Adaptive Reuse of Historic Structures

In a rapidly globalizing world, heritage has become a focal point of regional identity and has increasingly become a resource in the field of local development, job creation and promoting the image of a region, rendering it attractive to companies that are considering establishing themselves in a new place. The major actors in the field of development, particularly the World Bank, use heritage as a strategic instrument in the struggle against poverty within the framework of the UN’s millennium goals.

Are we using our Heritage buildings and sites in a profitable way? Preservationists recognize that our buildings often outlive their original purposes. Adaptive re-use is a process that adapts buildings for new uses while retaining their historic features.

Internationally, old buildings are considered re-usable resources. They also add charm and human scale to our cities and neighborhoods.

Recycling has become second nature to modern communities as we strive for environmental sustainability. Aiming to reduce, reuse and recycle waste, we find new life in everything from bottles and boxes to clothes, vehicles and buildings. Adaptive reuse is a process that changes a disused or ineffective item into a new item that can be used for a different purpose.

“Recycling” our old buildings has therefore become of major importance in the historic revitalization of cities around the world. It is a key strategy for government agencies, institutions and communities to achieve more sustainable patterns of development. Through recycling old buildings architects have created integrated solutions that carve out exciting new spaces in unlikely building shells.

Sometimes this is achieved by traditional restoration of a building’s exterior, but gutting the interior to create adaptable space with a more modern look and the sort of amenities tenants would expect in a new property. Of course this depends on the historicity and grade of protection assigned to the building by the National Trust. Just as often the interior spaces are respected while upgrading electrical, mechanical and plumbing systems for
a contemporary use. We see former warehouses transformed into attractive and competitive Class A workplace environments, and design solutions that have given historic but obsolete buildings a marketable and sustainable future.

The following is an excerpt from “Adaptive Reuse: Preserving our past, building our future (2004)” - Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Environment and Heritage:

The adaptive reuse of a historic building should have minimal impact on the heritage significance of the building and its setting. Developers should gain an understanding of why the building has heritage status, and then pursue development that is sympathetic to the building to give it a new purpose. Adaptive reuse is self-defeating if it fails to protect the building's heritage values.

The most successfully developed heritage adaptive reuse projects are those that respect and retain the building's heritage significance and add a contemporary layer that provides value for the future. Sometimes, adaptive reuse is the only way that the building's fabric will be properly cared for, revealed or interpreted, while making better use of the building itself. When buildings can no longer function in their original use, a new use through adaptation may be the only way to preserve their heritage significance.

For some, saving an old building is a response to the dehumanization caused by the monoliths, technology, and institutions that dominate our culture.

It is the response to the interchangeable skylines franchises, and shopping malls, the commercial and monumental buildings that intrude on our landscapes…and take away our comfortable feeling of “home” and make our surroundings unidentifiable from anywhere else in the world. Contemporary architecture has become so “universal” in its style, choice of materials and the manipulation and controlling of room environments that there is often little to distinguish one culture from another in a typical modern office space.

Is it aesthetics then that drives the need for preservation? Is it the charm of a bygone era and style? Form and function do seem to complement each other in old buildings, with a depth and beauty that has been left behind by
our rush into modernity. Internationally, older buildings are now often saved and re-used instead of being demolished and replaced. For example, Mayler House on Belmont Circular Road was originally a family home and has now been adapted to an elegant conference centre.

Preservationists believe that old buildings have a far more enduring importance to society as educational examples and tools than they do as modern dwelling and working places. They are living history. History we can feel and touch. They provide an anchor for our collective memory. They give us a sense of belonging to a particular place or neighbourhood. Historic preservation therefore is not only about saving buildings. It is about saving communities.

Adaptive re-use is a golden opportunity to preserve our neighbourhoods and offer the community something it desperately needs, a cultural connection that can help to create leaders who will promote harmony, cooperation, pride and self-worth. Historic buildings, modernized and reused can then continue to create history and be relevant to our children and grandchildren by teaching them, empowering them, by bringing their neighbourhoods back full circle, reinforcing the legacy of those who toiled and strove to create the wider family in “the good old days” when the village
raised the child, and the child cherished hope and dreams of a successful future.

_The Chamber thanks Ms. Rudylynn De Four Roberts, of Citizens for Conservation for her contribution of this article._