

Aurora Town Square a testament to 'quiet revolution' in how Town looks at culture



This Saturday, the Town will formally dedicate Aurora Town Square, a new state-of-the-art facility that is not only intended to be a prime community gathering place in the Town's historic downtown core, but a facility that integrates past, present and future.

For Dr. Leslie Oliver, who founded the Aurora Historical Society 61 years ago, it's a testament to what he describes as 'a kind of quiet revolution' in how Aurora, and towns like it, have come to value heritage and culture.

'It's difficult to imagine that day when cultural matters and community cultural development were viewed as ultra vires, well beyond the responsibilities and interests of Aurora's Municipal Council,' said Oliver, now a resident of Owen Sound, in reminiscences shared to mark the Society's Diamond Anniversary.

He recalls the early foundations of the Aurora Historical Society at a time where politicians and civic leaders were unsure where volunteer-driven cultural organizations fit into the grand scheme of things, a far cry from the new chapter about to open where the Aurora Museum and Archives is a key cultural partner within the new development.

At the heart of the Aurora Museum and Archives is the 'Aurora Collection,' a gathering of important artefacts that tell Aurora's story which, in turn, used to form the heart of the Society itself.

'In recognizing and celebrating the Society's 60th anniversary, I muse on the Society's life experience, its struggles, and accomplishments, now as a recognized leader among Canadian volunteer, community-based, historical societies,' he says. 'I muse, too, over the birthing of the organization, its early struggle for public and political recognition, and the support of municipal Council, achieved often through stormy times. In retrospect, in all this, the Society has been fortunate to have been able to contribute to its times, moving with its times, as part of a larger public good, made possible by its times.'

'Seen in retrospect, the times have been ones of quiet, cultural revolution, and transition. Here opinion around the municipal Council table would evolve dramatically, from municipal Council having no place in Aurora's cultural life, to the current opening of a multi-million-dollar cultural centre.'

Dr. Oliver has had a fascination with history from his earliest memories.

He is the fourth-generation scion of the prominent Oliver family, a name which lives on in the local business community through the company his father founded, T.H. Oliver Heating and Cooling, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. He was inspired by E.H. Clarke to found what ultimately became the Aurora Historical Society (AHS) to mark the Town's Centennial in 1963.

Over the next few months, the AHS, with the support of the Mayor's office and requisite legal counsel, the Society was chartered as one of the first volunteer, citizen-based municipal historical societies in Canada to be charged with responsibilities for community cultural development. And the rush was on, he says.

Arrangements were made for gratuitous space in 'Doane Hall', the then somewhat dilapidated, but truly magnificent, Greek Revival, Yonge Street home of Aurora's first mayor, slated for demolition. With the support of the current owner, the Society's archives would tell the story of the two-room, elegant, centennial museum, created with the assistance of professional support imported from Toronto. Most importantly, the Society's Centennial Museum featured historic artifacts and archival materials on loan and gifted for this celebrious event, so it was that the 'Aurora Collection' was born.

It was a period in which independent, publicly sanctioned, historical Societies, with clearly documented, officially sanctioned, public mandates, like the AHS, were an oddity at the time. And municipal Councillors were uncertain as how to treat them, whether as friend or foe. And were often treated variously as both, in requests for financial support, and in lobbying for shifts in public policy and priority in the cultural and social affairs of community.

Looking back, I well recall of those early, formative years in the life of the Society in which its agenda seemed to merge, quite naturally, into two, often interrelated, main streams - community cultural development and interpretation, focused on museology and curation, and political advocacy in the cause of community cultural conservation.

Over the years, the curation element took on a life of its own, finding its initial home in the historic Church Street School under the guidance of local historians Jacqueline Stuart and Dr. John McIntyre.

The Town formally acquired the Aurora Collection from the AHS in the summer of 2013 and the artefacts have now come back home to the historic Church Street School, the expansion of which is a showpiece of the Aurora Town Square development.

To follow in the period of [the AHS' maturity] would be another historic decision: to turn over the AHS' founding Aurora Collection to the then newly-minted Aurora Museum & Archives where it quite rightfully belonged, said Oliver. There, the collection would be under due legislative protection, as gifts-in-kind, of historic, community significance. The transfer itself was a significant accomplishment providing a major milestone in the current development of the Aurora Cultural Centre, itself to be a centrepiece of the Aurora Town Square.

Currently, with the grand opening of a multimillion-dollar Aurora Town Square, it has indeed been a kind of quiet revolution, and an exercise of achievement in community cultural development, one step at a time - often with the enablement of the Aurora Historical Society and its multiple volunteers.

By Brock Weir