

HERITAGE BUILDINGS

The Dangers of Knowing the Price of Everything and the Value of Nothing



(Image via Wikimedia Commons)

- “I think we’re confusing heritage with nostalgia”
- “Not every old building is a heritage building”
- “I respect the past, but we are not living in it”
- “I drive by that building every day and I think it’s an eyesore”

Just a few quotes from the latest proposal to demolish an iconic century-old building and make room for progress. What cabal of money-grubbing developers would, without a hint of shame, so plainly offer their own decades-long neglect of a historic building as justification for its demolition? Why, a good number of Halifax’s own elected councillors of course!

Having proved their bonafides with a unanimous approval of a new Heritage Conservation District the month prior, councillors, in fresh receipt of a building condition report for one of their own registered buildings, wasted no time debasing themselves with all manner of excuses as to why the Halifax Forum deserves the dynamite treatment. “A modern building for a modern city” offered one, espousing a viewpoint decidedly more mid-century modern, than modern-day. Bravely willing to take costless (to them) actions in fulfilling their duty to the public realm, it seems once the chips are down some find it quite easy to shift from clucking tongues to copping out.

The intrepid, if outgunned, heritage planning staff managed to get an admonishing squeak into the staff report, “as the building owner, it is incumbent upon the Municipality to exhibit stewardship in this area by investing in the Forum’s heritage preservation”. Atlas shrugged.

Unfortunately for the top minds on council, that pesky Heritage Property Act does apply after all. Combined with a few other staff reports, they will at least have to pay some further lip service to the issue before they can vote to do what they’ve so clearly already decided. A forthcoming Heritage Impact Statement will further spell out the historic and architectural merit of the building and provide conservation guidance, however the future of the Forum has much broader implications.

The North End is changing. Market forces and planning policy are driving new development to the area. Within a scant few blocks of the Forum a bevy of development projects mean more than 2,000 new residents will soon call the area home. All of this is to say nothing of the further density that will be driven to the area under the incoming (...hopefully) Centre Plan, wherein it is designated as the largest “Growth Centre” in the urban core.

All of this can be good. All of this can be bad. For more than a decade now the municipality has been making the case for more urban densification and its role in the social and economic health of the city; infrastructure efficiency, public health, climate impact mitigation, traffic management, the higher quality of services and amenities it can justify. Yet all of this high-minded ambition hits the ground somewhere. Achieving these goals is a long, incremental process, and along the way will be many points where the public gets to evaluate actual outcomes. Will HRM's performance stall the progress, or add to its momentum?

The Halifax Forum is a heritage arena, unique in the city for its history and form. It is one of the largest heritage buildings left, enabling a broad range of adaptive reuse options compared to the typical Georgian and Victorian stock. It is also unique in its use. Unlike most heritage buildings, which are often private, it continues to play an active role in the life of the North End neighbourhood. It is therefore a pillar of the community's identity, visually and socially. This is a building known and loved by far more than architectural aficionados; previous rumblings of its demolition have elicited swift public outcry.

So what message might Council's treatment of the Forum send? Will it shine as an example of how existing neighbourhoods can densify and change while retaining and enhancing the elements they already love? Or is development only for the benefit of newcomers, a spectre to be opposed like the barbarians at the gate? Will the municipality show how the enlightened treatment of built heritage adds value to the overall quality of place in a way that exceeds the potential of new development alone? Or will its pound-foolishness produce only lingering regret, and a list of self-serving excuses to be eagerly wielded by similarly unscrupulous property owners?



Restored 1928 arena in Michigan: Rosetti Architecture



New HRM municipal rink: Hello Halifax