

NEWS FROM THE TRUST

May 2012

Carrying the past forward

By Richard Moorhouse



Richard Moorhouse, second from right, in front of the former Grand Trunk Railway station in Port Hope during its restoration in 1984.

Under our feet, brittle beech leaves crunched as we made our way through the moonlit space. Others had been there before us, perhaps many years earlier; you could see their prints in the dust. It was like walking into a garden terrace – except that it was seven storeys above Toronto’s Yonge Street.

This was my first visit to the magical Winter Garden theatre over 30 years ago – long before the Ontario Heritage Trust acquired, restored and returned it to theatrical life – and its impression has stayed with me ever

since. Beholding a heritage interior is the only way to experience its space, understand its meaning and appreciate its value. Old buildings help us hold onto our collective pasts, as well as our individual ones – pasts that we need to keep close and, hopefully, carry forward.

As a conservation professional, I’ve been able to carry the past forward over the last 30 years, having had the opportunity to work with heritage buildings, at archaeological sites, in the natural world, and at places of great historical value. I have applied an integrated approach that considers all components of significance to help influence and direct the most appropriate conservation solution. Yet, when I consider the various aspects of conservation, I find that I am most concerned about the future of Ontario’s architectural heritage. I find myself focusing

on this concern as I reflect on my time in the heritage community, and at the Ontario Heritage Trust.

I spent the first three years of my work with the provincial government visiting historic sites, meeting proud owners and encouraging communities to set up Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committees (now Municipal Heritage Committees) that could advise their councils on how to protect and reuse heritage properties. In those heady years after the Ontario Heritage Act was proclaimed, and soon after Canada’s centennial, there

was a groundswell of interest in heritage. Extensive government funding fuelled the interest for owners of historic properties.

These programs provided support to cover the costs of restoring historic roofs, woodwork, masonry and other significant features. Such incentives put people to work, encouraged the protection of sites through designation and easements, and created a sense of pride and renewal for local communities. Many town halls, commercial buildings, places of worship and historic residences were

effort was taken by local heritage activists to save such structures, but all too often, perseverance and passion are not enough.

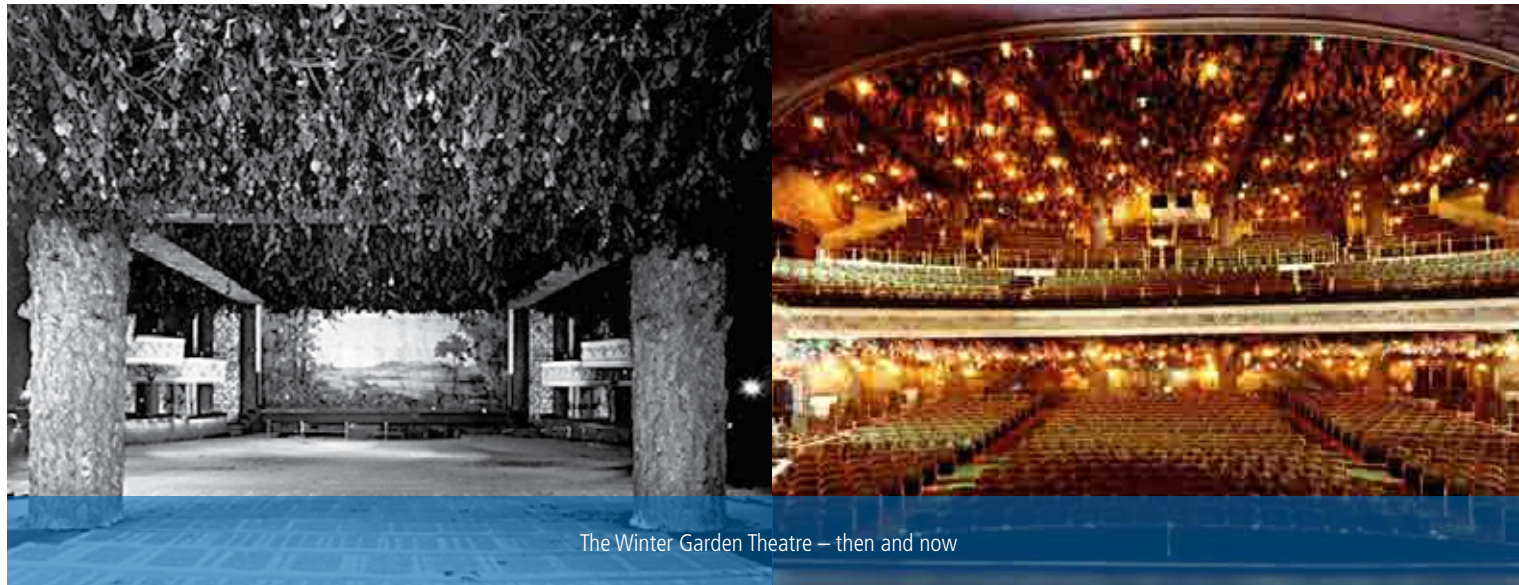
Certainly, “why” is a significant part of the question. But we must also consider who “they” are. The “they” represents us – all of us – those of us in the heritage community, and those unaware that there is such a thing. Until everyone develops an appreciation and awareness of these same values, preservation of heritage will not be part of the mainstream.

