

Get a virtual tour of new Aurora United Church at Sunday's Street Fest



By Brock Weir

The empty plot of land at the corner of Yonge and Tyler Streets has been raising questions about its future since the spring of 2014 but that will change this Sunday as members of the Aurora United Church will be stationed outside their former home to provide Aurorans with a sneak peek of what's to come.

Members of the Aurora United Church (AUC) community will be on hand to provide a virtual tour of the new church space, the foundations for which they hope to lay by the end of this year, a space which is designed to be a modern and airy place of worship with plenty of nods to its storied past.

The front of the church might be modern-style glass and brick, but just inside the door, suspended seemingly in midair will be five stained glass windows, prominent features of the historic Aurora United Church building, which were salvaged from the fire.

When we were able to tell the congregation the windows survived, it was a powerful moment, recalls Lorraine Newton-Comar, who leads AUC with Andy Comar. We just couldn't believe those windows survived. They weren't pretty, but they will be renewed and suspended from the entrance way. That, I think, for folks coming back, will be just wonderful.

Just beyond this reminder of the past will be an open sanctuary space, with flexible seating that will lend the space to many different uses including community uses and balcony seating.

We feel like we're on the other side of being able to imagine what it would be like to just open the doors and say, Come on in! says Lorraine. We already have our shovels, so we're anxious to get going. The video is essentially a view all the way around the project. You come in the front doors and what you see is the sanctuary and up to the balcony. It will be wonderful.

It is the heart of the building and I think people have been reassured. The building looks so contemporary and modern, but the inside still has some reflection of the past and that is what we're hoping for: that it wouldn't be so new that people would feel they were just out of water; there's enough there that they will feel home again.

It is a home that has provided spiritual healing to the community for 200 years.

It's a milestone anniversary that will be marked, but not marked in their traditional space.

Since the April 2014 fire, planners have been working hard to ensure a phoenix rises from the ashes. Most recently, archaeologists have been on site to ensure standards are met, but this activity has led to some confusion, according to the Ministers.

When the archaeological dig started, a lot of people felt we were starting the project, and again, it is just that there are so many new learning for us that before you get onto the land there are all these assessments that have to be done, says Lorraine. Unless you were building, you wouldn't know. There are some tests that are specific to Aurora, with the soil and all of that. The archaeological process is level two, so once they are done, we're done!?

And it can't come soon enough.

From the Ministers' perspectives, there is excitement in the air. They have fielded a lot of questions on just what they are intending to do with the site.

The building is the first touchstone for many people and they talk about what happened in the building, what happened when they

were growing up and those relationships that people developed over the years," says Andy.

Adds Lorraine: "There is a curiosity too. When we talk about the old sanctuary, we talk about it as that golden space, and it really did feel like a golden space and it was a wonderful feeling. The appeal will be for people to come to see what did you do with those memories? How were they translated in a more modern setting? We did want a more modern setting, we wanted something contemporary, something that people would note as they were driving up and down Yonge Street. They wanted a place they could be proud of as a congregation and ensure we have lots of space."

This is a view reiterated by Bill Newman, Chair of the Congregational Council.

Aurora United Church, he says, is not building for the present. Rather, they are building for the future.

"The community is changing, the church itself is changing," says Mr. Newman. "We want this building to be flexible enough and forward-looking enough to suit the future because what is going to happen in the future, even in the way of worship and community involvement, isn't the same way that has happened in the past."