

# Ontario Heritage Conference

## 2025 Summary



June 20<sup>th</sup> – 21st

Markham Heritage Committee  
Respectfully Submitted by: Kugan  
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# Ontario Heritage Conference Summary

June 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup>

For two days in June I lived and breathed heritage in the lovely picturesque Prince Edward County. I initially arrived at the conference on Friday June 20<sup>th</sup> to Base 31 on top of the escarpment in Picton, which provided an outstanding view of the outlying area.

Situated on approximately 750 acres, Base 31 is a semi restored World War Two air force base that was used to train Royal Canadian air force pilots during the war, as well as maintenance and repairs for various military aircraft. Today it is a repurposed venue that is used as a location for a multitude of events, such as conferences, music concerts, corporate events and even filming Hollywood movies. There are also various businesses on the campus which have made use of the old army barracks. Everything from bicycle repair to gem & stone shops. The central highlight is “The Commissary” which makes use of the old Sergeants Mess Hall along with which hosts various eatery’s and a bar and serves as a hangout & meeting spot for visitors to Base 31.

After breakfast and introductory remarks at the Sergeants Mess Hall, there was a panel conference discussion on the adaptive re-use of heritage buildings along with highlighting the notable historic buildings in Picton County that could perhaps be restored and reused. The keynote panel stressed the concept of change and grappling with the idea of preserving heritage buildings. There was much conversation about the

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benefits and feasibility of adaptive re-use building restoration methodologies, as we are currently facing a housing crisis in Ontario as well as a historic building conservation/protection crisis as well, there is emphasis on the idea that these 2 problems and the solutions go hand in hand. This was all focused on during some of the various questions brought up during the discussion, which include “How do we allow ourselves to grow and preserve. Solutions to resolve this dilemma included focusing on “saving the things that matter” as not all buildings could be saved due to various factors such as poor condition and remoteness of location. Some important highlights from the panel discussion that I noted were “have a better historic awareness by understanding the world better by knowing what came before”. Relevancy is key now and we unfortunately can’t save everything in whole. There is a lot of give and take when it comes to the matter of heritage building preservation.

Following the panel discussion, we the attendee’s were treated to a pictorial tour of Picton country, focusing on adaptive building re-use, with selective showings from 400+ heritage properties. In the early 1980’s Tom Cruikshank undertook a painstaking but thorough “Heritage Architectural Survey of Prince Edward County (HASPEC)”. The Prince Edward County division of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario (ACO) contrasted these archival photos in the HASPEC collection with matching contemporary photographs, of the same buildings, to show the imaginative adaptations of historic buildings for modern uses. A few highlighted examples of to indicate this concept of adaptive reuse included a residential house that was turned into the community library in



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the town of Milford. There are also churches and one room school houses that have been renovated into homes, barns turned into art galleries, stores and winery's etc. There was emphasis on the fact that these buildings have not seen their heyday for many years but and still have potential to give for decades to come, if given the chance. This I felt was one of the major takeaways of the conference.

In the afternoon, there were various workshops that I was able to choose from. I firstly attended the workshop aptly named "ACO Bringing Social Justice Home & How Heritage Helps in a Housing Crisis." The panel of industry experts was headed by Graham Cubitt from Indwell, which is a Hamilton based Christian charity which happens to be the fastest growing developer of new affordable housing in Ontario. Cubitt highlighted some the barriers to adaptive building reuse such as the political red tape and NIMBY-ism to affordable housing and a lack of importance being placed on the sociological-economic issues facing various communities, and more of a focus on the potential drop of property values. Despite this, Indwell has successfully adapted various industrial and public buildings to supportive housing featuring an innovative social justice bent such as the Balaclava school in St. Thomas & the Health Services building in London. Takeaways included, why build new when there are heritage buildings with arguable better bones than what can be built today. As well as the costs of adaptive restoration versus building new are not that far off as opposed to the common misconception that building new is always cheaper.



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The next workshop I attended was “Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Heritage Act.” I learned that Legislation designed to protect heritage properties was enacted on March 5<sup>th</sup> 1975, but originally was to be part of the Planning Act. Case studies in Kingston and Ottawa were highlighted recognizing the challenges of our times such as modernization to meet current building code and accessibility requirements, the economical feasibility and profit margins of restoration projects, archaeological concerns when some of the sites may hold significance particularly to indigenous groups, and the focus on issues dealing with the various outside consultations and advice that is needed when undertaking such redevelopment projects whether it is spearheaded by municipalities or the private sector. In my personal opinion, it appears that Ontario is the only province with a holistic approach to heritage preservation. Major cities such as Toronto and Kingston (and Markham) have heritage departments, staff and budgetary resources and are at the forefront of using digital tools to better inventory their heritage resources. However, there is much to be learned that can be used and adapted to smaller communities who may not have the resources available to quickly and accurately designate all their heritage resources.

