

BROCK'S BANTER: Revamping the space-time continuum

By Brock Weir

Stepping through the front door was like stepping through a time portal.

Everything around it had rapidly grown, expanded and modernized. Time stood still behind the creamy-coloured bricks, yet the passage of years mellowed their golden hue and, for reasons clear only to time itself, picked just a handful of bricks here and there to weather, as if to make the chosen ones just a little bit different from the rest.

Once inside, you were isolated.

The heavy banisters, elaborate wallpaper, carved furniture, Victorian bric-a-brac, bookshelves groaning under the weight of dusty volumes, and lacy drapes imparting a gauzy light onto the surroundings were completely transforming.

While the hustle and bustle of Yonge Street and the ebbing and flowing of Aurora's downtown core were just a curtain flicker away, you were worlds apart once inside Horton Place, the landmark heritage home on Yonge Street, on the northwest corner of Irwin Avenue.

I had multiple occasions to step through these other-worldly doors for various reasons. One of the first was to interview its occupant, historian John McIntyre, on his latest literary endeavour. The last was to speak to his sister, Mary Beth Hess, on their joint efforts to re-publish a book to coincide with the milestone anniversary of Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School. In between, was a visit on a Doors Open day to show off the magical place to others who had, until that point, only heard me rave about it.

As they stepped through the doors, they realised the wonders of the place on their own and, perhaps disappointedly, were unable to chalk up my enthusiasm to simple hyperbole.

So, it was with a certain degree of disappointment that I watched the decline of Horton Place as it more or less became a political football for a year or two.

As you might remember, just a few years ago, Horton Place was one of three properties proposed to form the core of Hillary-McIntyre Park, a plan which would have preserved Horton Place and Hillary House as living museums and transformed the building separating them into a new heritage resource.

It was a dream held by Horton Place's owner as he had lovingly preserved the building, his family home for generations, stretching back more than a century.

After all, if you had your own personal labour of love, wouldn't you be very selective over who you trusted to carry the torch?

It was a proposal vehemently supported by the Aurora Historical Society, which devoted a great deal of energy to making the pitch as a good use for Aurora's \$30+ million Hydro Reserve Funds, and supported by a large chunk of heritage-minded residents.

But, this is Aurora. Where there is a decent degree of support to be had, there is an opposite reaction and those equally vehemently opposed to the idea branded it, at best, a 'Heritage Disneyland' and, at worst, a 'waste' of the Hydro funds.

Like so many ideas in this Town, the idea fizzled after considerable Council time had been spent discussing it and it was back to the drawing board for all concerned.

Hillary House continues on in its merry way, the building immediately south of it remains languishing in a continual state of disrepair and Horton Place was eventually sold up, bought by State Farm agent Richard Gong for use as his new office.

As someone with an appreciation of history, it pained me to watch the showpiece house gutted from the inside, but my dismay was tempered by the fact that obvious love and care was being taken to preserve the façade, which has become so familiar to anyone who travels up or down Yonge Street with any kind of frequency.

The finished result, at least from the outside, is stunning with up-to-date landscaping and the creation of a parking lot, which can often be an eyesore, developed sensitively to the heritage surroundings.

I hadn't had an opportunity to go into the renovated building until Saturday when it popped up on the annual Doors Open tour, which is an opportunity for heritage and architecture aficionados and members of the regular public alike to get a glimpse inside heritage buildings and other programs that are not usually accessible to everyone every day.

For those who go on the tour year after year, Doors Open can sometimes be a 'been there, done that' scenario, but this year presented a few new added attractions; and top of my list was Gong's State Farm office, now comfortably settled into its storied surroundings.

It was well worth the wait.

Stepping through that door was still like stepping into a time portal, but a portal into a fascinating state of limbo. While the doors and walls give way to the building's place in Aurora's collective heritage, everything else is the epitome of a modern office.

The blend of the old and new is stunning and is a prime example of how, if done right, our heritage buildings can be transformed into practical, modern use.

The heritage park concept never came to pass, but what did eventually transpire is something unique in Aurora and a good example to others in this community on how heritage assets don't necessarily have to be razed in the name of progress or commerce.

In the last term of Council, the Town acquired tens of thousands of pieces of Aurora's history from the Aurora Historical Society which continue to form the Aurora Collection, now housed in the Aurora Museum & Archives.

At that time, Society members who had founded that institution over 50 years ago, offered the view that now that the care and maintenance of the extensive collection was no longer theirs to shoulder that their energies would be best spent going back to their roots: activism for the preservation of heritage.

Alas, that too has not come to pass ? yet ? but it might be time to look at that again. Someone needs to be the voice for preserving our heritage assets, not as static reminders of the past, but cornerstones to our future development.