

HISTORY LESSONS

COUNCIL MUST PROTECT CITY'S HERITAGE

BY LAURIE WATT

Steele's China Shop. The opera house. Old City Hall. The American Hotel. The old fire hall. The downtown Barrie buildings met the same fate: that of the wrecker's ball.

How and why does it happen so consistently?

Why is Barrie's record of saving heritage buildings so poor?

Getting a building designated is the critical step to saving a building; the Ontario Heritage Trust recognizes the building's architectural style and historic role in the community.

In Barrie, there are very few buildings that carry that distinction. For years, designation required the co-operation of the owner, although the province changed that rule a few years ago.

Now the decision rests with the municipal council.

The process can still be lengthy, starting with a local heritage committee assessment and recommendation, then the city issuing a notice of intention to designate which is appealable.

The Ontario Conservation Review Board may opt to hold a hearing and issue a recommendation to the municipality, which then can pass a bylaw to designate the building.

To demolish a designated building would require city council to rescind the bylaw that designated the building.

Another alternative is for a municipality to create a list of properties of interest; according to Barrie lawyer Ingrid Peters, that would delay a demolition permit from being issued for 60 days which could be enough time to lobby the owner to change his mind.

Barrie had no grounds on which to delay issuing a demolition permit for Steele's China Shop; the permit was issued April 17, and Heritage Barrie didn't have to be forewarned, and it wasn't.

Heritage Barrie has just completed its first list, or registry, of properties of interest; the only designated public site is the Allandale Station; key focuses this year are Lount's Castle



Barrie has a poor record of saving heritage buildings, including from top, old city hall (the "market building", the courthouse, the opera house, the American Hotel and the post office.

and Woodlawn.

There are some historic homes – privately and previously designated – where owners display heritage plaques; some are featured on heritage walking tours.

However, Steele's China Shop was not included in this.

According to Heritage Barrie vice-chairperson Caroline Smith, the city's registry includes 126 Blake St.; Sanders Block at 123 Dunlop St. E.; 30 Mary St.; the old Farmers' Market Building and the Carnegie Library (now part of the MacLaren Art Centre), both on Mulcaster Street; and Maple Hill, a Victorian at 147 Toronto St.

She explained the committee faces a challenge because it's made up of volunteers and has very little city staff support, and in creating the registry, research had to be done on not only architecture, but community function and heritage value.

"Some changes need to be made in the way the city council receives advice on heritage matters. The key problem currently is that council does not support its heritage committee with enough staff time to create the background reports a statutory committee should be expecting to receive," said Smith.

"That sends the message loud and clear that there is no significant value attributable to Heritage Barrie, and as such, heritage within the city. Although the membership is a voluntary one, it is voluntary within the expectations that city staff provide reports and support."

The committee is now chaired by Coun. Andrew Prince, who serves on an array of other committees, including the very time-intensive Power-Stream Barrie Hydro board.

Smith said the city also has Heritage Barrie reporting to the development services committee, which then reports to council's general committee.

"Cut out the middle man and the time delays. Provide Heritage Barrie with monthly follow-ups of actions taken by council based on the heritage committee's recommendations and put the information on the web," she suggested.