

A heritage building gets a proper capping off

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The restored Winchester Hotel in Toronto's Cabbagetown gets a rooftop lantern

It's oft been written that John F. Kennedy killed off the fedora, since he was the first U.S. President to appear hatless on a regular basis. But since Mr. Kennedy predated the informal, gender-bending hippie movement, where did he find the inspiration?

Perhaps he'd been looking up at heritage buildings.

Starting in the 1950s, all sorts of turrets, domes, cupolas, towers, widow's walks, belvederes and other "hats" were being lopped off at an alarming rate in the United States and elsewhere. Whether due to failing framework, prohibitively expensive shingle-work, or other maintenance issues, these razed rooftops often left stunted, odd looking streetscapes in their wake.

And Toronto was no different. For every survivor - The Oddfellows' Hall at 441 Queen St. W. or 1484 Queen St. W. in Parkdale come to mind - there were probably nine others that received an unwanted buzz cut. To wit, looking at historical photographs of Cabbagetown's iconic Winchester Hotel (which started life in 1888 as the Lakeview Hotel), the lovely, eight-windowed lantern - a timber construction placed on top of the cupola to emit light - was erased from existence by 1954, though it may have been even earlier, since the Second Empire building received an Art Moderne interior makeover by architect Benjamin Swartz in 1941.

But, regardless of whether 67 or 80 years ago, there can't be many Torontonians alive today who can lay claim to having laid eyes upon this wonderful feature ... until now.

"It's amazing, eh?" restoration expert Barkley Hunt asks rhetorically, as he squints up from the corner of Winchester and Parliament streets. "I was turning up from the lake shore and I could see it ... it really has an impact [and] people in this neighbourhood are really excited about it."

I'm excited, too, and not only because it appeared shortly after I turned south from Bloor Street as well. Even though lanterns or belvederes generally don't add to a property's revenue-generation ability, they are invaluable for generating goodwill, improving streetscapes and, ultimately, causing chain reactions as other property owners follow suit. And while the story of the reconstruction of the Winchester lantern will certainly light the way in Cabbagetown - more on that in a minute - it's worth noting that the building's entire façade has been restored by Mr. Hunt and his crew.

Finding ample evidence of original tuckpointing on the brick, Hunt Heritage embarked on the painstaking, months-long journey of recreating the lost art. Developed in England in the 18th century and all the rage by the 19th, tuckpointing, through a multi-stage process which includes a colour-wash that involves beer, was meant to mimic the tight joints of expensive brick on buildings with poorer/irregular brick via a sort of trompe l'oeil caused by the final layer: a raised, lime putty ribbon precisely laid and trimmed for a sharp and geometric look (for a complete description of tuckpointing, see my February, 2018 column on Hunt Heritage).

One of the few firms in Canada trained in this method, the Hunt team was surprised, however, that while the low rise portion of the building (Winchester Hall, built in 1880) contained white ribbons, the larger building sported black. "It was done at a time, apparently, when somebody important died in Britain, so the masons then switched to black to mourn the

loss," Mr. Hunt says. And, since most of the masons working in Canada in the late-19th century came from England, it's only natural that they adopted the practice.

After replacing 6,000 bricks and averaging about two square metres of tuckpointing a day - "Three on a really good day," Mr. Hunt says with a laugh - the heritage carpentry, metalwork and windows and doors were addressed with help from GBCA Architects, who were (and still are) consumed with the restoration of Massey Hall. While working on a door on the building's west face, Mr. Hunt uncovered a tile apron reading "Lakeview," so broken tiles were replaced, the whole thing was ground down to restore colour, and then a thick layer of epoxy was applied for protection.

The rebuilding of the lantern was even more complicated. Removed from the scope of work a couple of times, the Winchester's owner finally agreed to have it replicated in September, 2020, provided Hunt Heritage could find a few cost-saving measures. When it was decided to construct the entire structure on the Winchester's roof to save carpenter Roger Vaughan the usual back-and-forth of site-to-shop, the newly crunched numbers worked. Because heritage roofer Martin Ware of Roofing Inc. already had his "copper guy," Adam Bargielski, bending metal up there, for a few months sidewalk onlookers witnessed quite the aerial ballet.

"Thinking back now, it was pretty remarkable," says Mr. Ware, 31, who hails from Devon, England, and has been roofing since he was 15-years-old.

As often happens in heritage, not a scrap of the original lantern remained, so it had to be recreated from photographs by the heritage experts at GBCA. Working with their drawings, Hunt Heritage further tweaked the design while constructing onsite since the cupola wasn't square; the cupola also needed major reinforcement to take the lantern's weight, which, once Mr. Ware's slate shingles were added, came in at approximately 7,000 lbs. (And speaking of slate shingles, after the fakes were removed from the cupola, Mr. Ware laid the new, thick stones in a Dutch lap pattern, since the convex-concave shape wouldn't allow for a more simple application).

To finish it all off, the team had a rose made by Richmond Hill's A&D Woodturning cast in aluminum by Guelph's Standard Brass to house the shiny new flagpole...hats off to all for a job well done.

"Without this, the cupola looked so naked...it looks so much better now," Mr. Hunt says.

"I'm so happy it got approved," Mr. Ware says.

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