



SARNIA HERITAGE COMMITTEE

HERITAGE CONSERVATION POSITION PAPER ON SCITS

Position statement

To assess the heritage significance of the Sarnia Collegiate Institute & Technical School (SCITS) for its preservation for future generations.

Introduction

This Position Paper has been prepared by the Sarnia Heritage Committee to be used as a basis to encourage discussion by the various interest groups, including the School Board, the community, the City and other interested parties who have expressed an interest in the fate, preservation and future of the SCITS building. Hopefully such discussions will help result in a clarification of just what our community regards as "heritage", what is considered worthwhile to conserve, the effort and expense that they are willing to commit to such conservation, and the formulation of ways and means to work together to achieve what ultimately we all want to see – the conservation of the SCITS building for the enjoyment and benefit of the present community and for future generations.

Who We Are

The Sarnia Heritage Committee is a volunteer Committee of Council whose members are appointed by Council in accordance with By-law 14 of 1991, enacted under the provisions of the Ontario Heritage Act, R.S.O. 1990. The role of the Committee is to assist City Council and our community in addressing all relevant heritage related issues which may have an impact on our community's heritage and history. The mandate is to identify our built heritage to promote and encourage its conservation.

Since 1983 the Sarnia Heritage Committee (formerly known as the LACAC - Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee) enables the community to express its interests in heritage conservation in a recognized forum. It also enables our municipal council to make these complex decisions about heritage preservation and conservation with the input of reliable experienced, technical and professional advice.

Sarnia Heritage Committee Mission

The mission of the Committee is to ensure that natural, historical, architectural and cultural heritage assets in Sarnia are identified, conserved, protected and maintained in a manner which is in keeping with their intrinsic heritage and community value, facilitating public enjoyment and participation wherever possible.

Planning for the future of a strong, vibrant community requires knowledge of the past, and an understanding of what we value in the present. Existing buildings, structures and landscapes often define a community's unique values and identity and give it character and a sense of place. To help guide change, it is important to identify and protect the sites in our community that have cultural heritage value that affect us.

The Ontario Heritage Act is one tool that Sarnia, and hundreds of communities across Ontario, have used to protect thousands of heritage sites and buildings. Heritage properties can be individually designated (under Part IV of the Act) or as part of a larger Heritage Conservation District (under Part V). The Act provides the tools to help municipalities to:

- a) recognize the importance of a property to the local community;
- b) legally protect the property's cultural heritage value;
- c) encourage good stewardship and conservation; and
- d) promote knowledge and understanding about the site.

The main focus of the Act is the designation of properties which involves the evaluation following provincial criteria of a property's architectural, historical and contextual attributes and values.

While designation is commonly mistaken as a barrier for future use of the property, it DOES NOT:

1. impose restrictions, special obligations, or additional expenses beyond those expected of any property owner;
2. preclude alterations or expansions to a building (provided that they complement its heritage attributes);
3. include interior spaces (unless they are of unusually significant or rare). The majority of heritage designations are intentionally restricted to exterior building or property features;
4. adversely affect property values (and may enhance values);
5. result in higher insurance premiums, as it does not place additional requirements on the insurer;
6. restrict the owner's use of a property; and
7. obligate an owner to restore, repair or replace lost or damaged features of a property.

It however DOES:

1. identity character, architectural details and sense of place that should be protected;
2. publicly recognize the significance and heritage value of a property's features, and its worthiness for on-going care;
3. protect a property from un-sympathetic alterations, which may decrease its historic, architectural or aesthetic significance;
4. prevent demolition without due process and Council approval; and
5. apply to any real property having cultural heritage value or interest.

The continued use and/or repurposing of a cultural heritage resource inevitably impacts on its heritage significance and will continue to contribute significantly to the community's cultural identity. Any continued use and/or renewal should therefore minimize any negative impacts on the buildings' significance.

This paper proposes that a comprehensive heritage assessment be undertaken of the SCITS building to determine its significance and value to the community at large, thereby helping all decision makers to fully understand what this building means to the community and how its future use should be evaluated.

Heritage Impact Assessment

The 1922 SCITS building has been identified by the City as having significant cultural heritage value and as such is included in the City's Register of Cultural Heritage Resources. While not "designated" under the *Ontario Heritage Act*, the Register (inventory) status requires an owner to notify Council in writing at least 90 days in advance of their intention to demolish or remove the building. This period gives the Sarnia Heritage Committee and City Council an opportunity to review any proposal and determine whether to allow a demolition permit to be issued or to proceed with formal designation. Alternatively, the Register status allows the Owner or the City to proceed with designating the building at any time.

