a piece of junk, they have ideas of what they would like to do and they find ways of doing it.'

'We know that change is inevitable and some houses that maybe shouldn't have been taken down were taken down. They were small and humongous houses have been put in their place and people have been so upset they didn't realise what was going to happen. Now they are living in constant shadow. For example, these buildings on Yonge Street, the feedback I got there was a plan would be to widen Yonge Street by taking these buildings down and then we can rebuild them exactly what they used to look like. I said, 'You don't understand. This is history, this is real.''

The revival of the Aurora Historical Society's advocacy role became a reality over the summer in the heat of the municipal election campaign when the Board, via Ms. Baird, pressed each candidate seeking office on how important Aurora's heritage was to them. For some of the candidates, heritage was a vital and important part of their visions for the community over the next four years. For a few candidates, it was not really important at all. The candidates' responses were circulated to each AHS member verbatim and were important for these members in making their decisions at the polls.

Over the coming months and years, Mr. Green says advocacy work includes the AHS' rebuilding of Aurora's last surviving coach house, dismantled and preserved from the nearby Horton Place, once funds are available. Horton Place, now an insurance office at

the corner of Yonge and Irwin, could be promoted as a prime example of how restoration can maintain the integrity of a house while adapting it for modern use. Meanwhile, he adds, there has 'been some conversation' regarding bring the historic Petch House, now standing behind the Aurora Seniors' Centre, to the Hillary property. A move like this would be a point of pride for the AHS while making it accessible to visitors and animated for events and programs.

'History is our identity,' says Mr. Green.