needs to be understood that once a building is gone, it’s gone forever – but that the reuse of a building is a more sustainable approach. Utilizing our existing stock of built properties empowers us to enhance our communities and make them infinitely more livable.

The first step is valuing what we have. We have a rich and complex history that is not widely known or understood. Our heritage buildings are tangible elements of that history. We’ll fly overseas to see historic sites, while not taking advantage of the history in our own

and interest in the field of heritage conservation. If we successfully communicate the importance of our built heritage to school-age children today, they will make more informed choices about our legacy buildings when the decision-making power becomes theirs.

These goals will require effort from all of us. We all need to get more engaged and involved by attending Doors Open Ontario events, participating in community forums and discussions, volunteering, making donations and challenging community and political leaders to



The Winter Garden Theatre – then and now



Doors Open Ontario continues to attract people of all ages, and to inspire people to preserve our province’s heritage.



Many significant heritage structures have fallen to the wrecking ball, including the Bow String Bridge in Eden Mills. (Photo: Charles Simon, Architect + Planner)

repaired, updated, restored, adapted and protected – buildings like Mackenzie Hall in Sandwich, St. Raphael’s Ruins, the Sharon Temple, the former Grand Trunk Port Hope railway station, the Hamilton Pump House and Thunder Bay’s Tourist Pagoda, to mention just a few.

But not everything went as well as I’d hoped. The movement to conserve heritage buildings faltered. Time after time, local activists and advocates did their best to encourage a building’s conservation, using all the tools and incentives they had – but to no avail. Legislation at that time was not binding, so designation in many instances only delayed demolition. The incentives were inconsistent and not long-lasting, and development pressures were high.

Subsequently, many significant heritage buildings fell to the wrecking ball. To this day, I keenly feel the loss of the West Toronto Junction railway station, the Eden Mills Bow String Bridge, the North Bay courthouse, the Cornwall Capital Theatre and Amherstburg’s Navy Building. Unfortunately, significant heritage buildings continue to be lost, even with binding legislation now in place. Invariably, archival photos of these buildings astound people, and the question is always the same: “Why didn’t they do more to save it?” Of course, considerable

As the years pass, I’ve watched as heritage became more and more isolated as an activity. Although communities might mourn the loss of a building, the arguments and reasons for replacement seemed, in many cases, to win the day. Sentimentality, sustainability, “best in class” and historical associations were sometimes acknowledged but did not sway the decision makers.

Why is conservation and adaptive reuse so hard to comprehend as an important and necessary endeavour in a modern, sophisticated society? Is it because we don’t think we have buildings of significance? Or that we’re too young as a nation to feel we need to conserve? Or do the buildings we live in every day mean so little to us? The arts and environmental sectors have made a more compelling case to citizens and have been able to explain and justify the importance of their activities in our daily lives. It has not been easy for these sectors either, but their work seems better understood and more accepted than heritage conservation.

How do we ensure that more heritage buildings can be reused and valued into the future? What could we have done or need to do differently? What do we need to do to ensure that the conservation of our historic built environment is an integral part of our day-to-day lives? It

backyard. We need to tell the stories of this province’s history in a way that will engage the emotions of diverse audiences – whether visitors or new Canadians. In recent years, the Internet and social media have helped make communication easier, faster and far-reaching – something that the Trust embraces through its new tagline: Bringing our story to life.

