A LOOK AT ONTARIO'S BEST CITY HALLS

Leamington

Leamington's population growth has been steady since early 2000, and the Town's new, modern city hall is a consequence of it.

The new town hall comes in at a total of 42,000 square feet. Designed with an eye towards showcasing Leamington's commitment to sustainability, the building was planned around a number of sustainable building strategies. The design incorporates day-light harvesting, a biofilter living wall, a reflecting roof membrane, north-lit high-performance glazing and other lighting-maximization strategies focused on the orientation of the building.

Guelph

Guelph's Civic Administration Complex brings together two classic heritage buildings: The 1856 Guelph City Hall and the 1900 Winter Fair Building.

The two buildings were renovated and physically connected by architects Moriyama & Teshima and heritage architects Goldsmith Borgal. The old City Hall is a National Historic site, designed by William Thomas in the Renaissance Revival style and built with locally-quarried dolomite limestone, known colloquially as "Guelph stone." The original version featured a short tower, which was built up over the years but ultimately removed in 1961.

Renovating this heritage building for use as a Provincial Offences Act courthouse required careful planning to both meet modern standards and preserve its heritage character. Technical upgrades were kept discreet, while heritage details like corbelling, pressed tin ceilings, copper-and-granite fittings and the central staircase were either restored or replaced with matching versions. The new building maintains the structure's heritage feel while achieving reduced energy consumption and improved operating efficiency.

Orangeville

Still in use after almost 150 years, Orangeville Town Hall is a sterling example of a heritage Ontario masonry building.

Designed by F.G. Dunbar and built beginning in 1875, Orangeville town hall was built as a multipurpose structure, intended to be a town hall, a civic office and a marketplace. The main building is constructed from red brick, accented by yellow brick quoins, pilasters, banding, arched voussoirs and surrounds, with lower floor keystones carved into the shape of bullheads. Buff brick banding is used to provide accents at the first floor and at the wall tops. The building is designed in the Italianate style, popular in Ontario architecture at the time.

In the early days, the upper floor of the building was home to town hall, while the lower floor housed butcher stalls, with a council chamber at the back. The building underwent a major renovation in 1993-94, with a major addition reflecting and interpreting the design of the original structure.

Today, the building at 87 Broadway is still home to Orangeville Town Council and municipal staff, as well as the town's Opera House. The building's cupola is a prominent architectural feature and a town landmark.

Milton

Milton's Town Hall demonstrates the beauty of adaptive reuse when applied to heritage buildings. The original structure dates from 1855, beginning life as the town courthouse.

The Milton courthouse, built from limestone masonry, is one of three castellated courthouses built in Ontario (the others being Middlesex and Guelph). It features design elements inspired by classical and medieval architecture. The limestone architecture features tall rectangular windows with traceries, flat window hoods, a double-panelled front door and crenellations, including a central block with a pair of crenellated towers. The original structure was designed by architectural firm Clarke and Murray and built by Michael Kenney. In 1877, a jail was added.

The old courthouse served until 1977. In 1982, the Town bought the building from Halton Region for just one dollar, restoring it for use as the new Town Hall. It was expanded into the new Town Hall East building, with the old building serving as Town Hall West.

The new addition was constructed to maintain the character of the existing building. In fact, the new stone walls were built from local limestone originating from the same quarry as that used in the original building.

LET'S BUILD TOMORROW'S HERITAGE NEIGHBOURHOODS, TODAY.

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BUILD IT RIGHT, NOW

News From Ontario's Masonry Professionals

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STAND BEHIND YOUR COMMUNITY VISION

Urban Design Guidelines and the Force of Law

Planning policy is a field rife with arguments and appeals, but for municipalities looking to set design standards, the record is clear: Urban design guidelines have the power of precedent behind them.

Policies like Official Plans, Secondary Plans and design manuals are often subject to appeals on a range of grounds. Some of these are legitimate; others are spurious. However, a robust policy framework is in place which supports the right of municipalities to set standards for urban design, including policies specifying preferred building materials.

"Strong and well-written architectural policies have the force of law behind them," says Masonry Works Executive Director Andrew Payne. "Municipalities should have confidence in their design policies and back them up in the face of pushback. Past cases have shown that these guidelines do matter."

Section 41 of the Planning Act provides municipalities with the power to grant site plan approval only on the condition of receiving drawings showing "matters related to exterior design," including elements like character, scale, appearance and design features. With the proper Official Plan clauses in place, communities can extend this power even to residential buildings with less than 25 dwelling units.

The Building Code Act affirms this power: It empowers chief building officials to issue permits unless they violate the Building Code or other applicable laws. The Act affirms that Section 41 of the Planning Act is applicable law.

In short, existing Provincial law both affirms the power of municipalities to set design standards and confirms that this power is an accepted part of the Building Code. The law is clear: Exterior design policies, enforced through the Site Plan Control process, are fully legitimate and have legal force behind them.

That holds true even on appeal. The Local Planning Appeals Tribunal has consistently recognized the validity of Urban Design Guidelines, and the tribunal has made rulings in favour of their applicability. Such guidelines should be given "due regard" as Council-approved documents, the tribunal determined in one 2020 case. And in 2019, the tribunal upheld the strength of urban design guidelines that underwent strong background research and public consultation before adoption by council. The tribunal noted that "while the guidelines must be applied flexibly, they are not optional. They must be applied during the site plan process."

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BUILDING HAND IN HAND WITH HERITAGE

At the borders of heritage districts, integrating the new with the old

Ontario's steady growth presents community planners with a challenge: What to do as new neighbourhoods and main streets begin to branch out from the heritage neighbourhoods that have long defined many municipalities.

