

Preservation of pioneering factory to be considered amid intensification

For some, they are simply bricks and mortar standing in the way of intensification.

For others, they are silent but invaluable reminders of Aurora's early industrial days and of the community's contributions to the First and Second World Wars.

The last remaining buildings of the Sisman Shoe Factory have won a reprieve ? at least for now ? after applications have come forward to de-list the buildings as being of Cultural or Heritage Interest. De-listing could pave the way for an eight-storey mixed use apartment building and 18 townhouses.

While the parcel of land includes several buildings, including two detached homes, 34 Berczy Street is of particular interest due to its role in the development of the Sisman Shoe Factory, a company which outfitted the Canadian Armed Forces with footwear as they went overseas for King and Country.

Built in 1910, the brick building has been retrofitted for various uses over the last century, now clad in stucco following its conversion into multiple units.

According to a report before the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee, the heritage value of the buildings would be ?better served through documentation? rather than preservation as the buildings have been significantly altered.

Heritage evaluations, however, have scored 34 Berczy Street an 85/100, deeming the building worthy of designation.

Town Planner David Waters tells The Auroran staff are ?not currently? planning to bring a report to Council recommending the de-listing of the properties in September, but their futures were a key point of contention when the recommendation to de-list from the Town's Heritage Planner came before the Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) last month.

Before the debate, area resident Frank Pignataro of the Town Park Area Ratepayers' Association, said he was concerned that demolition would erase an important facet of Aurora's history.

?During challenging times, Sisman made [protective] safety footwear for our Canadian Military during their war efforts,? he said. ?Of greater significance is the Sisman Shoe Company's contributions to the livelihood and financial stability of many Aurora families. They were a community-minded company who supported local sports teams, charitable programs, and our local economy. The landmark cornerstone has contributed to Aurora being a wonderful community which many people have called home.

?For all those who have an affiliation to the company, we're here to advocate for the preservation of Aurora's history. To demolish a piece of Aurora's legacy and replace [it] with a plaque simply does not show respect to a pioneer building and company. When future generations ask about the community of Aurora's contributions to the war efforts, for the betterment of its citizens, it would be meaningful to be able to look at the original building, stand next to it, and reflect upon its rich history.?

This rich history was a common thread for members of the Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) who agreed with Mr. Pignataro's assessment, advocating for either the preservation of the building as a whole or to have large components of it incorporated into whatever is developed on the site, which happens to stand in an area designated by the Province of Ontario for significant intensification.

One of the most passionate defences of retaining the building was offered by HAC member ? and former councillor ? Bob McRoberts who said he ?totally disagreed? with the staff report stating the building's heritage would be ?better served? through documentation. He also took issue with the fact an application to de-list the building was even before them for review when the building scored so high on its heritage evaluation.

‘I would suggest that rather than tearing down 34 Berczy that it be incorporated or integrated into whatever development is to appear there,’ said Mr. McRoberts.

Sharing many of these views was former HAC member Neil Asselin who said he was ‘disappointed’ that the heritage evaluation carried out in March 2020 never made it before Council.

‘I think the fact that this building has been modified somewhat, unfortunately, should not discourage us or dissuade the argument that it is worthy of preservation,’ he said. ‘I think a rigorous intervention, rehabilitation is entirely possible. The new development [proposal] has taken cues from this building?’ to think that we can’t save this building and do that is maybe a failure of imagination and maybe a failure to believe in the power of architecture to do its job and rehabilitate old buildings and integrate them into new buildings.

‘We still want to grow and believe me, I am not against this development per se, but I am just very upset at how this has unfolded and this building has been ignored and maybe we lost a year in integrating this where we could have passed this designation and the architects and designers could have been working with them this time in the past year to bring us something that incorporated this building and, instead, here we are.’

Proponents of the plan said they would take HAC’s comments ‘into consideration’ but reiterated their support for staff’s recommendations.

‘They have been heavily adapted and modified over the years [and] their contextual relevance in terms of telling that story of the Sisman factory has changed dramatically,’ said architect Neil Philips. ‘With the original factory gone, the Sisman Mansion [gone] and the fact they have been so heavily modified, they really struggle to tell the story of the factory that was there. We very much are in line with the recommendations in the staff report that these buildings would be best interpreted through a combination of commemoration and interpretation and, of course, a financial contribution to the Heritage Reserve.’

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter