

Ontario Heritage Conference Niagara 2015 – It has come and gone

Architectural Conservancy of Ontario / Community Heritage Ontario / Niagara Heritage Alliance.

There is only one heritage conference held in Ontario each year, so it is a big deal ! It takes more than a full year of concentrated planning. Former recent venues were Cornwall, Midland, Kingston and the one for next year will be in Stratford. Our Niagara conference was held in Niagara on the Lake at their beautiful Community Centre from April 30th – May 3rd, with opening and welcome Thursday night at Navy Hall. About 225 registered for this event, a lot less than I anticipated, given the popularity of Niagara on the Lake and its attention to heritage. A lot happened at this conference – many speakers, bus tours, workshops, displays, networking and visits to various sites in the Region as well as AGMs at RiverBrink Art Museum in Queenston. Niagara is a perfect place for a conference of this type, with its rich history, built heritage and natural beauty.

Every time I attend one of these conference, I wonder why we have them at all when the people who should attend, don't attend. I have attended many of these events over the 30 years I have been involved in heritage preservation and I have met many wonderful, committed people involved in heritage, many of whom are still attending conferences, BUT we are all “**the converted**”. We all know the importance of saving our built, cultural and natural heritage – we work at it every day. What about those who have no interest in heritage preservation, or are involved in things like real estate, law, development, insurance, Mayors and municipal councillors; they deal with matters of designated heritage properties on a regular basis, and based on many questions I hear from this group, most do not really understand designation; some feel there is no use for an old building and that they should all be demolished to make way for new. They need *to think outside the box* ! Those are the people who should be at these conferences to gain an understanding and appreciation of the absolute need for preservation; do we need more building materials in our landfills and if we have to boil it down to money --- restoration is a huge economic driver!

Not only do we not have these people at the conferences, we can't even get the Ontario Minister of Tourism, Culture & Sport to attend – even with begging and coaxing. By the way, culture means – arts, culture and **heritage**....the unspoken word; the name is buried in a ministry dealing with so many other issues that we become unimportant and lost. Michael Chan, when he was Ontario's Minister, was totally invisible;(he didn't attend conferences either!) we now have a new Minister, Michael Couteau, named to this post in June, 2014. He was invited to the conference and given way more than 6 months notice; I would have thought he would find it absolutely imperative to attend Ontario's only heritage conference in the position of Ontario's new minister. It should be a given! Someone from his office was sent in his place; she gave a nothing, prepared speech and then left. I am sure there were many questions from the audience which went unanswered. This, again, downgrades the issue of heritage and is not a good example to set ! We need a proper position in our provincial government called Ontario Minister of Heritage ! Although legislation allows it, the Minister never chooses to intervene when a heritage site is threatened, so why am I surprised that he didn't even attend our one conference a year ?

What about the feds.? They do things like they did last year, announcing “*Canada’s renewed commitment*” to National Historic Sites cost-sharing program with total funding available of \$1 million which would cover up to 50% of eligible costs to a maximum of \$100,000 per project. This is a total disgrace ---- there are over 950 National Historic Sites across Canada – and many of these are reported in extremely poor condition. *These places shape our identity, create jobs and attract tourist dollars.*

Most politicians who show up to open these conferences disappear after they have delivered their *speech* instead of sticking around and investigating to see if there might be something in this “*thing called heritage*” that so many people are passionate about !

Oh, and by the way, the province, in their wisdom, a few years ago totally ignored the fact that the third Monday in February is and has been *heritage day* for all these years, and they took it completely off the calendar, now calling it Family Day. I, of course, am a member of a family and it is a nice day to have, but was this the way to do it ! why scoop up Heritage Day? – obviously the province didn’t care about it and have never made any explanations - “why” – appeals go by unnoticed – again, another downgrade to heritage and our volunteers.

With the lack of Provincial support (and the Federal Government as well) it is no wonder that heritage volunteers feel that after the installation of the Ontario Heritage Act 1974, and its amendment in 2005, along with the Tool Kit issued by the Ministry in 2006, that we have been deserted and left to fend for ourselves. By the way, if you check out this famous Tool Kit, it lists all the duties of a heritage volunteer – it is overwhelming --- sounds like a full-time job to me. We don’t seem to count, but the government loves to use the statistics that we work to supply – like how many designations have occurred ! Some volunteers I know have given up – they are tired, they lack support and the worthwhile tools needed to help sell the idea of designation – for example, some incentives to help designated heritage property owners in the often onerous and expensive job of restoration of their properties. These property owners make a commitment, contribute to our history and have agreed to preserve their properties for present and future generations to appreciate.

