

## New uses for older buildings

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By DAVID J. WILSON

Historic buildings are the heritage of our civilization. In addition to furnishing a physical link with the past, such buildings can provide economic and aesthetic benefits to owners, occupiers, and the general public.

In these times of social, economic, and technological change, the ever-diminishing stock of older buildings could eventually result in our architectural history being confined to historic monuments or museums. If Canada's architectural heritage is to be preserved for future generations, it will only be with the cooperation and not the opposition of the private property owner and his advisors.

Over the last two decades, attitudes of both the general public and the private property owner have been changing; the conservation of heritage resources now has a wide and popular appeal. But recent trends are away from pure historic attractions such as historic sites, and towards using the historic association as a means of marketing the property. Thus, the appraiser needs to be able to recognize the latent advantages in an older building.

Here, it would be appropriate to comment on the differences between preservation and restoration: two very similar philosophical concepts but worlds apart in practicalities.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* defines "restore" as to "bring back to the original state," whereas "preserve" is defined as to "keep alive" or "maintain". Hence, Barkerville in British Columbia is a restoration project, seeking as it does to return the town back to the Gold Rush period. In contrast, projects like South Street Seaport in New York, Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco, and to a certain extent, Granville Island in Vancouver, are excellent examples of preservation, and of significantly better benefit to the private property owner. In these projects, it was never the intention to return slavishly to days of yesteryear but to combine history and economic practicalities.

Restoration, in contrast, is generally so expensive in bringing a structure back to its primary condition that it can be undertaken only by governmental bodies or historical societies. The finished restored product is therefore rarely offered for sale in the open market and "market value" is accordingly extremely difficult to ascertain. For this reason, this article will concentrate on preservation not restoration.

There is no doubt that progress has been the enemy of preservation, especially in the inner-city areas where new development invariably means the demolition of some older building.

How then is the private property owner, or his advisors, to be persuaded that it is economically viable to retain that older building?

There are, of course, many economic reasons, both for the owner and the community as a whole, that an older building should be preserved, in most cases, however, it will be the owner's perception of financial gain that will decide the outcome.

In the first place, the adaptation of an existing building can save the owner not only the greater part of costs associated with such building components as foundations, walls, and roof, but also in services and architectural fees. The building contractor may also be able to use existing site facilities during the construction period.

In addition, in many cases, the refurbishment of an older building will result in a gain of floorspace over a new building if the older building has a plot ratio in excess of the current accepted maximum (i.e., the older building contains more floorspace than would be allowed under current regulations). Modern parking requirements often serve to reduce the size of new buildings or entail substantial increases in building costs.

This situation frequently exists in the downtown areas of small to medium-sized communities or the commercial fringe areas of major cities. Current plot ratios in the centre of the larger urban areas are generally of a magnitude unattainable by our forefathers.

In many cases, older buildings are built tight against property lines, whereas modern standards require front, side, and rear set-backs, all of which can reduce the utility of the site and often serve to destroy the visual cohesion of an area. Adaptation of an older building in these cases can result in a significant increase in floorspace over that of a modern building erected on the same site.

Often, developers and architects alike fail to recognize that thick walls, small windows, and natural lighting lead to energy conservation. Studies have shown that employee productivity is better in a converted older building than in a modern property offering the same facilities. '

In these times of high finance costs, it must also be remembered that the conversion of an existing property rarely takes as long as the construction of a new building of similar size. Quicker completion of the building also leads to a more rapid return on investment in the form of sale proceeds or rental income. A successful project is generally more quickly achieved as prospective purchasers or tenants are more likely to make commitments faced with a shorter construction period.

Again, it should be remembered that most buildings constructed in recent times have built-in obsolescence and are rarely meant to last more than 50 years. Our grandfathers were somewhat less extravagant and, if properly maintained, an older structure can outlast the majority of buildings built today. Costly failures in building technology and in untried materials have, in the past, received a good deal of media attention, a circumstance that can generally be avoided in the adaptation of an existing building.

Probably of relatively minor concern, but definitely a factor to be borne in mind, is the cost of demolishing an older structure. In many cases, for reasons of public safety or the integrity of an adjoining building, such demolition must be carried out by hand with a resultant increase in costs.

If these various aspects are taken together, the potential savings to an owner can be substantial. Proper investigation of the potential for preservation can result in the identification of far higher financial returns to the owner subsequent to the adaptation of an existing building than those resulting from the development of a new building.

Although in the absence of legislative authority it is most often the economic benefits to the owner that will decide whether an older building is to be preserved, there are nevertheless certain benefits that will accrue for the community as a whole.

The refurbishment of an older building will, in many cases, provide benefits to the immediate area in the form of increased economic activity. As other building owners, seeing the success of the original project, seek to improve their own buildings, the whole fabric of an area can be changed for the better, and with this change will come increased employment opportunities.

Non-economic benefits to the community include the preservation of construction skills that otherwise would likely die, as the tradition of craftsmanship is something that rarely survives in the modern building. Older buildings are themselves a repository of former technologies and lifestyles, and act as resources for local history. The continued leisure explosion has resulted in more demand being placed on learning institutions for instruction in local history and related subjects. It is important that such instruction is not primarily confined to museums.

A powerful psychological motivation also works in favour of preservation in that the demolition of an important older building often leads to adverse media attention. Most developers prefer a low profile and often the threat - real or imagined - of a poor press will result in the deferment of plans for a new building. At this stage, it is wise of the owner's advisor to investigate the potential financial advantages for preservation, as the saving in finance costs over an extended holding period may tip the scale in favour of refurbishment.

Unfortunately, a combination of negative factors often results in the loss of a building that would otherwise be a viable entity.

