Saving the Morris Building

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**Introduction**

The Ecology Action Centre (EAC) and Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia with the support of HRM, Nova Scotia Power, and other local businesses and organizations have embarked on a bold project which it hopes will attract attention to the issue of sustainability in the construction industry in Nova Scotia. The project brings together so many parties because it is not only about environmental issues surrounding construction and the all-too-common demolition which often goes along with it, but it is also about preserving the buildings that we have, especially those with historic significance for our communities.

Far too often over the last few years we have been forced to watch as demolition crews pull down buildings that have added charm and permanency to our streetscapes, when renovation and adaptive reuse could bring these structures back into a useful state. The popular belief that we must always tear down in order renew largely stems from the prevailing consumption culture of today which has led to the terrible destruction of our social and ecological environment. Currently 30% of Nova Scotia landfill originates from construction and demolition waste material.¹

Contrary to popular belief it is not always easier, or cheaper, to tear down and build new - especially in a city like Halifax where historic and well-scaled buildings add to our economic growth by attracting tourism and talent. It can take almost three times the energy, and many times more resources to tear down and build new than it does to rehabilitate and retrofit older structures.² What is called for is imagination on the part of our developers, designers and politicians to adapt these older structures for new and profitable uses in order to better address environmental, social, cultural and economic issues that we are faced with today.

**The Project**

In September of 2009, Halifax Regional Council approved a development agreement with Dexel Developments to build a 10 storey mixed residential/commercial building on the Southeast corner of Morris and Hollis Streets. For construction to take place, it was necessary to remove four historically significant Georgian and Victorian buildings which resided on the corner. The group of structures included the former mansion and office building of the first Chief Surveyor of Nova Scotia Charles Morris which both date back to the 1750s and 1760s respectfully, the Victoria Apartments which was a former hotel dating back to 1898, and the mid-Victorian Italianate Rhuland House which dated back to confederation. The process of demolition began on December 20th with the Rhuland House, and ended January 18th.

Despite the shortage of time, and the limitations inherent in the season, several motivated and inspired individuals representing government and NGOs worked tirelessly to save one of the oldest

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¹ Denhez, Marc. “Landmarks or Landfill: Institutional Obstacles” Planning Presentation Simon Fraser University, Feb. 15/07
² The Vancouver Heritage Foundation “New Life Old Buildings: Your Green Guide to Heritage Conservation”
of the four buildings from demolition. Following a week of negotiations with the city, Nova Scotia Power, the developer and neighbouring landowners, the Charles Morris office building was relocated about 50 metres south of its original position on the night of December 21st – one day before it was slated to be demolished.

Formal planning for the building’s relocation began in the fall of 2009 following an offer from the developer to fund the move with monies that would have gone to the building’s demolition and land-filling costs. After conversations with many neighbouring landowners, Nova Scotia Power came forward at the end of November and offered a small parcel of land on the other side of the block which could serve as a new home for the building for up to three years.

Once a new temporary home for the building was secured, the other necessary elements of the plan began to fall into place in quick succession. Ownership of the building was transferred to the Heritage Trust, a site plan for the new location was created, and additional funding was provided by three regional councillors. By December 18th the house moving firm had inspected the building and accepted the contract to perform the move, which was completed smoothly and flawlessly four days before Christmas.

Since the move, actions have been taken to secure, stabilize, and insure the building so that it remains safe in its temporary new home. The building is currently being inspected every 48 hrs by volunteers who report on the condition of the building and any unwanted activity. In the many months since the building was moved there has been a lot of interest and enthusiasm about what this project means for the city. Artists, architects, film makers and archaeologists have visited, studied and been inspired by a structure that has stood for so long in defiance of the changes around it. In September of 2010 two of the joint action committee members were invited to speak about the project at the annual Heritage Canada conference in St. John’s, where the story of the Morris building attracted much interest and support. In October two local artists created a life sized illuminated replica of the building for the annual Nocturne art festival, and met with rave reviews.
The continued curiosity and activity surrounding the building has been a constant source of renewed energy and resolve for the members of the joint action committee. So far a film, a published article, and several inspiring art installations have been based on the continuing saga of the Morris building.

Throughout 2010 meetings were held with various government departments, potential project partners and stakeholders. HRM has been supportive throughout the process in the search for land on which to place the building, but that process remains difficult without an end user for the building. Finally in the fall of 2010 a request for proposals was sent out looking for potential partners and end users. The strongest respondents were the ARK (a non-profit youth organization) and the Nova Scotia Museum. The museum proposal included a plan to move the building to the waterfront courtyard of the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic to use as classroom space for a youth boatbuilding workshop. After several months of discussions however it was concluded that the Project had to be put on hold. Despite the setback, many things were learned from the experience, new contacts were made and the project moves forward.

A revisiting of the ARK proposal is currently underway and there are renewed hopes that the Morris building can serve a strong community role as a safe and proud home for young people in need of supportive housing.

What a wonderful end to the story it would be for this little building that has been given so many second chances, to be able to give a second chance to youth in need of a place to call home.

