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Antiquated thinking about heritage thrives on council

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Page: A16

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Byline: Paula Arab

Column: Paula Arab

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If only history would stop repeating itself when it came to tearing down Calgary's heritage buildings.

But here we go again, with the Cecil Hotel. Determining the historic value of the 1911 working-class hotel, it seems, depends on whom you ask.

Ald. Druh Farrell--and apparently most of council--are convinced there's not much there. They're prepared to use \$10.9 million of public money to buy the building just to bulldoze it and put up a parking lot. More on that in a future column.

"I would not have suggested we tear this down if I believed there was some integrity left," insists Farrell.

"There was a big fire in the '80s, the exterior has been altered dramatically and it would cost millions and millions to restore."

The media were not allowed to listen in on the discussions, but council said it decided against saving the hotel after determining much of the heritage value was lost in the 1982 fire.

It's a tough line to swallow. Just look at the before and after pictures. Maybe the interior is gutted, but the exterior has hardly changed. It still displays traces of a once-attractive sandstone and brick

treasure, lying beneath the ugly blue paint. The windows on the main floor have been filled in and the balconies removed, but other than that, it's not so different.

Besides, if there were no historic value left in the Cecil, why is it ranked a B according to the city's historic resource evaluation system? It's not the highest ranking, but it's pretty darn close. Whereas A sites are buildings that score overall points between 75 and 100, B buildings score between 60 and 74.

The policy clearly states: "Category B sites and buildings are very significant in certain respects. . . all buildings and sites in Category B are worthy of consideration for designation under the Historical Resource Act."

It's more likely council didn't want to spend the "millions" required to restore it to the gem it once was, only to be left with a building three storeys high. I guess land and density are more valuable than history, culture and character.

This sacrificing of the Cecil is a hypocritical retreat on council's so-called priority to the preservation of the city's few remaining heritage buildings.

It also represents a meddling in the private sector to solve a social problem by bulldozing the building where the social

problem took place. Why not just deal with the criminal activity instead of simply relocating it down the street?

Farrell knows I don't buy her argument, so she refers me to the city's heritage expert, Darryl Cariou, whom she believes will be able to convince me the history of the Cecil is lost forever.

The only thing Cariou confirms in my mind is that council's decision to demolish this once-handsome hotel has put the city's heritage department in an extremely awkward position.

Cariou has done an amazing job raising the radar on the heritage file since being hired as senior heritage planner several years ago.

He's launched an ambitious new strategy meant to make Calgary a leader in heritage sites. And he has successfully obtained the rare designation of Municipal Historic Resource on a record-breaking number of buildings. Never before have five properties come before council at once for designation, as they did in July.

That the Cecil won't be added to the list has got to be disappointing for him. It's a tragic setback, even if he can't say that.

Every major and some minor cities in Western Canada once had a Cecil Hotel -- initially a chain built to house travellers and working men.

The Calgary Cecil included a cafe that was a popular meeting place for many years. It was then owned by A. E. Cross's Calgary Brewing & Malt Company between 1938 and 1967, and turned back into a hotel in recent years.

It's only been since then that the site has been overrun with drugs, gangs, shootings and other crime.

Luckily, the fight isn't over. Under the city's policy, the Calgary Heritage Authority has the ability to recommend designation.

They are meeting, as I write, to discuss how to proceed. Board member Donna Bloomfield says she will do what she can to save the Cecil.

"I personally like the building," she says.

"I know what it used to look like and I know what it could look like again."

She adds the "gem of a building" is structurally sound.

What a pity not everyone can see the potential for it to be restored to the visual landmark it once was.

The Cecil is one of only six such hotels left in Calgary that predate the First World War. Two others -- the King Eddy and the St. Louis--are also in the East Village.

Both have been given protection from the wrecking ball, even though the St. Louis is classified Category C --lower than the Cecil--and the Eddy is a boring, no-frills box in far worse shape, by comparison.

Such antiquated thinking on the part of council should be history.

Parab@theherald.canwest.com