Following the aforementioned workshop, we had dinner in the Sergeants mess hall, where the attendee’s were treated to a dinner presentation regarding the ongoing restoration of Base 31 and it’s adaptive reuse from a military facility to a neighborhood. As it sits on a 750 acre property, plans were mentioned to include new housing, retail, and event space all while preserving the history of it’s former usage. The evening events

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came to an end with a tour of the Base 31 museum which houses various aircraft memorabilia, including one of the remaining 17 Lancaster Bombers in existence. This particular plane was cosmetically restored by CFB Trenton and has been involved in 11 combat missions in World War Two. To stand in the presence of such history was a very humbling experience for me, especially considering that I would be of the right age to be a pilot in the war. If only the Lancaster could talk, the stories it would tell.

The following day, Saturday June 21<sup>st</sup> featured a bus tour of Prince Edward County's South Shore region. We initially went to the village of Milford for a walking tour. There we visited the historic Mt. Tabor Church (circa 1805) that has been repurposed into a theatre, which hosts various community plays. We also visited the town hall in Milford which listed the names of various community members that were shipped off to both World War One and Two. A lot of history was evident in our visit. The next stop on the tour was the circa 1820 South Bay cemetery of mariners, fisherman, and their family members and featured harrowing stories of shipwrecks and sailors, including the tale of seventeen year old Minerva McCrimmon, a ships cook who braved the storms of Lake Ontario and sailed her ship with no navigational aids, when the rest of the crew took cover within the ship, eventually landing on the shores of New York State. Following this, we also visited a 100 acre farm where the private owner has converted a historic barn into an art studio. Lastly we visited the Moss Hudgins log cabin, which is currently being restored to it's original condition. Points taken from this particular stop emphasized the importance of co-operation and collaboratory efforts between various

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stakeholders in order to successfully restore heritage buildings.

In the afternoon, I drove to Belleville for a tour of the downtown memorial Belleville city market. Highlights from this event included a tour of the memorial marketplace. The memorial hockey arena is currently being repurposed from a hockey arena to commercial store fronts, the interior space being subdivided into stores. The original memorial arena played a significant role in Belleville sports history for over 80 years. It was built in 1929 in a style similar to that of the Maple Leaf Gardens in downtown Toronto. It is centrally located next to the historic Belleville farmers market and City Hall. The re-visioning of the building will transform it into a hub for the Belleville community an attraction for the downtown district, which unfortunately is facing urban blight and is under a state of emergency due to the fentanyl and homelessness crisis.

The conference ended with a spectacular indigenous concert performance located at downtown Picton's historical Regent Theatre. The headliner artist was Tom Wilson and his Mohawk symphony. This was a special performance celebrating national indigenous peoples day and featured an 8 piece chamber orchestra. Tom Wilson spoke about his Mohawk heritage and how this has affected his worldview, along with igniting his passion to preserve the rights of the indigenous, and the importance of generational knowledge. The historic Regent Theatre was an absolute stunning venue that retained many of it's original and period correct features particularly in the stage area and it's neon marquee on the front of the building.



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All in all this was a very memorable, informative and rather enjoyable conference and I enjoyed partaking in discussions with fellow delegates from various municipal heritage departments and committees from across the province. The main takeaway I believe was the importance of heritage building adaption and reuse, focusing on the resources that can be saved, and remembering our history while modernizing and solving the issues of the future. Notable examples such as the Belleville Memorial Arena, and the Mt. Tabor Church show the possibilities when the community and municipalities stand up and fight back against pressure from developers, demolition and new construction. The conference highlighted the need to fight for heritage preservation while maintaining provincial housing goals. Heritage can also be picturesque and functional without looking like a Victorian Disneyland. I believe all the attendee's enjoyed The Ontario Heritage Conference in many different ways between all the events, tours and workshops. Everyone will find something in this experience and this will be enjoyed and talked about for years to come.

Thank you to the heritage committee for providing me with this memorable experience and allowing me to represent the committee at the Ontario Heritage Conference of 2025.

Respectfully Submitted by: Kugan Subramaniam



***Figure 1: Crystal Palace Circa. 1887***





**Figure 2: The Commissary Eatery on Base 31**



**Figure 3: Navigational Sign on Base 31**







**Figure 4: Seating Area Within The Commissary Eatery Area**





***Figure 5: Airplane Hanger On Base 31***





***Figure 6: Barrack Building Undergoing Rehabilitation For Reuse***





*Figure 7: Lancaster Bomber On Display At Base 31*



*Figure 8: The Commissary At Night On Base 31*





**Figure 9: Mt. Tabor Church - Repurposed Into A Theatre Venue**





***Figure 10: Historical Barn Converted To Artist Studio***





**Figure 11: Hudgin Log Cabin Circa. 1865**





***Figure 12: Picton's Picturesque South Shore***





**Figure 13: Belleville Historical Market & Town Hall**





**Figure 14: Closeup of Belleville Town Hall Clock Tower**





*Figure 15: Picton's Historical Regent Theatre Circa. 1919*



*Figure 16: Preserved Interior Of The Regent Theatre*





**Figure 17: The Regent Theatre Marquee**