

"Cultural" precinct could give way to "Creativity"



By Brock Weir

Over 100 years ago, there was a certain rhythm in Aurora's Downtown Core.

Factories and railways surrounding the area punctuated the day. Train whistles coming in and out of the station, factory workers helping to unload the precious cargo, factory whistles and shift change bells helped you keep track of the time of day ? but it is significantly quieter now.

For some, that might seem like a good thing, but for the dozens of people who turned out on a bright Sunday afternoon, returning a bit more noise and activity to the area would go a very long way.

These rhythms played a key part in a walking tour organized by the Town of Aurora and led by heritage consultant Carl Bray over the weekend to stimulate discussion on the future of Aurora's Downtown Core, rebranded for these purposes as the Town's "Cultural Precinct", bringing together several "cultural" features of Aurora including Town Park, the Aurora Cultural Centre, Aurora Public Library and a number of churches.

For people living, shopping and thriving in Aurora's newer communities, a sense of "a tale of two communities" has developed, and this is something that needs to be addressed, said Mr. Bray.

Sunday's walk pointed out key features of the area, such as the Aurora Armoury, historic homes and features along Yonge Street, as well as tackling more pedestrian issues such as parking and, well, pedestrian traffic.

Parking is a primary concern among residents, said Mr. Bray, but is it really an issue? There are a significant number of parking spaces downtown, but there is a "perception" that it is not the case.

"The standard joke [working in a small town] was you have a parking problem when the downtown merchant can't park his car out front of his store," said Mr. Bray. "The world is ending. The notion of convenience and the notion that you park in one place and you walk to somewhere else is a very urban notion and Aurora is trying to straddle that gap between having a small-town atmosphere and many of the amenities of a small town, but it is also actually quite a big town and almost a small city. That kind of push and pull is going to be a big theme throughout this exercise."

The tour concluded at the Aurora Cultural Centre with a brainstorming session where many of the participants, including local heritage activists, area residents, Mayor Geoff Dawe, and Councillors John Abel, Sandra Humfryes, Harold Kim and Tom Mrakas, were asked to fill in a number of blanks to flesh out a vision for a "cultural precinct."

But, there is a lot of work to be done if a town like Aurora can keep pace with a town like Newmarket, which has experienced a significant revitalization of its own downtown core over the last 10 years. Newmarket has the advantage of their Main Street not being on Yonge Street, an advantage many people in attendance were able to concede, but it is worth a look.

?It upsets me when I look at Newmarket now,? said realtor Doug Sabiston. ?In Old Newmarket around Main Street now their [property] values are higher now than Aurora. It is something that being in this area I didn't expect I would see. I think a big contribution to that is their Main Street with shopping and restaurants.

?We do have Yonge Street, but it is difficult to create a Main Street like it is in Newmarket, Unionville, or any of those hubs that have a downtown core that is walkable, where you can go out for a nice day and it is filled with people. The only time we see that in Aurora is on Saturdays with the Farmers' Market. If we had a corridor with boutique shops, a couple of restaurants, a coffee shop, you would see it used. I am a firm believer in that. I think all the businesses would do a lot better if they were in the same core because they feed off each other.?

This was a sentiment shared by many people in attendance as they marked shopping, cafes and places to congregate as essential to downtown redevelopment. Some, however, were not as convinced.

?I like it the way it is,? said Heather Masters. ?I don't see that we have to add a whole bunch of stuff. I don't know if consultants can come up with a plan. Everything has been here so long and it is wonderful.?

Nevertheless, the consulting session left Mr. Bray with plenty of food for thought.

?It is understanding change is going to happen, but they want to control the rate of it,? he said. ?A lot of this speaks to enhancing what is already happening. Is [this area] more than just things involving the performing arts or fine arts? Is it a place where you can start a business? Is it a place where you can get an education and information? Is it a place where you can live? It is not just about culture; that is why the term 'cultural precinct' is perhaps a misnomer. It is a creativity precinct.?