Secondly, we need to create more financial incentives to support the conservation of what we value. This can take the form of grants, cost-sharing programs, tax breaks or in-kind support. Conservation is a labour-intensive activity; it puts people to work and powers an economy. Federal programs, such as the Ecological Gifts Program, support the protection and conservation of natural heritage sites. But there is none for built heritage sites. We need an array of federal, provincial and local incentives for building conservation to succeed.

Our third focus must be youth. We need successive generations to be interested in and impassioned by heritage, not just abstractly or academically, but also practically – through summer camps and internships, apprenticeships in restoration arts, and co-op programs at the secondary and post-secondary levels. We must work more closely with the skilled trades to build awareness

demonstrate that heritage does matter. It’s a gift left behind by those long gone from our streets, stages, fields and railways. A gift – if we can keep it vital and close to us – that we can, in turn, carry forward.

Richard Moorhouse has been the Executive Director of the Ontario Heritage Trust since 2003 and has spent more than 30 years actively involved in the conservation and celebration of Ontario’s heritage. He is a board member of Willowbank, the School of Restoration Arts in Queenston and Vice-President of the Arts and Letters Club of Toronto. He retired from his position as Executive Director at the Trust in May 2012.

In the coming months

The Ontario Heritage Trust regularly hosts or attends events that impact our rich and unique heritage. From provincial plaque unveilings to conferences, we are busy year-round with activities that promote heritage conservation in Ontario.

Here are some of the events and activities occurring over the next few months. Visit our website at www.heritagetrust.on.ca for more details!



Join the family fun at Homewood Museum on July 29!

Doors Open Ontario continues throughout the summer and fall with events across Ontario. Visit www.doorsopenontario.on.ca for more information on events occurring near you!

June 15, 2012 – Provincial plaque unveiling to commemorate the Ontario Human Rights Code, Hart House, Toronto. The Trust and the Ontario Human Rights Commission are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Ontario Human Rights Code, and its impact on human rights in Ontario.

June 24, 2012 – Fundraiser – millinery fashion show, tea and talk at Fulford Place, Brockville. Hosted by Norma Shephard, founder and director of the Mobile Millinery Museum & Costume Archive. Help raise money for Fulford Place! Call 613-498-3003 for more information.

July 29, 2012 – Family Day at Homewood Museum, Maitland. Fun events planned for everyone – including wagon rides, performers, crafts and a War of 1812 re-enactor. Call 613-498-3003 for more information.

August 4, 2012 – Emancipation Day celebrations at Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site, Dresden. Attend the annual Emancipation Day celebrations that commemorate the end of slavery in the British Empire. Uncle Tom's Cabin is on the site of the historic Dawn Settlement, a former place of refuge and new beginnings for freedom seekers. Call 519-683-2978 for more information.

August 7, 2012 – Provincial plaque unveiling to commemorate the founding of the City of Timmins, Timmins. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the town by Noah Timmins, who founded the town for workers of the Hollinger Mine.

August 12, 2012 – Family Day at Inge-Va, Perth. Bring your family to Inge-Va and explore this early 19th-century stone home. Call 613-498-3003 for more information.

August 12, 2012 – Provincial plaque unveiling to commemorate St. George the Martyr Church, Magnetawan. The church, built in 1880, stands on the Magnetawan River. The church inspired Group of Seven member A.J. Casson's painting *Church on a Rock*.

August 14, 2012 – Provincial plaque unveiling to commemorate the Mutual Life Head Office building, Waterloo. The Waterloo County Mutual Fire Insurance Company began in 1863. The company outgrew its original building; in 1912, the company built the majestic head office at King and Union streets.

September 6-16, 2012 – Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre Centre hosts Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), Toronto. TIFF is the world's leading public film festival. Visit www.tiff.net/thefestival for more information.

September 17, 2012 – Provincial plaque unveiling to commemorate the Dale Estate, Brampton. At its peak, the Dale Estate greenhouses were the largest cut flower business in North America and the third largest in the world, boasting 1.5 million-square-feet (457,200-square-metres) of glass.

Continuing exhibit: Foundations & Fire: Early Parliament and the War of 1812 Experience at York at Toronto's Parliament interpretive centre (265 Front Street East). For more information, call 416-212-8897