

A workable plan for Les Soeurs site
Unusual collaboration results in creative solution

By Randall Denley, The Ottawa Citizen August 22, 2010

It's amazing what people can accomplish when they work together on intensification instead of engaging in the usual war against development. The controversial redevelopment of a former convent property in Westboro is much closer to becoming reality thanks to an unusual collaboration by the developer, area residents and a city-appointed panel of heritage, design and architectural experts.

The original proposal sparked anger in the community because it was seen as too tall, too dense and not respectful of the heritage importance of the former Les Soeurs de la Visitation convent on Richmond Road. The convent was appended to the front of a proposed hotel and vaguely designated for an unnamed community use.

Now, critical design changes have been made by developer Ashcroft Homes, president David Choo revealed in an interview this week. The new version of the plan has responded to criticisms made by the experts, incorporates an imaginative new use for the convent and is getting a thumbs up from heritage advocates.

The biggest challenge in the convent redevelopment was finding an appropriate 21st-century use for the convent itself. That's where the community came in. A group of about 40 people from the neighbourhood agreed to put aside any concerns about condos and density and focus on the convent, says Community Foundation of Ottawa president Barbara McInnes, one of the leaders of the group.

They are suggesting that the building be turned into a hub of creativity, renting inexpensive space to artists and entrepreneurs. One of the keys to this would be the interaction between creative people working in different fields. It's loosely modelled on a successful similar centre in Toronto. The convent chapel would be home to blues, jazz and chamber music concerts.

"We're quite excited about the possibilities," says McInnes. A feasibility study is the next step.

The city-appointed design review panel has also played a vital role in reshaping the plan, with Ashcroft accepting the panel's major recommendations. It's the first time the city has taken this approach and it really paid off.

As a result of the recommendations, the convent building will no longer provide a front for another structure. It will stand alone and the developer has moved other buildings back to preserve the views of the historic structure.

A line of mature maples on the east side of the development will be saved. This preserves the walkway used for daily exercise by the nuns. Choo says he is considering naming the development Nuns' Walk.

On Richmond Road, the buildings have been lowered from 12 storeys to nine. Ashcroft architect Rod Lahey says this brings the new retail and condo buildings in line with other recent condo developments in the area. The building will also now have two portals to allow pedestrians to enter the site and get a view of the convent. The new plan drops the proposed hotel and offers about 700 housing units, half of those for seniors. That's about 50 units less than the original plan.

Maintaining the convent as a separate building and moving other buildings to preserve the views has improved the project says David Jeanes of Heritage Ottawa. "It's certainly better," Jeanes says.

That is important, because it looked as if the project would get hung up over heritage issues. The company still intends to appeal the scope of the heritage designation, which covers the entire site.

Choo says he wants to create an interesting urban space, something that serves the whole city, not just Westboro. "For me, what Westboro could become is what Georgetown is to Washington. What's wrong with that in a modern city?"

He sees his project as forming the eastern gateway to Westboro. He doesn't believe that the taller buildings would have been a real problem, but says he was prepared to appease the project's opponents.

The new Ashcroft plan leaves nearly two-thirds of the site as open space of one sort or another and it allows the public access to a site and a building that has always been closed off from the community. Some won't like the commercial and condo frontage on Richmond Road, but it seems inevitable given the enthusiasm for development in the popular neighbourhood.

The revised convent plan goes to the city's planning committee in September and then on to council for approval. Ward councillor Christine Leadman has seen the new plan, but doesn't want to offer an opinion until she has consulted with city staff.

Choo hopes councillors will see that he has an appropriate solution that takes into account heritage and community concerns while delivering the intensification city council always says it wants.

"I think I have done my part," he says.

That seems like a fair statement.

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