

Morrish Store and Residence Saved

Richard Schofield

In 1890, W.J. Morrish built a two-storey, brick residence and general store in Highland Creek, which became part of the City of Scarborough, and since 1998 is within the City of Toronto. The family business served the community for the next seventy-five years. They then leased the store to others until 1988, when the last of the Morrish family of eight children passed away. No longer interested in keeping the building, descendants sold the property to a developer who envisioned a restaurant on the site.

The property was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act but after attempts to develop the property failed, the new owner abandoned the building. There may have been a hope that it would deteriorate and have to be demolished, so the property could be redeveloped as three or four residential building lots.

After a couple of years of minor vandalism and damage by wildlife, the local historical associations convinced the City to board the building closed and seek to expropriate the property. This was not an easy task, as most municipalities are not interested in becoming landlords or in restoring a heritage property that it does not own, even for a municipal or cultural purpose such as a museum. While capital for one time expenditures are somewhat easier to secure, ongoing staffing, with associated benefits, and operational costs can run into millions of dollars over time. Municipalities with already stretched budgets and little support from other levels of government, shy away from such long-term commitments.

Before approving expropriation, the City wanted the heritage community to provide a business plan that included an analysis of private staffing and ongoing operational costs. When this was provided and accepted by the City, the property was expropriated. The City took possession in 2000.

Capital funding was approved in small amounts over the next six years. Gradually, exterior renovations and structural repairs were made. On the exterior, a later addition was removed and the wall repaired. A new roof was added; bricks were repointed and damaged areas restored. All glazing and window sash mullions were repaired as vandals had destroyed most of the originals. An accessibility ramp was built at the



rear of the building, which was to become the new main entrance.

On the interior, structural repairs were necessary to bring the century old building up to current building code standards. Asbestos was removed and lead-based paint sealed. All new electrical, plumbing, and mechanical materials were installed along with an accessibility washroom.

In February 2006, the building was turned over to the Scarborough Historical Society for final restoration. This included plaster repairs, repainting walls and ceilings, and the restoration of the floors, retaining as much of the historic patina as possible. This was a large task considering the 3,200 square foot building has fifteen rooms, including the original store area. The ceiling and all walls are constructed of tongue and groove wood, which required brush rather than the easier paint roller method.

It was fortunate that no structural changes had been made to the interior during its hundred years of existence. Even the 1894 hand-operated elevator/lift is still operational. This is believed to be the oldest hand-operated elevator surviving in Ontario. The store's original sixteen-foot long grocery counter, safe, and sales records were saved by the Historical Society in 1988 when the building was sold and have now been returned to the building.

Currently, the facility serves as the Scarborough Archives and has a large room set aside for community meetings. Staffed by volunteers and trained archival personnel, the archives is open six days a week by appointment.

It has been a long struggle from an abandoned and threatened designated century old heritage building, to a fully restored adaptive reuse as a heritage and community facility that serves the people of Scarborough and Toronto. But it has been well worth the effort. All citizens can be proud that another heritage landmark in the local community has been saved.

Richard Schofield is the Scarborough Archivist and local heritage consultant, and Secretary/Treasurer for CHO.