Oh, sorry I forgot, there is one incentive which was legislated a number of years ago for designated property owners in the way of a municipal tax reduction which can be between 10–40%. We have 414 municipalities in this province and 41 of them take part in this program... that is 9.9% of our communities; I would say this plan is a total flop. The Ministry states that the plan covers 41% of Ontario’s population – guess what – they are including Toronto – this statistic doesn’t hold water ! What we should have had, and what was suggested, was a separate tax class for designated heritage properties. That might have worked !

Out of the 414 municipalities we have 152 Municipal Heritage Committees in place – that is only 36.7% of our communities – not even half. The Ministry states this is 91% of the population – and guess what- again, this includes the City of Toronto. It looks like Community Heritage Ontario has their work cut out for them, being the umbrella organization for these local committees. As a matter of interest their Mission Statement states :

“To encourage the development of municipally-appointed heritage advisory committees; to promote appreciation, understanding and support for the values of cultural heritage and to work for its conservation and continued contribution to a sustainable society in Ontario; and, to further the identification, preservation, interpretation and wise use of heritage, locally, provincially and nationally.”

So, CHO, we need more Municipal Heritage Committees in Ontario; this statistic is pathetic....surely you can't be satisfied with this showing !

I have made a list over the past years entitled *“The Weakening Position of Heritage in Canada”* and I have reached #54 in this list. Nothing has changed since I started doing this work some 30 years ago – in fact, the position of heritage is weaker. So, what have I accomplished – I wonder sometimes ! In my own community we have worked very hard and have moved ahead, but because we have no support from the province or Feds. it is always a walk uphill ! – and we are all volunteers, contributing our time, expertise and I might say, money ! Volunteering always costs money !

At the conference we had an excellent keynote speaker in the name of Jennifer Keesmaat, Chief Planner for the City of Toronto – one of the best speakers I have ever heard and she said that at the outset of negotiations with a developer, City Planning states that the policy is that heritage buildings must be retained in full – that is, integration of the whole building into the new development – and further, that it must be enhanced, not just saved ! --- and she gave examples of this. This policy has forced good negotiation, tenacity and *“thinking outside the box”* ! As a result, they have some interesting and successful developments in place and ongoing, which, according to their policy, requires the inclusion of on-site heritage buildings enhanced!

The Ontario Heritage Act has been in place since 1974, and in a CHO newsletter of January 2014, it is reported that under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act (single sites), 6,600 by-laws have been passed in Ontario protecting the cultural heritage value of these properties. As well, under Part V of the Act (heritage conservation districts) there are 18,500 properties protected – that is, all over Ontario. All I can say is

“hurrah for our passionate volunteers” – without them, all of this would never have happened and -- further..... my belief is that without our committed volunteers the whole “heritage movement” if I can call it that, would fall apart and come to a quick halt.

Conferences of this type still remain a great place for heritage volunteers to renew friendships with others, to compare notes, mingle and get some new ideas.....BUT, we are not educating those who need it and isn't that why we always have fabulous speakers!

The Region of Niagara has named 4 pillars for a complete Niagara :

- Environment – Economic – Social – Culture -
- Again culture means – arts, culture and **heritage**
Heritage – the unspoken word !

I can't end this without a word from Richard Moe – he has written books, he is head of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the U.S., former Chief of Staff for VP Walter Mondale, Member of the Carter Senior Staff, and his philosophy on livable cities is the best I have ever read – and I quote below one of my favourite quotes :

“It has been asked what makes a city livable; well, it has to be safe of course, and attractive. It must provide the services we need, and it should be planned and built in a way that makes it easy to use and move around in. But, there is something else – something very important, and that is – a truly livable city is one that makes us feel personally connected to it in a meaningful way. It is hard to feel that kind of connection to a place that has no distinctive character. Our built environment is becoming ‘homogenized’ – it has been called ‘generic’ – a place where you can't even tell what city you are in. Everyplace looks more and more like Anyplace, and eventually they all wind up looking like Noplace. It is hard to feel connected to Noplace, and that is one reason preservation is so important. It is a means of saving and celebrating the history and traditions – the character, in other words, that makes every community unique, appealing and livable, and it is becoming increasingly apparent that community livability is the key to community survival – it is an economic imperative ! “

(Statistics shown are for 2014)

Pamela J.Minns

Thorold

Sections of this report appeared in Niagara at Large June, 2015.

Thorold's Involvement in the 2015 Conference

-Adaptive Re-use of Heritage Buildings

Phil Ritchie

Maplehurst to the Keefer Mansion Inn

-Tour of the Keefer Mansion Inn by delegates

-Dinner for 52 people at the Keefer Mansion Inn

-Restoration of Historic Beaverdams Church (its past, present & future)

Melanie Battell – Mark Shoalts

-Transformation of Downtown Thorold (incentives, investments and Vision revitalization downtown)

Adele A. Arbour

-Tour of Downtown Thorold by delegates