

Armoury's heritage features should be considered in revamp: Committee

By Brock Weir

The historic Aurora Armoury is set to begin a new chapter in its nearly 140-year-old life, but the features and battle scars it has collected over the years should be preserved as part of its future, according to the town's Heritage Advisory Committee.

The Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) has tasked consultants who are planning extensive renovations to the historic building with maintaining features which tell a story of its past military use as it is overhauled to make way for the Canadian Institute of Food and Wine, an offshoot of Niagara College.

As part of the overall vision for the building, the western side of the Armoury will be opened up to connect it to the surrounding Town Park, making it an integral part of the many activities that take place in the popular green space throughout the year. But these dramatic changes raised alarm bells for at least one member of the HAC who said this could have a detrimental effect not only on the building's identity, but its integrity as well.

Sounding off on the plan was HAC member James Hoyes who said his eyes landed on the words 'rehabilitate' and 'renovate' in a recent report before the committee.

'I look at this building and I don't see it as a renovation; I see it as a rebuilding - a demolition and a rebuilding because that is probably what would happen,' Mr. Hoyes contended.

The reason he says he has these concerns is the report notes 'several major renovations' will need to take place to protect the Armoury from deterioration and ensure its functionality to contemporary use but protecting some heritage features would 'inhibit' the project.

'To me, that says everything that is heritage - window openings, trim, everything that we would evaluate a normal heritage building - are irrelevant in this letter because they get in the way of what you actually want to do to the building,' he continued. 'It [says] it will restore the relationship of the building to the park [but] it doesn't say it will restore the building, it says the 'relationship' and that is why I am concerned.

'I see this as a rebuild that gives tribute to what was in the past, not a renovation. I see this as a homage [to its original use] and it just looks like an institutional building that has some heritage attributes attached to it.'

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who chaired the most recent HAC meeting, said she shared some of Mr. Hoyes' concerns, particularly when it came to changes to exterior walls, as it would change the look of the building.

Nevertheless, Anthony Ierullo, Aurora's Manager of Strategic Planning, one of the leading proponents of this project, along with architect Jim Burkitt, tried to allay some of these concerns.

'For this building to be a success, it has to be read as what it was, and for me the clearest is the north elevation where you have six windows and the vestibule we see in other military buildings of this stature and how you enter in,' said Mr. Burkitt. 'We know we are making changes and we're opening the building up but, at the same time, we sure hope this building should in a number of ways be as important as it has been for the last 150 years.

'There have been changes and additions to the [original drill] shed, but truly it is that shed shape that was iconic as a drill shed and a place to meet in the park. What we're excited to explore is that we see this building still gets understood in that way as a historical place, but [also] a place that integrates into the park.'

Details cited by Mr. Hoyes - particularly the window openings and trim - are not being taken 'lightly,' he added, and they hope to 'refurbish them as best we can.'

Indeed, additions and modifications have taken place on the building as early as 1895 with a new floor work, according to Heritage Planner Jeff Healey, along with extensions during the Second World War and further work in the 1960s and 70s.

'One thing that has endured with all these changes is the shape,' said Mr. Burkitt. 'We want to bring it back to the structure that holds them up. It sure would be nice to see where those angled beams extend up into the ceiling.'

As much as consideration will be given to the heritage nature of the building, it will be renovated for modern use.

'When we began this process, we had obviously the concept of a partner, so we wanted to make sure the space fit the partner but, more importantly, we wanted to ensure it was multi-functional space that can be easily repurposed to community-type space,' said Mr. Ierullo on the deal with Niagara College, but also underscoring the commitment they have made to be community partners.

'That being said, we are very excited about the partnership and hope that it stands the test of time and Niagara College operates for an extended period of time in the Armoury. But the intent is to have enough flexibility that if the partnership is not successful for whatever reason, we can retain ownership and repurpose the building again or some other community use.

?A significant mandate of this partnership is also to focus on re-established community uses in the Armoury. Niagara College has made it clear that they are actively interested in engaging with community partners on the use of this facility as they maintain their tenancy. As part of our agreement with them, there is access to their services, whether it be catering or programming as well as access to that facility.?