

Restoration is rewarding for builder honoured with others during Ontario Heritage Week



By Brock Weir

If builder Antonio Masongsong had to do it all over again, he'd ? well, to be perfectly honest, he probably wouldn't do it all over again, but restoring a heritage workers' house in Downtown Aurora back to its original glory has its own rewards.

Mr. Masongsong was one of several Aurora residents to be honoured at Town Hall last week for the biennial Town of Aurora Heritage Awards of Excellence. Handed down in collaboration with Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee and Ontario Heritage Trust, the awards recognize people, groups, and companies that have contributed to preserving Aurora's heritage and architecture in a variety of categories.

Mr. Masongsong was recognized in the ?Addition to Heritage Structure? category for his work on 56 Temperance Street, adding onto the building in a way that was sensitive to its unique heritage.

?Many houses built along Temperance Street were symmetrical, fairly simple in architectural detailing and modestly sized,? said Vanessa Hicks, Heritage Planner for the Town of Aurora at Wednesday's ceremony. ?These homes represent an important part of the early industrialization of Aurora.?

When asked what drove him to take on the challenge of restoring a heritage home rather than knocking it down and starting fresh, Mr. Masongsong says he was up for the challenge, but might think twice before doing it again.

?For the money I spent on that house, I could do two houses!? he said with a laugh. ?If money is not an option, it is the personal satisfaction. As I get deeper and deeper into the money pit, I realise there are rewards at the end. It's the uniqueness of what you are doing because you are building around something that is there and when you are finished, it's different!?

Pride was not the only reward he received when he came to the end of his journey, it had its tangible rewards as well from ladies' bloomers found hidden in the walls, a few unpleasant surprises in its stone foundation, and a variety of old bottles from the turn of the century through to the 1920s found on the property. These artefacts now have pride of place in his display cabinet, a testament to what once was and what will be.

Also recognized for his contributions to Aurora's built heritage were Jack Laurion, who renovated the Browning House on Wellington Street East into his eponymous law office and Gordon F. Allan in the Restoration category for his work turning the Frederick Webster House on Yonge Street, part of the Town's Northeast Heritage District, into a law office as well.

David Heard was honoured in the Outstanding Achievement Category for his efforts in keeping Aurora's heritage alive through his popular Spirit Walks, as well his outreach in venues such as the Aurora Farmers' Market.

Elsewhere, Aurora Historical Society member Wayne Keilty was honoured in the Natural Heritage Category for his efforts in the landscape design and maintenance at Hillary House, as well as coordinating all the volunteers, including many students, to make that

a reality. Also honoured, was the Newmarket Main Street Holdings Corporation for their work transforming the former home of Thompson's Furniture into Aw, Shucks!

‘It portrays a building that is not only new and modern, but also one which demonstrates how new infill can complement a historic urban area and enhance its heritage character,’ said Ms. Hicks.

The evening, however, took a decidedly more regal turn when Queen Victoria came up to accept her award in the Cultural Heritage category. Long-time volunteer Dorothy Gummersall, who is a familiar face for portraying the long-reigning monarch in a series of parades and Town events, was not only honoured for her royal bearing, but also for her volunteerism with groups like the Aurora Historical Society and her founding of the Richmond Hill Historical Society. A nursing veteran, she also keeps the spirit of fellow nurses who have served in times of conflict alive, donning her vivid blue nurses' uniform each year to lay a wreath at the Aurora Cenotaph.

‘I never thought what I was doing was that important at the time,’ said Mrs. Gummersall. ‘It was just something I enjoyed doing and I tried to fill a need.’

Enthusiastic in collecting oral histories, she decided enshrining these histories was what she wanted to do after being widowed and left to raise three children at a young age. Through her work with the historical societies, as well as genealogical societies and Anglican Church archives, she did that in spades.

And then Queen Victoria came into the picture. She ‘resurrected her’ for the Thornhill Festival, she says, demonstrating a quick glower the monarch was famous for. But that wasn't the only character under her crown. One of her favourite memories is portraying a suffragette trailing then-Markham mayor Don Cousins through a municipal parade.

‘These people whom we honour tonight are not only part of the cultural conscience of your community, but they are fully engaged citizens who contribute freely, positively and passionately to heritage conservation while inspiring others to do the same,’ said Sean Fraser of the Ontario Heritage Trust. ‘What I have learned is culture and natural heritage only flourishes in places where the community comes together to recognize, protect and celebrate the importance of its heritage champions. We can see Heritage is strongly rooted and thriving in Aurora.’