



Not bashful about combining old with new in Elgin County courthouse

Posted By Ian McCallum
April 25, 2009

Restoration of the Elgin County courthouse would prove cheaper than construction of a new consolidated court facility in St. Thomas.

That was the guarantee from London developer Shmuel Farhi to a capacity gathering Thursday at the St. Thomas Public Library on hand to hear his proposal to fully retrofit and add on to the Wellington Street facility that pre-dates Canada.

The room crackled, fueled by a supercharged blend of passion and frustration, as Farhi and architect Paul Sapounzi from the Ventin Group offered up one example after another of heritage buildings throughout the province that have been upgraded to continue to serve in their original capacities as places of business, seats of justice or community centres and not museums.

Queen's Park in Toronto; Simcoe's city hall, a multi-purpose building in Shelburne (near Orangeville) that serves as a police station, town hall and theatre; Castle Kilbride in Baden; the Toronto headquarters of the Law Society of Upper Canada (local lawyers take note); and our own city hall here were just a few of the examples of what can be accomplished with heritage edifices.

"We're not bashful about combining the old with the new and making a building useful," stressed Sapounzi in reference to Farhi's plan to build on to the Wellington Street courthouse to meet the province's requirements for a new, consolidated facility.

Farhi's proposal has been given the cold shoulder by the Elgin Law Association which is of the opinion "it would be unreasonable to expect that the heritage value and basic character of the present structure and the surrounding neighbourhood could be meaningfully preserved and maintained if a consolidated facility were to be constructed at that site."

Two months ago in the corner we printed excerpts from the association's letter to Ontario Realty Corporation which acknowledged area lawyers are of the firm belief "any proposal to convert the Wellington Street building to a consolidated facility sufficient to satisfy the current and future needs of this community makes neither practical nor economic sense."

Not one lawyer was in attendance Thursday, prompting city resident Bud Lorch to observe, "I've heard nothing but negativity from them."

In a similar vein Farhi addressed several doubters in attendance with the challenge, "I'm talking a glass that is half full and you're talking half empty."

When asked to substantiate claims restoration and additions would prove less expensive than a new purpose-built building, Sapounzi calmly replied, "How do I know it's cheaper? I've got 37 years' experience on more than two dozen heritage renovations."

However the biggest outpouring of emotion was reserved for Ald. Gord Campbell, the only municipal politician in attendance, who stressed, "We are adamant that building remain a courthouse. Brought up to proper standards, that's the way to go."

The outburst of applause that greeted Campbell's comment should be all the evidence the law association requires to make the right decision and get on board with Farhi's ambitious project to maintain this community heirloom as the seat of justice for St. Thomas and Elgin.