Many building owners are concerned that the future costs of maintenance of an older building will be prohibitive, not realizing that a well refurbished project need be no more expensive in upkeep than a modern building of similar size. In addition, in many jurisdictions an older building incurs lower rates of local taxation when compared to a newer building.

Disuse, however, is one problem that besets the owner of an older building. This is especially so in the case of those special-purpose buildings that time and changing circumstances have made obsolete.

Churches are prime examples of such buildings. With today's amalgamated and larger congregations, the smaller, older church buildings are often either left empty or demolished. Although alternative uses can be made of churches (one that comes to mind is a disused church in Chilliwack, British Columbia now being used as a sausage factory), design and the association tend to restrict uses.

Similarly, with the virtual death of passenger transportation, railway stations now find themselves surplus to requirements. And there is obviously a limit to the number of restaurants that can be accommodated in defunct railway stations.

Changing trends in building design and utility can often affect the use of older buildings, leaving them abandoned long before their time. Multi-storey factories and warehouses are prime examples as modern technology requires single-storey, clear span buildings. Older buildings, therefore, have difficulty in first attracting and then keeping tenants.

Government action is likewise a factor that often works to the detriment of preservation, although, in many cases, the same government is probably the leading promoter of heritage conservation.

Road-widening schemes are generally the kiss of death for older buildings, often resulting in their demolition to make way for the project. In other cases, irreparable damage is caused by increased traffic vibrations. At the very least, the road widening can often alter the aesthetic appeal of the area.

Schemes that are perceived to bring employment to an area, such as industrial parks and shopping centres, are unlikely to receive opposition from the local authority even if the scheme demands the demolition of an important older building. A vocal segment of the local population might take a different view, but the thought of an increased tax base is likely to have more effect than even the most vocal

opposition.

Peculiarly, the decline in the economic base of an area has, in the past, worked for - and not against - conservation. Gastown in Vancouver, for example, survives only because in the early 1900s the financial sector of Vancouver moved west, leaving Gas- town as it is today. Similarly, the City of Nelson has the second largest inventory of Victorian buildings in British Columbia (Victoria, not unreasonably, is the first) only because the local mining industry went into a slump and there was not sufficient commercial activity for investors to consider redeveloping their properties.

As far as the conservation of older buildings is concerned, nothing is as important as the attitude of the building owner and the local authority. More than one owner of an older building has deliberately allowed his property to become derelict in the hope of gaining permission to redevelop it. In the absence of strong action by the relevant authorities, this ploy is likely to succeed.

Few authorities have followed the example of the City of Seattle where in the case of the Pioneer Square area, the city has taken powers upon itself to repair such buildings at the owner's expense. Such actions would not be necessary, however, if owners could perceive the benefits that would result from the preservation of their buildings.

Previous owners can have a detrimental effect on the use of buildings, most often as a result of the imposition of restrictive covenants.

This is most commonly the situation with churches, where the former owner often seeks to prevent the sale of liquor from such recycled premises. Such restrictions result in the reduction of potential uses for such property.

Understanding why older buildings should be preserved is one thing, but what practical possibilities exist for the uses of such buildings?

Churches, for example, can have varied new uses, but not generally as bizarre as the previously mentioned sausage factory. Other church structures have found new uses as private schools, radio stations, funeral homes, restaurants, auction houses, community halls, art centres, theatres, sport halls, museums, senior citizen centres, medical offices, all types of retail uses, and, of course, as single family dwellings.

Railway buildings, especially stations, can often find a new life as restaurants, museums, garden centres, offices, and many other community uses. In the world's larger urban areas, obsolete stations have been converted into such uses as office blocks, sport complexes, and exhibition space.

Warehouses and factories often offer the best possibilities for preservation, especially if closely associated with water. Such complexes, when located in the larger urban centres, often become prime tourist attractions such as Gastown and Granville Island in Vancouver, Pioneer Square in Seattle, Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco, and Old Sacramento in Sacramento. Most of the larger North American cities have similar examples.

While such schemes benefit greatly by being relatively large, there is, nevertheless, scope for the single building to be converted in such a manner, especially in areas that have a pedestrian profile.

In other areas, older warehousing and factories have been converted into residential accommodation, often commanding prices and rents that could never be obtained with a new building. Such complexes

often include studios for artists and artisans and perhaps some commercial space.

Other commercial buildings invariably can be adapted for mixed uses without much difficulty. Generally, any use that could be accommodated within a new building can be fitted into any preservation scheme.

Larger country homes have successfully found new uses as schools, senior citizen complexes, private hospitals, conference or training centres, country clubs, restaurants, hotels, and, in exceptional cases, offices. Smaller homes lend themselves to conversion into multi-family accommodation, group homes, and similar uses.

Agricultural buildings should not be ignored; many barns and similar structures have found new uses as restaurants, museums, craft centres, and even tourist accommodation. Many older barns throughout northern Europe and Scandinavia have been converted into tourist accommodation for cyclists and hikers. It seems that cold and drafty barns are a welcome relief after a day of cycling or walking, and so successful are they that even Britain's National Trust is beginning to get into the act.

Indeed, it would seem that the potential for using older buildings is limited only by the ingenuity of the owner or his advisors. Even temporary uses are beneficial in maintaining an older building until such time as circumstances change. Many a church building has been used as a storage structure until finding life again as a church. In many cases today, the enemy of preservation is no longer progress but under-utilization of the building in question. With some support from local authorities through less inflexible zoning regulations, many of our older structures can have many more years of useful life. ●

**David J. Wilson**, B.Sc., AACI, ARICS joined Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation in Vancouver as a senior appraiser in 1983, and, in 1985, became Real Estate Manager for the Corporations Granville Island Project. He is currently responsible for all real estate matters including a public market, restaurants, theatres, as well as general retailing within the 40 acres of Granville Island.