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Teamwork key to innovation in HRM

By AARON MURNAGHAN
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A watercolour by R.D. Wilkie, circa 1840, shows the Morris office and mansion as seen from Morris Street. (NOVA SCOTIA ARCHIVES)



The Morris Building is currently sitting on blocks in a downtown Halifax parking lot near Lower Water Street. (Christian Laforce / Staff)

Halifax's future as a dynamic, unique and creative city looked a little brighter a few weeks ago, thanks to a small but proud house that was saved from seemingly inevitable destruction. The Morris Building, which housed the offices of one of Halifax's founding fathers in the mid-1700s, is counted as one of the oldest buildings in the province, and remained unregistered under our embarrassingly impotent heritage legislation.

It took an unprecedented collaboration between developers, government, heritage and environmental organizations to save this building, and it very well could mark a drastic shift in the way developers and conservation groups do things in the city. This would mean huge benefits for our economy, our community and our environment.

A new condo project by Dixel Developments slated for the corner of Hollis and Morris streets meant the end for several historic buildings, including a mansion from the 1760s and an apartment building which some say helped to create the vibrant Halifax music scene of the early 1990s by housing several of that decade's most

notable musicians. Thanks to the complementary goals of two disparate organizations, however, one building was saved and that fact is unprecedented in Halifax history.

Those two organizations were the Ecology Action Centre and the Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia, and their aim was to show that we can save our heritage and our environment by investing in and preserving our older buildings instead of gaining the scorn and ridicule of our descendants by wantonly destroying both.

By saving the Morris Building, a clear message has been sent that a different approach is possible. That new approach will bring with it economic, social and environmental benefits for the whole community. Through adaptive re-use and rehabilitation of our old buildings, we are creating new skilled labour opportunities and hundreds more jobs. Dollar for dollar, rehabilitation creates more jobs than new construction because it is more labour intensive. At the same time, it can also require far fewer materials and no demolition expenses.

By destroying our older buildings in favour of new development, we are not only cheating ourselves and future generations of Nova Scotians of their built heritage and the historic charm of their communities, but we are also contributing to the degradation of our land, air and water, as well as consuming large quantities of non-renewable resources.

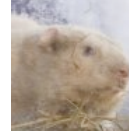
The dialogue concerning development in Halifax needs to change if we are to truly grow and thrive as a community. The consistent conflict between supporters of heritage conservation and the pro-development crowd has continued unchanged for 40 years and has resulted in losses for both sides in the argument. By working together towards sustainability, a new common ground can be found.

A green economy is the way of the future, and adaptive re-use needs to enter the vocabulary of Halifax's development community. All that is needed is some creativity and imagination on the part of developers, and a demand from citizens for conservation and re-use of our older

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buildings. Haligonians must come together to identify and protect those elements of our community and built environment that make us unique. Even HRM by Design, in all its imported wisdom, has failed to do this simple task correctly.

We as a city don't know who we are or what we want and until we find the answers to both of those questions, our streetscapes and neighbourhoods will continue to suffer. That's why that little house on Hollis Street represents so much hope for the future: It represents co-operation and unity across so many lines. Those of us who hold out hope for a new and more innovative direction for Halifax watch elatedly as the ideas for the future of this building and many more like it come pouring in.

Aaron Murnaghan is an urban planner who worked with Heritage Trust and Ecology Action Centre on the Morris Building project.

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Keith P. wrote:

This is an unremarkable building and even the descendants of Mr. Morris feel that it should have been demolished. We had a situation several years ago where another "historic" wood-frame building was relocated from North St to Barrington at great expense. Today it looks like every other unremarkable building in that area and hardly seems to have been worth the effort. I suspect this will be no different. The vast majority of old buildings in Halifax are not the type of magnificent stone structures seen in Europe and elsewhere -- they are small wood-frame structures that were never intended to last very long, and need to go when the end of their life is reached.

karen kulyk wrote:

Katie Reid's demand to pull down her ancestor's office building sets off an alarm bell. What remains of Charles Morris's eighteenth century house and workplace deserves a far better end than demolition and a plaque. Halifax, one of the oldest cities in North America, has suffered significant architectural loss to progress. Our history is being replaced by questionable parking lots, uninspired condominiums and soulless developments. Very little private architecture from the 1700's remains, but this one survives changing purpose, neighbourhood decline, the explosion and powerful hurricanes. Charles Morris was a teacher, justice of the peace and of the Inferior Court of Common Pleas, and the author of "Description and State of the New Settlements in Nova Scotia in 1761". Restoration of the office where he produced the surveys and maps that document the development of this city and its province will designate importance to Acadians, Indigenous and all people involved in the process of building a province. Walking into the finished product will provide tangible evidence of our past in a way that a plaque never can.

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