

**Huron Perth Healthcare Alliance**

**Board meeting – September 15, 2022, 7:00 PM**

**Presentation by Howard Shubert on behalf of *Save Avon Crest!***

Good evening Mr. Williams and members of the Huron Perth Healthcare Alliance Board. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share with you our group's concerns. Our group – [Save Avon Crest!](#) – is only a few weeks old. We came together when it became clear that Stratford's first public hospital was denied heritage designation and would be threatened with demolition. We are citizens of Stratford who believe in the value that heritage adds to our community. In particular, we value the cultural, historical and architectural significance of Avon Crest.

Our steering committee includes executive members of the [Stratford/Perth branch of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario](#), of the [Stratford & District Historical Society](#) and of Heritage Stratford. The views I'm expressing tonight are ours alone. Our goal is to mobilize our collective knowledge, experience and contacts on your behalf. We want to reach a mutually agreeable solution, one that includes a restored Avon Crest. Part of our mission involves educating the public about this threat to their heritage and environment.

My colleague Laura Dent, who is also attending this meeting, is a registered professional planner who holds a PhD in Planning from the University of Waterloo and currently works as a heritage planner with the City of London. I am an Architectural

Historian, author and former curator at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal.

I want to use the time available to advocate for Avon Crest on the basis of its heritage and of the environment. I will then present a brief vision of what we would like to see and of how we might work with you to achieve it.

Before I begin however, I want to make clear that our membership supports the remarkable, ongoing work of our health care professionals, whether medical staff, administrators or Board members. We appreciate how challenging the past few years have been. We have no desire to make your jobs more difficult. On the contrary, we want to help.

### Heritage

We believe that Avon Crest is among the most significant architectural and historical buildings in Stratford. Not only is it a repository of personal memory and collective social meaning for citizens of Stratford, but as one of the few, surviving, 19<sup>th</sup>-century hospital buildings in all of Canada, Avon Crest commemorates the contributions of health care professionals over the past 130 years. Avon Crest owes its existence to the generosity of Stratford's citizens, who contributed 75% of its construction costs, and to the municipality that donated five acres of land. So, while we acknowledge that the Huron Perth Healthcare Alliance owns the physical property, we also insist that Avon Crest's

heritage belongs to the people, the same people who have continued to generously support your work.

The architect of Avon Crest was George F. Durand, who designed three other buildings in Stratford: the old Pumphouse, in 1883, which was subsequently renovated and repurposed as Gallery Stratford; the Perth County Court House, in 1887; and the neighbouring Stratford Jail, in 1886, both still in use. Avon Crest was constructed as part of a larger push across the country in the 19th century to build lay, general hospitals in Canada's growing cities. When it opened in May 1891, Avon Crest stood as a symbol of progress in science and technology. It represented Stratford's belief in the welfare of all its citizens. Stratford is remarkably fortunate to possess such an accessible and visually stunning work of 19<sup>th</sup>-C architecture amongst its cultural landmarks.

In describing the hospitals constructed from the mid-1850s through to World War I, McGill University professor [Annemarie Adams](#), an expert on hospital architecture, remarks, "This is the hospital of Florence Nightingale," where patients lay in parallel rows of narrow beds and "ventilation, ventilation and ventilation were the three main planning ideas" driving their design.

As Stratford's population increased and medical science advanced, the hospital kept pace, adding a gardener's cottage in 1904, a three-storey wing in 1910 and a nurses' residence in 1929. Our hospital continued to grow, and I will not presume to tell you any

more about your own history. But what is important to appreciate, what I absolutely want to underline here, is that this ensemble of buildings and landscape is unrivalled in Canada. I may be here on behalf of a municipal committee that wants to preserve a local landmark, but make no mistake, Avon Crest also tells the story of medicine and medical practitioners for all of Canada.

Urban and architectural historian Cameron Logan wrote in his 2019 book, *Architecture and the Modern Hospital*, "Whether they want to or not, architects, preservation professionals, and municipal-planning departments must think about hospitals as historic places." To this list, I would also add, hospital Boards.

#### Environment:

I hope I've made a compelling case for the significance of Avon Crest, with respect to its history, culture, architecture and heritage. On this basis alone the building deserves to be preserved for future generations. But this is only one half of the story that I'm here to speak about. The other half concerns our environment. Over the past ten years or so there has been a virtual avalanche of research and public discourse initiated by architects, urban planners, politicians and environmentalists that has connected the dots between preservation and the environment. These ideas were summed up by [Carl Elefante](#) of the Climate Heritage Network, when he wrote: "The greenest building is the one that is already built."

Even architects – often regarded as egotistical and willing to build first, ask questions later – have been some of the most vociferous and radical in their pronouncements on this topic. “[Demolition is an act of violence](#),” says Pritzker prize-winning French architect, Anne Lacaton. British architect Sir David Chipperfield, winner of the Stirling Prize and the Royal Gold Medal, argues that the retention of buildings should be seen “not as an obligation but as a commitment to a more resourceful and responsible approach to our future, based on intelligent use of existing material and cultural capital.” This year, in Britain, Conservative cabinet minister Michael Gove ordered a public inquiry into the proposed demolition of the 1929 Marks & Spencer flagship store on Oxford Street. He argued that its demolition would release 40,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. An article reporting on this subject in London’s *The Guardian* newspaper commented that: “Whereas heritage conservation would once have been the primary reason to retain such a building, the conservation of the planet has now taken centre stage.”