As the province's population grows, the Greater Toronto Area's growth is steadily being driven to smaller communities further out from the Golden Horseshoe's epicentre. As communities expand, however, planners are challenged in how to maintain their communities' "small-town feel" or ensuring that development around existing heritage areas respects the look and feel of the community.

"Look around nature and the transition is always organic," says Anthony Wong, policy planner for the Town of Milton. The same should be true for heritage districts and surrounding urban zones, he says.

"The appearance might be different, but (transitions) are subtle and progressive, creating a pleasant treat in appearance and experience."

Making those transitions successful is a challenge many communities will face. Heritage consultancy ASI estimates that there are approximately 130 Heritage Conservation Districts in 40 communities across Ontario. These districts collectively cover more than 22,000 properties.

"(Policy) choices related to materiality and fabric for additions can be powerful when introduced in, and surrounding, these kinds of places," according to ASI contributors Kristina Martens, Rebecca Sciarra, Meredith Stewart and Laura Wickett. "If done sensitively, they can be seen to blend or ease points of transition, and can present opportunities to accommodate change."

Successfully integrating a modern building in or near a heritage district means being conscientious of fitting into the architectural context that already exist. Building materials play a key role in achieving that "fit."

"The appearance might be different, but (transitions) are subtle and progressive, creating a pleasant treat in appearance and experience."

As ASI notes, "contemporary construction may use modern brick as part of an infill project with the intent of 'matching' materials. However, often the objective is to find compatible solutions rather than matching." For instance, while adding modern brick to a 1920s bungalow clad in tapestry brick may seem logical, the effect is actually not good conservation. Modern brick is smooth, while tapestry brick is highly textured. The compatibility is not the same, and the effect becomes jarring.

"There are good examples of modern architecture used in the exterior and interior of historic buildings, which brings expression, technology and innovation," says Milton policy and urban design planner Hugo Rincon. "At the same time, building new structures that combine elements of traditional architecture can ensure a good fit in an area. The role of architecture in design is important as it is a subjective field and subject to interpretation."

Urban Design Guidelines can be a powerful tool in ensuring architecture is addressed properly in transitional zones between heritage areas and new neighbourhoods. A key part of these policies is materiality – policies addressing the exterior materials of new buildings.

Many Ontario communities are built around traditional red-brick downtowns, and the bulk of Ontario's surviving heritage buildings are built with masonry. Wong notes that if designers value timelessness, masonry is a proven and tested material, one found in many historic buildings. Brick and stone can be used in a range of ways to reflect a designer's style. As such, if masonry materials are prevalent in a heritage district, they should carry through to the present.

"It is the most obvious material that can help in the transitional strategy," Wong notes.

The tools exist to make these policies work. For Wong, will and vision are key to putting them to use.

"Have a clear vision, listen to the community and adopt time-tested formulas that already exist," Wong says.

BUILD IT RIGHT FROM THE START

How progressive procurement gets the most out of public buildings and infrastructure

Good, cost-effective buildings and infrastructure projects start with smart procurement, and that in itself starts with strong procurement policies that prioritize building the project to last.

Communities across Ontario have been required in recent years to develop asset management plans. While many municipalities have begun to embrace a lifecycle cost-based approach that prioritizes lowest total cost of ownership over simply the up-front cost, the next step is to ensure that municipal procurement policies align with this approach, allowing municipal governments to build infrastructure in ways that line up with smart asset management.

Lowest total cost of ownership looks beyond the cost of construction. It focuses on the whole life cycle of the building or project, from construction to decommissioning and recycling. That approach ensures decision-makers can achieve savings and value for money by assessing the complete picture of what an asset will cost. After all, savings up front may disguise costs down the line.

The ideal time to implement LTCO is at the procurement stage of a project, based on early estimates of primary mechanical, electrical and structural components. This calculation can be made by assessing costs over a lifespan of 50 to 100 years, and it can be implemented through procurement policies.

Municipalities should ideally update their procurement bylaws every five to ten years. When the time comes to go through with an update, policymakers will have the opportunity to make changes that prioritize LTCO, eliminating old and short-sighted approaches in favour of lifecycle-first thinking.

By implementing these policies, municipalities can align themselves with Provincial priorities all the more strongly. The Province's asset management plans call on communities to manage assets responsibly, manage risks to ensure a high level of service, and save money over time. All of these goals are achieved by taking a lifecycle approach to how new assets are procured.

Ultimately, the value of an asset begins at the very start of its life. That's why procurement is so important to the value your community gets from its infrastructure.

If your community is beginning to update its procurement bylaws or policies, Masonry Works welcomes the opportunity to be part of the process. We're open to speak with policymakers and elected officials and provide input on progressive ways communities can implement a lifecycle-based approach into procurement right from the start.

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Essentially, if your community goes through the process of researching, consulting for and approving Urban Design Guidelines backed up by a strong Official Plan, they will withstand an appeal based on existing precedent.

"There's strong policy ground to stand on when you're building your design language," Payne says.

"Civic leaders shouldn't be deterred from implementing good policy by appeal threats. These powers have existed for a long time and their use is accepted broadly."

Increasing numbers of communities across Ontario have embraced the concept of robust Urban Design Guidelines with strong standards for exterior built form. With the proper Official Plan policies in place, through processes like Site Plan Control and Architectural Control, planners and councils can have input into the exterior character of virtually any building in the community.

"Communities are recognizing the importance of strong design guidelines," Payne said.

"Built form is what defines the character of our communities. When we're building new businesses and neighbourhoods, what we're really doing is building tomorrow's heritage neighbourhoods today."