

## Preservation through Transformation Workshop Proceedings Highgate United Church

Saturday, June 12, 2010

### Introduction

As part of the Ontario's Places of Worship outreach initiative, the Ontario Heritage Trust held a workshop on the topic of stewardship and adaptive reuse of culturally significant places of worship (e.g., churches, meeting houses, synagogues, temples, mosques, etc.). The Trust held a workshop in partnership with the Ontario Heritage Conference (Chatham-Kent Chapter of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario) at Highgate United Church as a module of the Annual Conference held in Ridgetown.

### History and architecture of Highgate United Church

The Highgate United Church congregation dates to 1834. The current church, constructed in 1917-18, is the seventh building in which the congregation has held services throughout its 176-year history.

In the summer of 1834, Mary Gosnell invited members of the community into her home for a church service conducted by Rev. Stephen Miles, a Methodist circuit preacher. These small gatherings in Gosnell's home became an established congregation in the Methodist Episcopal Church of Canada. The new congregation was part of the Kent County Circuit. When the congregation became too large to worship in Mary Gosnell's home, services were held in a local schoolhouse.

In 1849, a small frame church was constructed on the grounds of the local Highgate cemetery on land donated by Joseph and George Gosnell, Mary's two sons. The first pastor of the church was Rev. John McLean. In 1861, a larger church was constructed on the same site by contractor Andrew Tolmie, with local volunteers assisting with the construction. The new church was called The Centenary Church and had a resident pastor, Rev. M.A. Wright. During this same time period, some members of the congregation felt that The Centenary Church was too far from their homes and they began holding services at Hornal's Schoolhouse instead. In 1879, Thomas Lee donated land for the construction of a new place of worship, Lee's Church. The Centenary Church and Lee's Church were a two-point charge (i.e., two churches that share one minister and one administration) until Lee's Church closed in 1969.

In 1870, a new frame church was built in the village of Highgate on the site of the present church. The old 1861 Centenary Church continued to hold services, but was soon sold and moved to Orford Township and used as the Township Hall. In 1897, the Rev. T.T. George drew up plans for a new, larger church. The cornerstone was laid on

June 22, 1898. The new church was dedicated on December 18, 1898. In March 1917, this church burned to the ground. It was decided that the new church be constructed to the same plans as the previous church. This building was completed in September 1918.

Highgate United Church is designed in Romanesque domestic and Richardsonian Romanesque styles, likely as a reaction to churches like the T.J Rutley-designed First Presbyterian in Chatham. The basic shape is a central square, but the walls are bulbous to accommodate an amphitheatre seating plan. The turret-style west entrance is reminiscent of Richardsonian design, but the openings for the bells are more akin to a basic Romanesque window with a faux moulding done in darker brick. Highgate also has a stone stringcourse running under the tower's upper window openings. Other Richardsonian Romanesque features of the church are its compact massing and heavy quarry-faced limestone base.

Over the pyramidal roof that covers the body of the church, there is a small pyramidal cap. This cap originally would have admitted light to illuminate the stained-glass dome over the sanctuary. Also indicating a possible Richardsonian influence, the roof over the body of the church features eyebrow dormers (now covered by asphalt shingles), which were employed often by Richardson. Fully-articulated dormers with gable roof are found on the sides of Highgate United Church. Under the roofline, darker bricks have been used to create a corbel table arrangement.

The east end of the church exterior has another bulbous or round turret-like projection element that mirrors the west turret entrance. But, in this case, the windows are set wide apart, accommodating a pulpit platform on the interior that fills this round space.

The basement of Highgate United Church features an Akron plan-inspired space. The Akron plan was first developed in Akron, Ohio at First Methodist Episcopal Church (1870), wherein the Sunday school was placed behind the sanctuary. It had an open auditorium area where the students could be one large group and then there were smaller schoolrooms on the periphery where the students could be broken up into smaller groups.

In Highgate, this kind of Sunday school arrangement was designed in the basement. The inspiration for this might again have come from Rutley, who used a similar Akron-inspired plan in the Paris Presbyterian Church, where the Sunday school was placed to the side of the sanctuary. The placement of the Highgate Sunday school is not unusual; basements were the traditional space used for Sunday schools.