Three dimensional model of the Morris placed on the site of the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. – Anni Terrauds
The Joint Action Committee has raised nearly $50,000 to date through grant writing and individual donations. Most of this has been spent on the move and stabilizing the building. The remainder is currently earmarked for project management and preliminary design work as well as communications and outreach to establish an end user and site. In kind donations of time and labour from interested individuals, skilled labourers, NSCC and government departments have been numerous and much appreciated.

Funding already acquired for the project is as follows:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dexel Developments</td>
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<td>Councillor Bob Harvey</td>
<td>$5,000.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Councillor Dawn Sloan</td>
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<td>Councillor Jennifer Watts</td>
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<td>NS Dept. Of Energy</td>
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<td>Conserve NS</td>
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<tr>
<td>other donations</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$48,000.00+</strong></td>
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Future project costs will include acquiring a piece of land suitable for the building ($50 - $100,000), moving the building again ($10 – $20,000) and the final placement and retrofit of the building which is expected to cost in the vicinity of $200,000. These figures stand to be mitigated greatly however, thanks to in-kind donations of services, materials and labour from such entities as Nova Scotia Power Corp. through assistance in shifting power lines during the building’s move, Nova Scotia Community College which has offered student and faculty labour, and the Nova Scotia Department of Environment, which has offered expertise and possible funding to acquire and install green and energy efficient technology.

Should the Morris building find a use as affordable or supportive housing it is expected that new funding will be available from sources such as the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Association, various Nova Scotia Government departments, Universities and philanthropists once an end use is established. These additional funds will help with the retrofit and conservation of the building, as well as additional research and conservation work to uphold the buildings historic integrity and meet it’s social purpose.
Charles Morris was the first Chief Surveyor of the Province of Nova Scotia and also held the posts of Assistant Chief Justice and was a founding member of the legislative assembly of Nova Scotia (Canada’s first democratic government). Morris arrived in Nova Scotia in 1746 as an army officer from Boston, and saw military action against the French at Annapolis Royal and Grand Pré. Morris completed several field surveys for the British Army in Northern Nova Scotia before he was permanently posted as Chief Surveyor of the Province and sent to Halifax for its founding in 1749. After planning and laying out the new town of Halifax, Morris went on to plan many other maritime towns including Lunenburg, Liverpool, Windsor and Charlottetown.

In the Early 1760’s Morris had a mansion, and later an adjoining office building built for himself along the street later named for him. He was busy planning the future towns and cities of the Maritimes in these buildings while most of Canada remained a wilderness. Charles Morris’ son and grandson who also became Chief Surveyors of Nova Scotia later called the mansion home and used the offices for their own surveying firms. Both the mansion and office building remained in the Morris family until the widow of Charles Morris III sold both buildings at public auction in 1850. The buildings retained their original uses under new owners (including Deputy Comptroller Commissariat Edward Strickland, Lieutenant Colonel Norton Taylor and Frederick Courtney Lord Bishop of Nova Scotia to name a few) until they were sold at a sheriff’s sale in 1895.

That same year the mansion and offices were converted into an inn called “The Metropole Hotel” and later “The Victoria Hotel.” In 1898 the owner decided to enlarge the hotel by adding the building we now know as the Victoria Apartments to the corner lot. The addition required adding a storey to the old mansion and moving the former office building about 30 metres south of its original location (yes it was moved once before). In 1910 the Victoria Hotel became the Victoria Apartments when the owner converted the corner building into 6 rental units and all three buildings saw various residential and hotel uses throughout the 20th century.

It may seem strange at first that an environmental awareness organization such as the EAC would want to pair up with The Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia to save a couple of old buildings, but nothing could be a better example of sustainability. Every year in Nova Scotia thousands of tons of construction and demolition debris and waste are put in our landfills. According to the Building Materials Reuse Association the demolition of a 2000 square foot house can produce up to 60 tons of waste material, 85 percent of which could have been reused. These unsustainable practices contribute significantly to degradation of land, air and water resources. On a cultural and economic level the wholesale destruction of older buildings through the current approach to development is defrauding existing and future generations of Nova Scotians of their built heritage, and the historic charm of their communities.

The EAC recently produced a resource called Waste? NOT! A Construction and Demolition Toolkit to help building professionals, homeowners and community groups cut down on the waste they produce when buildings are constructed, demolished, or renovated. Participation of the EAC in the relocation of the Morris Building allowed the organization to gain a vast amount of first-hand knowledge which informed the Construction and Demolition Toolkit project. It also made a powerful statement to developers, the public and the government that older buildings can be saved and reused, and by doing so our communities, environment and economy will benefit.

The Toolkit is a valuable resource for anyone involved in a building project of any size including:

- **Homeowners** working on property improvements with existing buildings are generally faced with three options – to reuse, demolish, or move their structures. The toolkit provides educational and inspirational options to help decide on a course of action that is achievable, affordable, and aims for the least environmental impact.

- **Builders** looking for ideas and contacts for people and companies that can recycle or reuse their construction waste will find practical information of this nature in the Toolkit.

- **Developers** will see inspiring examples adaptive reuse, which minimizes construction and demolition waste and values the embodied energy inherent in every building.

