

Restored Hanrahan's part of Barton renaissance

More people are realizing that treating old buildings as disposable is bad for environment

SARAH SHEEHAN

A yellow waste chute pokes out of a third-storey window on Catharine at Barton. There's work underway at the former Hamilton Strip, but perhaps not the kind you'd expect.

When the Strip closed, late last summer, it was commonly understood that the old Hanrahan's Hotel would be demolished. Developer John Barton Investments Inc. saw the property as a teardown, and local news media focused on the closing of the city's last strip club. Nearby residents braced themselves for the coming construction.

I live east of the former hotel; it's on my way downtown. I had never been inside, but I had written about the history of burlesque and adult licensing for *Hamilton Magazine* (R.I.P.). That story came out last Valentine's Day. In researching it, I found Molly Hayes' *Globe* feature on the decline of strip clubs, where she interviewed Konrad Sit, the young president of JBII.

Living in Toronto, as I did for two decades, you get used to seeing past the wear and tear on proud old buildings. Here, too, as more and more heritage properties get spruced up, Hamiltonians are learning the same habit.

Cross to the north side of Barton, look past the cheap main-floor cladding and faded pink signage, and the club's former self comes into view: the fine establishment of hotelier Thomas A. Hanrahan. Reporters were saying the hotel was Edwardian — circa 1908 — but the city's heritage mapping tool gave the date as 1890. Which was it?

I met with Paul Wilson for his column. In the spring, when the city was preparing to approve JBII's plans for the site, I had started looking into Hanrahan's and its Victorian predecessor, the *Mechanics' Hotel*, but he was the first person to show any interest in the history. We walked around the building, admiring the brickwork. The print headline asked, "Should we demo this dive?"

Wilson was not optimistic. But family members Laura Hanrahan and Peter Duffus got in touch with their stories, and I spent time at the archives, finding material on their Hamilton forebears and Billie Holiday — just one of the greats to play the old tavern. In November, I addressed the Municipal Heritage



SARAH SHEEHAN

This artist's conception of the renewed Hanrahan's hotel is courtesy of Bill Curran.

Committee and published my first opinion piece in this paper. I became the woman who wanted to save the strip club.

Treating buildings as disposable is bad for the environment. These days, urbanists and climate activists alike recognize the value of adaptive reuse. As Hamilton's head of Economic Development, Glen Norton, emphasized at an event last fall, "Heritage buildings are vital to feeding the entrepreneurial, youthful spirit in the downtown core."

Heritage buildings are a big part of what makes Hamilton, Hamilton. Yet despite the climate emergency — declared here in March 2019 — the city appears to have no meaningful policy to discourage demolishing properties that lack official protection. Fortunately, there is also a strong business case for adaptive reuse.

Konrad Sit is a University of Toronto business grad; his family has owned the former Hanrahan's since the late 1980s. By the time we spoke, JBII's earlier plans were already on hold: the project had seen what he called a "staffing change-up." This winter, inspired by Bill Curran's concept drawing, a friend of Sit's signed on as the new tenant. The hotel will be restored, not demolished.

"I think this is the best use of the property," Sit told me, adding that he sees the new space as an opportunity "to gather all the things that

are great about Hamilton."

Curran agrees. "We're thrilled to see the legendary Hanrahan's Hotel set for adaptive reuse," he said, noting that the building's scale made it "catalytic" for Barton East. Thier + Curran is no stranger to former strip clubs, having converted what used to be Maxim's, on the Gore, into Mills Hardware. As the firm behind the refurbished homes of Steeltown Garage, Mosaic, and now Meanwhile Wine Bar, "We know Barton is happening, and we're really excited to contribute at Hanrahan's. It's a good news story," he said. "This development will reinforce the extension of James Street onto Barton."

Reaching out to the owner enabled me to become more involved in this complex project, and I have been advising Sit on this new chapter for Hanrahan's. Heritage is not just for committees or planning departments. If there's a building you care about, don't wait for the city. Reach out. Speak up.

At the vacant building, the marquee is still unchanged from the fall. Sit and I walked around the neighbourhood, distributing flyers to residents. On John Street North, we overheard a young woman call excitedly to her friend, "They're not tearing it down!"

See you at Hanrahan's.

Sarah Sheehan writes about culture, heritage, and cities. She lives in downtown Hamilton. Web: sarahsheehan.ca Twitter: @DrSarahSheehan