In 1925, the Methodist congregation voted to join the newly formed United Church of Canada. With declining attendance and an aging congregation, it was determined that Highgate Church would be closed. Its last service was held in late June 2010.

## **Workshop proceedings**

The workshop started with a short description of the history by Erin Semande (Ontario Heritage Trust Researcher) and a tour of the church by Sean Fraser (the Manager of Acquisitions and Conservation Services with the Trust).

*The following is a record of the key questions and salient points of the discussion. The bullets are not quotes unless otherwise noted.*

### **Morning session: Places of worship in transition**

This panel presentation outlined and explored stewardship and adaptive reuse challenges of religious buildings.

The panel:

- Mark Warrack, Ontario Heritage Trust, Manager of Special Projects
- James Knight, professional engineer, James Knight & Associates
- Barry Stephenson, Religion and Culture Department, Wilfrid Laurier University

Session facilitator: Beth Hanna, Director of Heritage Programs and Operations at the Trust

Q: What municipal tools are available to conserve culturally significant religious buildings?

A: Mark Warrack

- The municipality can help – there are tools and heritage resources available at the municipal level.
- The Official Plan plays both a legal role and a role in planning for the future.
- Go to the planning department at an early stage to make sure that the adaptation/project is allowed.
- Understand the heritage attributes and heritage value of the property.
- There are a number of other key municipal tools that can assist with conserving heritage properties including:
  - Provincial Policy Statement of the Planning Act
    - Section 2.6.1 – “Significant built heritage resources and significant cultural heritage landscapes shall be conserved”
    - Cemeteries and unmarked graves – should do testing ahead of time
  - Ontario Heritage Act
    - Listing on municipal register – what is important to the community?
    - Look at all elements of a property (architecture, history, context, landscape, archaeology) to see what is important
  - Network of Municipal Heritage Planners
    - This is an informal group that meets a few times a year. They also have an email network with ongoing discussions about heritage planning issues across the province. A municipal staff member from

each municipality in the province should be on the list and be part of the dialogue. The Ontario Heritage Trust administers this list.

Q: What questions should a client ask and what needs to be known prior to commencing a building conversion?

A: James Knight

- What is the end use of the building? The client should have an idea where they want the project to go because it could answer questions about floor loading and how many pounds per square foot.
- Need to know the degree to which a building does or does not comply with the Ontario Building Code (OBC) – odds are that a historic church is not going to comply with the structural requirements of the OBC.
- Structural work is usually not the highest cost in an adaptation. Big costs include accessibility, finishes, envelope and HVAC.
- An engineering report can state what is/isn't possible in the adaptive reuse of a building.
- What is the species and grade of wood? There can be a massive range in strength of wood quality and type. For instance, old-growth white pine from the 19<sup>th</sup> century is significantly stronger than the white pine available today. Other species may have been used in the construction of a church that are significantly stronger than white pine. This needs to be factored into the engineering of an adaptation.

Q: What is the impact of closure on a congregation? What questions should they ask?

A: Barry Stephenson

- There is a grieving or mourning process with the closure of a sacred space – look at the closure as a type of funeral.
- A religious building is often the anchor of the community.
- What is being done with the iconography?
  - Can it be carried on to another facility?
  - Can it be stored somewhere safely?
- There should be meetings with the congregation to provide input.
- The congregation has to be part of the closure.

Q: Are there differences in a church closure in a rural vs. urban context?

A: Barry Stephenson

- In a small community, there is often a sense of ownership of a building. This happens less so in an urban context.
- It is a very personal discussion if the congregation owns their own facility.
- It is important to note that the congregation can continue to exist even without a building.

Q: What about the Ontario Building Code (OBC) and heritage preservation?

A: Panel and audience dialogue

- By expanding on Part 11 of the OBC (Renovation of Existing Buildings), it might be possible to provide greater direction and clarity for conserving heritage properties.
- Structural and fire safety – there will never be relaxation on safety in the OBC.
- “Every building that ever fell down, stood up until it fell down.” (James Knight)
- In Europe, there seems to be less emphasis on accessibility requirements in historic buildings and far more on preservation of important heritage features. (audience)
- The heritage community should not feel threatened by the OBC.
- The OBC contains words such as “reasonable,” “except,” “and/or” these are critical to understanding its implementation and interpretation. (audience)
- There is an opportunity to negotiate the OBC if you can come up with reasonable solutions.
- The OBC is supposed to help us create good buildings. It is a minimum standard.