For the full cultural heritage value of this building to be determined, an impact assessment on heritage significance of the building needs to be undertaken. This assessment would allow for a systematic comparison of a building's heritage significance against the impacts of its closure and possible removal from the site. The outcome can then be used to support the decision-making process for the future of this historic building.

The Sarnia Heritage Committee has initiated a preliminary historical and architectural assessment of the SCITS building. So far the following has been compiled:

Historically, the structure was built nearly a century ago in 1922 to house 700 students on a 7 acre on Wellington St. It was built by local tradesmen at a cost in 1922 of \$700,000 (\$500,000 from the city, and \$200,000 the province). In 2016 dollars that would be equal to approximately \$9.6million in 2016 dollars (\$6.8 Million from the City and \$2.7 million from the province!)

SCITS has always been a collegiate institute and technical school serving all of Sarnia and parts of neighbouring Lambton County. Designed in the Gothic Collegiate style it's one of only a handful of such landmark institutional structures across the Province (including the Lochiel Street School, circa 1916). This prominent building and its associated open space are highly conspicuous and welcomed in both the city-wide and neighbourhood context.

The classic detailed red brick laid in common bond, both inside and out, is particularly noteworthy. Other noteworthy architectural features include wide gently sloped stairwells, interior brick pillars and archways, the original classroom doors and transoms framed with wood molding and polished brick, and most notably the outstanding, classic auditorium that's probably as difficult to find elsewhere as it would be to replicate.

There have been exterior alterations made to the building over the years, such as the 1966 replacement of the original grandiose low-sloped exterior staircase, with an interior enclosed stairwell and some additional institutional space. Later additions were sympathetically added inconspicuously to the rear, helping to preserve the original building's architectural prominence as an impressive, well-known City landmark. The original building is well preserved and maintained.

Structurally, the building currently stands in solid condition. To accommodate modernization of the buildings infrastructure, dropped ceilings have been added to hide conspicuous utility upgrades, resulting in some of the significant interior architectural features being partially covered in some areas of the school. The elevator that was inconspicuously installed in 1995 to improve accessibility is still in good working order.

Recognition/assessment of intangible value

In many heritage studies it is found that "heritage" is perceived by most people as being largely physical in nature, and is particularly associated with old or significant buildings. However, there is also recognized, especially among younger people, that certain places have a value to society which goes beyond the physical structures within them. Given the present outcry by many sectors of our community regarding the future of SCITS it is evident this building not only has historical and architectural merits, as outlined in the City Inventory of Heritage properties, it is associated with people's emotional value that is imprinted in their "collective memory". With

collective memory, the place and function are all important, not just the physical structure.

This intangible value, the collective social memory, is not always appreciated until it comes under threat and there is a need to develop a mechanism to identify places, sites and settings to which such value is attached so that they can be recognized and protected prior to any threat arising. It is hoped that this value would be recognized and appreciated so that the decision makers can recognize that heritage conservation adds value intrinsically to the community and that this added, but difficult to quantify intangible value, outweighs the "cost".

Recommendation

This paper proposes that a comprehensive heritage assessment be undertaken of the SCITS building to determine its significance and value to the community at large, thereby helping all decision-makers to fully understand what this building means to the community and how its future should be evaluated. The SCITS building should be conserved to continue its heritage value to benefit present and future generations of our community.

Historically, many of our community supported institutions including this Board have prioritized economics over social development, but such an attitude towards this building would be less forgivable if the future of this structure is in peril. The true "value" of our heritage cannot be calculated simply by comparison with the costs of its preservation.

The Sarnia Heritage Committee and the community are looking for a clear and unequivocal commitment from the Lambton-Kent District School Board towards the heritage value and conservation of SCITS, so that the operation, management and maintenance of this heritage asset continue to benefit the present and future generation of our community.

The Sarnia Heritage Committee recommends every effort should be considered to preserve this landmark three-storey historical building regardless of whatever the future use come of the SCITS building (continuing as an educational institution, or repurposed as government offices, as a community centre, as condos/apartments or whatever).

With many heritage architectural details and a longstanding history, the building is conspicuous and appreciated in both the city-wide and neighbourhood context. Its' associated open space contribute significantly to establishing and maintaining the character of not only this neighbourhood, but the City as a whole.

For future generations to appreciate and respect, every effort should made to maintain and protect the SCITS building, as an exemplary display of

Gothic Collegiate architecture with associated historical and architectural significance to the social and cultural development of our City.



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