

Old farmhouse crop gets thin; Victorian Ontario's rural heritage often ends up bulldozed by 21st-century sprawl

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For now, the old Alex Bradburn house looks forlorn and threatened - boarded-up, sitting on temporary steel supports, dwarfed by cranes amid swirls of construction dust east of Warden Ave., north of Highway 407.

But unlike many similar remnants of Victorian Ontario's rural heritage that have been overrun by 21st-century sprawl, a new life awaits.

After being moved from its original location and boarded up for years, this circa-1855 farmhouse is to be a focal point in Phase 1 of Downtown Markham - a massive \$3 billion, 20-year mixed-use development by the Remington Group.

Bradburn House, which once sat about a kilometre south near an off-ramp for the nearby Highway 407, is designated under the Ontario Heritage Act and has a heritage easement registered against it, says Regan Hutcheson, Markham's manager of heritage planning.

And Hutcheson points to the house as just one example of Markham's success in saving historic buildings despite rapid growth.

"Over the last 10 years or so, at least 20 buildings have been preserved in new development areas (residential plans of subdivision in greenfield areas, within commercial and industrial development sites).

"In addition, within our heritage conservation districts, it is rare for anyone to even request demolition of heritage buildings," explains Hutcheson.

He adds that former hamlets and villages, including Thornhill, Unionville and Markham Village, are all designated heritage conservation districts, in addition to more than 250 properties that are designated and protected.

The same can't be said throughout southern Ontario, especially in the GTA. Developers have often seen older buildings as a hindrance when it comes time to clear the land.

"They're often isolated, set back from the road and vulnerable to vandalism, neglect and arson," says Sharon Vattay, City of Hamilton cultural heritage planner.

In 2004, she held a similar position with the City of Vaughan, where she tried to persuade a developer to incorporate the historic 1841 Cook house on Rutherford Rd. into a new home development.

"This was an amazing brick farmhouse that was exceptionally well preserved. It could have been a beautiful Italianate centrepiece to the proposed development," Vattay says.

But shortly after a tenant moved out, the building was vandalized and then badly damaged in a fire that was described as "suspicious" in newspaper articles. It was later demolished in 2005.

The situation has been improved with a strengthened Ontario Heritage Act and a 2005 provincial government directive that municipalities have to conserve "significant built heritage resources and landscapes." But farmhouses, barns and other historic buildings are still being lost, suggest historical preservationists such as Cathy Nasmith, president of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario.

Under a section of the Ontario Building Code, permits are not required for the demolition of buildings on farm properties, says Nasmith, suggesting that may be a "glitch in the language."

"Some building officials are interpreting the section as meaning permits aren't required for the demolition of farmhouses.

"Certainly demolition permits aren't required for the demolition of barns. It's a problem right across the province," says Nasmith.

And the Ontario Heritage Act didn't prevent the City of Guelph from approving the demolition two years ago of the historic circa 1912 Mitchell farmhouse and an adjacent 1830s log farmhouse as part of the commercial rezoning of the lands for a shopping centre.

"They're gone now and people miss them," says Paul Ross, chair of the city's municipal heritage committee, which joined many residents in fiercely objecting to the demolition .

While the Mitchell house has been lost, the committee and a new city council elected last fall are actively working to save other structures including two historic farmhouses, which stand as silent sentries in the 243-hectare Hanlon Creek Business Park, owned partly by the city and partly by private parties.

The 1860s Crawley Farmhouse, the first brick house constructed in the former Puslinch Township, is on the city portion and has been designated as a historic building under the Ontario Heritage Act.

"We didn't designate the back wall," says Ross, explaining that historic buildings in industrial parks are hard to market. The exemption would allow a potential purchaser to incorporate the building into a larger entity.

The fate of the second building isn't as sure. Willow Grove is an 1870s stone farmhouse in the privately owned portion of the industrial park. The heritage committee wants the building to remain in situ - a term preservationists use to describe remaining in the original location - and readapted for complementary industrial use such as a printing shop, corporate offices or restaurant.

Not only does the private developer want the building relocated, it also considers the city's plan to designate the house as an impediment, Ross says.

"We're in the process of designation. Right now it's vulnerable."

Still, compared with just a few years ago, municipalities today are more conscious of the need to preserve their heritage resource, architect Peter Stewart says.

"Heritage planners have never been lax. Now they have the political muscle," says Stewart, who believes the strengthened Ontario Heritage Act and the 2005 provincial directive are making an impact.

As a result of the legislation, many municipalities - though certainly not all - are conducting heritage impact assessments, "which are very similar to environmental assessments," says Stewart, a partner with George Robb Architect, a Toronto firm that specializes in heritage conservation and acts as a consultant to municipalities on the preservation and readaptive use of historic structures.

The firm is working on a number of historic home preservation projects for municipalities such as Richmond Hill and Newmarket.

Other municipalities at the forefront of historical preservation include the Town of Caledon, which is conducting two parallel studies to identify its cultural heritage landscapes and built heritage resources, and the City of Brampton, which is placing a much higher emphasis on preservation than it had been doing, says Stewart.

A new official plan implemented last fall by Brampton has significantly beefed up cultural heritage policies. In the past four years, the city has significantly increased the number of listings on its inventory list of significant structure and doubled the number of heritage designations under the Ontario Heritage Act, says its heritage coordinator, Jim Leonard.

Some of the city's success stories include the completion or near-completion of negotiations with several developers to preserve and reuse heritage properties as a condition of subdivision agreements. One of those properties is the Creditdale Farm, which was once the home of prominent landscape architect Carl Borgstrom. Unfortunately, a barn on the property was destroyed by fire in June, says Leonard.

But progress is being made on the preservation front.

"The city won't tolerate demolition (of heritage houses). The bottom line is that you can't just tear down a building in the City of Brampton and that message is getting through to developers."

Certainly the Remington Group, the developers of Downtown Markham, will be capitalizing on the appeal and value of the Alex Bradburn house.

While it still sits on temporary steel supports, the house will eventually be restored to its original stately manner, says Annette Yuen, spokesperson for the developer.

Remington, in conjunction with architects Goldsmith Borgal & Co. and the Town of Markham, is working on restoration plans. Located adjacent to a park, it will be serve as an office site for Remington Homes during the building of the Markham Centre Lands, Yuen says.

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Illustration:

• RICK MADONIK Toronto Star This circa-1855 farmhouse is being restored to become a focal point in Phase 1 of Downtown Markham -- a massive \$3 billion development north of Highway 407 and east of Warden Ave. Tony Bock Toronto Star file photo The Thomas Cook house in Vaughan, built in 1841, was demolished in 2005 to make way for a subdivision. GLENN LOWSON FOR THE TORONTO STAR Paul Ross and other members of Heritage Guelph are concerned that old farmhouses such as "Willow Grove," a stone building in Guelph dating to around 1870, will be lost as new industrial subdivisions are developed. Tony Bock Toronto Star file photo The Thomas Cook house in Vaughan, built in 1841, was demolished in 2005 to make way for a subdivision. GLENN LOWSON FOR THE TORONTO STAR Paul Ross and other members of Heritage Guelph are concerned that old farmhouses such as "Willow Grove," a stone building in Guelph dating to around 1870, will be lost as new industrial subdivisions are developed.