

The Record

Editorial

Reclaiming heritage before it's all gone

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Could there be a change in the wind?

A 120-year-old schoolhouse in the south end of Kitchener will be spared from the wrecker's ball and converted into a restaurant that capitalizes on its warm, weathered brick and old-fashioned charm.

That fact alone would be cause for comment, in a community with a spotty history of preserving its older buildings and streetscapes. What makes the story even more remarkable is how easily the idea of preserving the old school came about.

The 1889 Pine Grove School sits in a 40-acre site slated for a massive, \$100-million redevelopment known as Sportsworld Crossing. Members of the neighbourhood approached the Toronto-based developer, Intermarket Developments, and asked if there was any way to save the old building.

After an engineer determined the building was structurally sound, developer Mark Kindrachuk began to mull over possible uses, and drew inspiration from Toronto's vibrant Distillery District, a unique collection of restored Victorian-era industrial buildings.

He convinced tenants to consider a similar approach, and the historic building was given a new lease on life. There was no heavy hand of regulation, no government incentives, just the combined efforts of a concerned neighbourhood, a developer with vision, tenants willing to take a risk and a collective desire to recognize and preserve the past as well as look to the future.

"This is a small part of a big project but in my mind it is the fun part," notes Kindrachuk, whose comment acknowledges that saving even a humble historic building is a good thing.

Kitchener has an unhappy history of losing many of its older buildings: examples include the porticoed and elegant old city hall, demolished in 1973 to make way for an office highrise and a shopping mall, and the Forsyth shirt factory, torn down in 2006 and deemed Canada's worst heritage loss of the year.

But perhaps a new awareness is arising, that a city has a unique character when it not only builds imaginative modern buildings, but also when it finds a way to integrate its older

architecture. There are certainly increasing numbers of successful examples, such as the old Victoria school or the Kaufman lofts.

The Pine Grove schoolhouse, a solitary island in a sea of modern development, will not usher in a Distillery district for south Kitchener. But it is an important piece of local history that will be retained, in an area that is important in the birth of Kitchener and Waterloo Region. The schoolhouse is not far from Pioneer Tower, which marks the site in 1800 where the first Pennsylvania Mennonites bought and cleared land, in what became the first significant community of what was then the far interior of Upper Canada.

The schoolhouse itself has its own unique history: the 1889 brick structure replaced an 1855 frame school that itself replaced an 1809 log building. It was a key building in the early community, often a place for community functions such as a singing society or debating club as well as being a centre for educating local children. The teachers who served there, for as little as \$10 a month, were expected to drill reading, spelling, arithmetic and a little grammar and geography into the heads of the children of a cluster of mostly German households, who laboured on small lots, raising a cow or two, pigs and chickens, and growing their own potatoes and vegetables. Perhaps the renovated restaurant will include a plaque so that visitors can glean a sense of the old building's long history.

It is to be hoped the little schoolhouse is an inspiration for others to retain the region's historic buildings.