

HERITAGE LOST?

BY SIMONE JOSEPH
Staff Writer

When Patty Loveland-Gutzke first visited Kathleen McKay's house in Unionville about 12 years ago, she discovered the woman — who was old and frail at the time — had stored valuable Group of Seven paintings in her bathtub.

Ms McKay ended up donating the collection of 67 Varley paintings and her house to the Town of Markham on the condition a gallery be built for the collection.

Ms Loveland-Gutzke's dream of building a gallery and restoring a historic home has come true.

The Frederick Horsman Varley Art Gallery was built in 1997 thanks to an endowment of about \$1 million from Ms McKay. Nearly enough money has been raised to renovate the McKay house, thanks to \$175,000 from the Ontario Heritage Foundation, \$69,000 from the Town of Markham and a \$75,000 fundraiser held last year.

But \$70,000 is still needed to restore the garden, money Ms Loveland-Gutzke and fellow volunteers hope to raise in a campaign currently under way.

More people understand the importance of restoring and maintaining historic sites, according to Markham historian Lorne Smith. He pointed to the popularity of a neighbourhood of historic homes known as Markham Heritage Estates.

"It is perceived as valuable to have a restored building. Thirty years ago, that feeling didn't exist. (The sentiment was) 'Oh, it's an old building? Let's get rid of it,'" he said.

Legislation has also changed to protect historic buildings. The Ontario Heritage Act was amended in April to give the province and municipalities power to prevent demolition of heritage buildings. Prior to this, the government could delay but not prevent demolitions.

But while the attitude toward restoring historic buildings and the legislation protecting them has improved, there is not enough



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE ROCKERSCHIEDT

Executive director Jan Emonson shows some of the deterioration in the exterior of the Sharon Temple. The roof and windows of the building, one of York's leading tourist attractions, also need repairs.

funding to support restoration projects, according to Jan Emonson, executive director of the Sharon Temple Museum Society.

Ms Emonson stands near the centre of the Sharon Temple, just north of Newmarket and looks at the ceiling.

"I draw your attention to the plaster coming down here," she says, pointing out a spot where the plaster has disappeared, revealing thin strips of wood.

Sharon Temple was voted most

popular tourist attraction this year by the York Region Newspaper Group's Reader's Choice survey. It was also a popular tourist attraction in the 19th century and well into the 20th century and has been recognized as a national historic site by the federal government because of its unique architecture.

Unfortunately, this notoriety does not necessarily translate into funding. The temple requires close to \$1 million in repairs and has needed this upgrading for at least

five years. Without the repairs, an important piece of history could be lost, Ms Emonson said.

"There will be ongoing deterioration of the building over time. We can lose parts of the building that cannot be replaced. The longer we put things off, the more expensive it is to repair," said Ms Emonson.

Ms Emonson believes lack of funding is an obvious obstacle.

Heritage Canada offers matching funds programs, but that means a building must have at least 50 per

*York Region's
historical jewels
crumbling from
lack of funding*

cent of the funding up front, she said.

In the past, more provincial grants were available. The Ontario Heritage Foundation used to be a major source of funding, giving the temple \$300,000 in the '90s for its last restoration. But since then, it has drastically decreased its funding.

"There have been cutbacks to all aspects of cultural funding in the last 15 years," Ms Emonson said.

At the municipal level, funding has increased. The Town of East Gwillimbury doubled its commitment from \$6,000 last year to \$12,000 this year — a generous amount for the council of a small district, but hardly enough to cover the \$1 million cost.

Aurora resident Susan MacDonald believes governments are too short-sighted in their attitude toward preserving historical buildings. She and a team of researchers and activists had to work hard to convince politicians and staff in Vaughan her relative's home at 121 Centre St., known as Four Elms, needed restoration.

The home was once owned by artist James Edward Hervey (J.E.H.) MacDonald, a founding member of the Group of Seven. The property was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act in 1983 but wasn't maintained for about 20 years before Ms MacDonald and the rest of the restoration and research committee got involved.

Ms MacDonald believes politicians need to change their attitude.

"They leave them (historic buildings) too long. They sit there and sit there and the damage only gets worse. The longer they leave it, the more expensive it will be to do repairs."

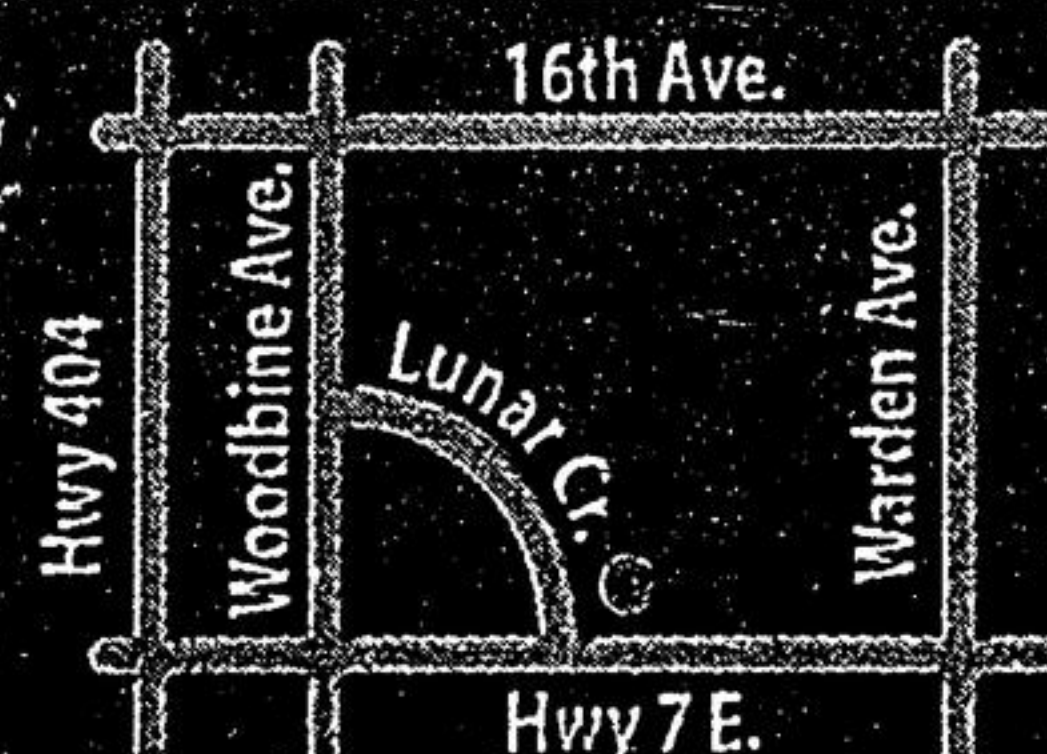
Holding meetings in historic buildings rather than boardrooms would raise the profile of these buildings, Ms MacDonald said.

Ms Emonson couldn't agree more.

"Quality of life is not just making sure we have good roads and sewage systems but it is making sure you have cultural offerings, too," she said.



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