The Toolkit was created in consultation with individuals, companies, and organizations throughout the province with an interest in the built environment. Hard copies are available through the EAC or can be downloaded from www.ecologyaction.ca/toolkit

In addition to saving the Morris building from the landfill, several tonnes of brick from the neighbouring Rhuland house, which was demolished on December 21st, were salvaged. These bricks are over 150 years old and are highly prized by historic renovators. By re-using these bricks in future projects, an equivalent amount of new materials will be diverted from the landfill. The bricks will be stored at Point Pleasant Park, as well as at the C&D Recycling facility in Goodwood as buyers are found.

Contact the EAC Built Environment at (902) 442-0300 for information on purchasing the salvaged bricks.
Several research projects are underway to capture heritage elements of the building and to deepen its story. These include:

- MacNeil Architects have completed an extensive survey of the building to create a three-dimensional photo rectified model of the building's interior and exterior. Interpretation of the data is underway with images coming soon.

- A paint and finishes analysis has been completed through St. Mary's University. Samples have been tested and opportunities for interpretation of the data are being explored.

- A dendrochronology (tree ring sampling) report of the building is underway through St. Mary's University. Samples have been taken and results are expected soon.

- Research is ongoing with Museum and Dept. of Heritage archaeologists conducting surveys of the building and its environs.

- An NSCC Heritage Carpentry student has compiled an inventory of significant details of the Morris and a report on the findings has been received.

- Film footage continues to be collected of all activities within the building to contribute to the proposed documentary film on the project.

The Morris building continues to fascinate people from across the academic and trades skill spectrum. From techniques used in its construction, to the interesting people who have called it home, there are many stories to gather and many ways to gather them. The Morris building has become one of the best studied and documented buildings in Halifax thanks to the volunteer efforts of many talented people and that research will certainly help in conserving the building for future generations. There is also a hope that the Morris building will be interpreted through film, literature, and on the internet once it's restoration is underway.
As the Morris Building sits in its temporary new home, standing in stark contrast to the construction which swallowed its neighbours, the parking lots, and the modern buildings which surround it, many minds are thinking, consulting, and negotiating for its future. There is hope that a new owner for the building can be found soon and that it can be placed somewhere not far from its original site, and that it can be restored to its simple Georgian elegance. It is also hoped that public use would allow Haligonians to see and experience an important piece of their city’s history. In planning for the building’s future, a set of short and long term goals have been created, and are currently being worked towards.

**Short term goals include:**

1. Finding a site for the building
2. Finding an owner for the building
3. Determining a restoration plan
4. Determining a sustainability plan
5. Creating an educational outreach plan
6. Acquiring funding for all of the above

**Long term goals include:**

1. Restoring the Morris building as an inspiring structure that models affordable, creative best practices demonstrating how heritage and green building can complement each other to enrich our communities and lighten our ecological footprint.
2. Ensuring that the story of the Morris building can live on through publicly accessible interpretation and that the building contributes to meaningful needs in the community (i.e. heritage, education, housing, health, etc.)
3. Producing an educational documentary film on the Morris building.
4. Using new media tools to disseminate the values, tools and lessons learned by saving the Morris building, and to continue to engage the community in issues of sustainability, heritage conservation and planning.

A new precedent of cooperation has been created through this project which has seen valuable connections made between governments, NGOs, corporations, and developers. It will remain an ongoing goal to strengthen and build upon these connections to improve the way we build our communities, conserve our heritage, and protect our environment. It is hoped the spirit of cooperation needed to save the Morris building will become more common and can inspire future endeavours of this kind.

**Hope for the Future**
It is truly remarkable that we still have a building standing that was owned and used by one of the principal founders of Halifax. Most of Canada was a wilderness when Charles Morris sat in this building, drawing lines on maps turning some of that wilderness into our present communities. Like any architectural heirloom of great historical importance, this building deserves to be repaired and protected for years to come.

By instituting an ethos of reuse and conservation in our communities and in the development industry we are not only preserving our built heritage and our environment, but are also boosting our local economy. The tourism industry brings hundreds of millions of dollars into our city every year and the industry is growing, but those tourists come for a unique experience which is upheld by our built heritage. Through adaptive re-use and rehabilitation of our old buildings we are also creating new skilled labour opportunities and hundreds more jobs. Dollar for dollar, rehabilitation creates more jobs than new construction because it is more labour intensive, but it also requires far fewer materials and reduced demolition expenses. The development industry can actually save money and employ many more workers.

Saving the Morris Building has sent a clear message that a different approach is possible, and that new approach brings with it economic, social, and environmental benefits for the whole community. We are not only saving a building, but are we also paying respect to the many thousands of person-hours, materials and resources that went into its construction, to the energy and costs for heating and maintaining it over 250 years, and to the hundreds of people who have and who could in future call it home.

A report by the UN sponsored Brundtland Commission in 1987 defined sustainable development as “development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Those needs are social, economic and environmental. Saving at least one of these buildings not only practices sustainable development, but are also shows other people that they can too.

Conclusion

Drawing by Carey Jernigan

Concept for green and energy efficient technologies which could be employed in the Morris Building.