These concerns are not some idealistic wish list. In fact they are fundamental to the planning strategies of most of the world’s cities. Stratford’s Strategic Priorities mention the environment no less than ten times. Our Official Plan specifically encourages the rehabilitation of older buildings.

Ontario’s Five Year Climate Change Action Plan for 2016 – 2020 identified the reuse of heritage properties as inherently sustainable and as excellent platforms to showcase low-carbon technology and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Ontario’s Climate

Change Strategy identifies one way to reduce the province's carbon footprint as the adaptive reuse of older buildings.

What has gotten everyone so excited? Why is everybody talking about reusing old buildings? The answer lies in embodied carbon.

In a 2019 article in *Canadian Architect* titled, "[Embodied Carbon: The Blindspot of the Buildings Industry](#)," Anthony Pak explains that, "The term "embodied carbon" refers to the carbon footprint associated with building materials, from cradle to grave." The author wonders, "Where did all of that concrete, steel and wood come from? What did it take to extract, manufacture and transport those materials? What will happen to them when your building eventually gets torn down?" Do any of you know the answer? Do you know to where the demolished fragments of Avon Crest will be transported?

A recent article in *CBC News* titled, "[Save a building, fight climate change](#)," refers to the huge carbon footprint of completed buildings, such as Avon Crest, and admonishes us that, "Demolishing an existing building, throwing it away in a landfill, is a staggering act of conspicuous consumption." The reason why this is so is that demolishing, and then rebuilding, creates double emissions by necessitating the manufacture of two lots of construction materials.

If the Hippocratic Oath, the ethical underpinning of medical practice, is summed up in the phrase, "First, do no harm," then this ethical standard should also apply to each of

you, the Board members and executives directing the operations of this hospital. I understand that you are in a difficult situation, that you have a fiduciary responsibility and that you must make hard decisions. I don't envy you. But you must make those decisions with a full understanding of the consequences, and those consequences extend beyond the borders of the hospital. My colleagues and I will be ensuring that as many Stratford residents as possible also understand the issues and the risks.

Our group has been meeting with the candidates for councillor and mayor in Stratford's upcoming municipal election. One mayoral candidate described Avon Crest to me as a "wicked problem," by which they meant that you were faced with a stark choice between two losing options: either spend \$24 million or demolish the building. But what is "wicked" is limiting your choices in this way. What if there was another option, an option that could yield a Win-Win solution?

#### What we want – what we can offer

Today, everyone recognizes Stratford City Hall as the city's crown jewel. But in the late 1960s plans were afoot to demolish it in favour of a multi-storey hotel topped with a revolving restaurant. Wiser heads prevailed after a public outcry. Likewise, it's hard to imagine Stratford without the Avon River and its ribbon of green parkland, but in 1913 it took a referendum, which only won by 127 votes, to prevent the Canadian Pacific Railway from laying tracks into downtown that would have ravaged the city's fledgling park system along the river. In each instance it depended upon advocates with a vision of what the future could be, to inspire confidence and win the day. Today, City Hall and

Market Square are part of a revitalized downtown that is the envy of many cities, while the Avon River parkland is a destination for city dwellers and tourists.

How might Avon Crest be reimaged?

We are asking you to give us three months. During that time we ask that you pause demolition plans and maintain services to Avon Crest. We need time, time to identify possible stakeholders in a future restored and repurposed Avon Crest. We need time to apply for grants to fund a feasibility study. We need time to identify available Federal and Provincial grants that could help subsidize Avon Crest's refurbishment. In London, Ontario, the Victoria Hospital, built in 1875, is being transformed, at this very moment, into much needed market and social housing units. In Stratford the Cooper Plant is inching toward re-birth as a community hub – in partnership with the University of Waterloo and the YMCA – and as a stunning reminder of our industrial heritage, one that is sure to attract visitors.

How might Avon Crest be reconfigured? What is the potential for a restored Avon Crest to generate stakeholders and income? Would HPHA itself consider returning to a revitalized Avon Crest? What contribution might Stratford make as an investment in its own heritage and environment? A feasibility study would attempt to answer some of these questions and to provide a road map of real options to guide informed decisions. My colleagues and I have close to 200 year's experience in architecture, heritage and



planning. We have a network of contacts in all of these fields. Put us to work for you.  
Give us the chance to give you other options.

### Conclusion

In concluding, I want to thank you for your time and attention. Laura and I will be happy to answer questions if your schedule allows it. Otherwise, please feel free to contact us for further information. We will be happy to share our research. I've forwarded a copy of this talk to Sue Davey. You could also consult our website, which will provide links to much of the information and resources that I've talked about this evening.

Thank you and good night.