## Lunch session

### **Presentation by David Butler, Chair of the Mary Webb Centre Committee**

Provided an overview of their proposal for the future Mary Webb Centre

- Adaptive reuse of Highgate United Church to the Mary Webb Centre
- Use the former sanctuary as a concert/performing arts venue
- Provide space for community groups
- Use the basement for artists’ studios and gallery space
- Become the eastern gateway to Chatham-Kent – travel and information centre
- Provide options for occasional church services/weddings, etc.

### **Presentation by Erin Semande, Ontario Heritage Trust Researcher**

- Focused on adaptive reuse of rural places of worship
- These churches did not sit vacant for a long period of time
- These former churches had a strong advocate – whether it was the congregation, a community group or the new owners
- Engaged local community by offering events
- Converted places used minimal intervention – e.g., all maintained the original footprint of the building
- Examples:
  - Marble Church Arts Centre (Tweed) – former United church converted to a performance space and artists’ studios
  - Blenheim and District Freedom Library and Museum (Chatham-Kent) – former Presbyterian church converted to a museum and reference library
  - Macaulay Church Museum (Prince Edward County) – former Anglican church converted to a museum

- Ailsa Craig and District Historical Society (North Middlesex) – converted an Anglican church and a Baptist church to a rental venue and museum/gallery/research space
- Coe Hill Dharma Centre (Township of Wollaston) – former Anglican church converted to a yoga centre
- Former Wesleyville United Church (Port Hope) – the Friends group is in the process of restoring his former church. The restoration is ongoing. The building is currently open for a limited number of community events such as art shows, meetings and classes.

### **Afternoon session: Creative solutions**

This panel presentation explored the importance of due diligence and creativity in the preservation and reuse of the Highgate United Church.

The panel:

- Peter Stewart, Conservation Architect, George Robb Architect
- Michael McClelland, Principal, ERA Architects Inc.
- Andrew Pruss, Associate, ERA Architects Inc.
- Mike Marcolongo, Community Economic Development Specialist, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs

Session facilitator: Sean Fraser, Manager, Acquisitions and Conservation Services, with the Ontario Heritage Trust

Q: What opportunities exist at the provincial level to help support adaptive reuse?

A: Mike Marcolongo

- The economics of rural Ontario are very different than urban.
  - Funding: There is funding out there for communities. The Rural Economic Development Fund covers soft costs of community revitalization. Infrastructure initiatives now include heritage.
  - Technical assistance: Assist with feasibility study, business planning – Business Mix Analysis. The National Trust’s publication: Feasibility Assessment Manual for the Reuse of Buildings.
  - Legislation: Community Improvement Plans are a strong legislative tool; Heritage Property Tax Relief.

Q: How best can one package a project for provincial funding partner?

A: Mike Marcolongo

- Follow the five stages: concept, analysis, preparation, implementation and operation
- Ensure strong community partnerships
- Follow the process: economic analysis, feasibility
- Find and take guidance from successful models: e.g., St. Thomas CASO Railway Station (they built capacity and obtained community consensus around their

project and received both provincial and federal funding for their adaptive reuse project).

Q: When undertaking an adaptive reuse project, what should the owner do first?

A: Peter Stewart, Michael McClelland, Andrew Pruss

- Understand the building through careful observation.
- Carry out a condition assessment that describes the physical form and current condition of a building.
- Prepare measured drawings of the building.
- Test materials. Non-destructive testing is preferred (destructive testing may be necessary).
- Undertake a feasibility study that describes the changes to a building and the impact on features of the building.
- Create a prioritized schedule with timeline and costing. Create a 20-year plan. Don't do everything at once.
- With a change of use, there will need to be Ontario Building Code discussions.
- Ensure that you get professional advice from an architect and an engineer – especially for an adaptive reuse project.
- Have a strong vision for the future.
- Have strong leadership.
- Stewardship – there needs to be someone to look after the church.

Q: What are the key challenges in the conversion of a rural place of worship?

A: Mike Marcolongo

- It must be a place that people will travel to see. It must become a destination that will draw people from afar.

Q: What factors are common to all adaptive reuse sites, not just rural places of worship?

A: Peter Stewart, Michael McClelland and Andrew Pruss

- Fire safety (egress, occupancy load, fire prevention, fire suppression)
- Accessibility (barrier free)
- Services (washrooms)
- Comfort within building (heating, cooling)
- Mechanical/electrical (furnace, fans, wiring, hot wire)

Q: Minimal intervention is an important conservation principle. How might it be applied to Highgate United Church in planning for adapting the building to a new use?

A: Michael McClelland

- Look at the final project objectives and see how they relate to what already exists within the building.
- Hold some events and look at the impact on the building's heritage.

- Minimal intervention is the key – “It’s cheaper to do less, it’s better to do less.”
- Understand how you can work with the fundamental structure, form and volumes of an existing building. Look at architectural opportunities and don’t try to force a use into a structure.
- It’s best not to move pews or try to make them moveable.

Q: How best can one avoid unexpected discoveries that might arise during an adaptive reuse project?

A: Peter Stewart, Michael McClelland and Andrew Pruss

- Projects are assured of surprises – e.g., there is the potential to find new information about the heritage value.
- We often do not know enough about a building. Know as much as you can about the building prior to starting the project.
- Need to understand the changes made to a building over the years (i.e., ventilation history, design/intent).
- Buildings can deteriorate quickly because of a change in use.
- Go slowly!

Q: How does one use in-kind/volunteer support?

A: Audience and panel dialogue

- Safety – who is responsible for the volunteers?
- Do not take on liability with volunteers – whose insurance policy are the volunteers covered under?
- Do not mix contractors and volunteers.
- There is a role for volunteers: maintain landscape, general upkeep, inspect on a regular basis.
- Multiple contractors at the same time acting independently places liability for construction safety on the owner – who becomes the “constructor.”

Q: What about converting the church into a museum?

A: Michael McClelland

- It’s hard to achieve humidity standards in both new and old buildings.
- Humidity controls cause problems for the building.
- Artifacts can be kept in storage cases or the environment can be stabilized (including temperature, humidity and air quality).
- Don’t fight the building.

Q: What other uses might work well architecturally in Highgate United Church?

A: Andrew Pruss

- Meetings, performance, community events, retail use in basement

- Issues of adapting Highgate United Church to a performance space: sound isolation, lobby space (need a ticket booth and a bar). Other options – in the summer, have a tent outside for ticket use; there is plenty of outdoor space.

Q: What about managing designated hazardous substances?

A: Michael McClelland

- Almost all older historic buildings have hazardous substances present.
- Legally, lead paint and asbestos can remain in situ and be encapsulated.
- These materials are hazardous when friable. If sealed away from public contact, they can be managed.

Q: Are there logistical and legal matters related to transfer of ownership?

A: Dave Butler

- Make sure that accounting and legal are in order – e.g., make sure that the presbytery is in agreement of transfer or lease agreement.

Q: Are partnerships important?

A: Sean Fraser

- From what we have seen on successful conversions in the Trust's survey of the province's places of worship, partnerships are extremely important, especially when dealing with not-for-profit ownership/operation. One can't have too many partnerships in adapting a place of worship and finding multiple creative uses for the facility.

Q: What about the hardship of insurance?

A: Various panel and audience

- It makes more sense to spend valuable financial resources on reducing the risk of loss than on paying exorbitant insurance premiums.
- By adding sprinklers, premiums may be cut in half. Installing sprinklers is expensive and can be intrusive.
- Smoke/heat detection is important, but reducing the risk of fire is more important.
- Security, lighting and good property management is also important.
- A church like Highgate United Church is irreplaceable. Steps need to be taken to minimize the possibilities of catastrophic loss.
- The real challenge is finding an insurance plan that can address the matters that might arise from a partial loss. In such a case, heritage value remains and can be conserved, but there is a need for major repairs, new work and/or restoration.

Closing remarks from the Ontario Heritage Trust by Beth Hanna.

Thanks by Marlee Robinson, Ontario Heritage Conference Committee.