

Centennial College wants to restore Guild Inn's glory



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The historic Guild Inn in Scarborough.

Cultural centre planned at historic site in Scarborough

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It's one of Toronto's best-kept secrets – an idyllic hideaway overlooking the bluffs in an astonishing enclave of Scarborough, tucked in below Kingston Rd. as Eglinton Ave. empties into what was once the main drag into Toronto.

The Guild Inn has inspired authors and artisans and served as an overnight resting place for monarchs, political cabinets and rulers as well as youths off to war. And what it needs now is an enlightened vision to resurrect it and propel it into Toronto's consciousness as a cultural and heritage asset.

Enter Centennial College, a Scarborough institution that knows what the Guild means to this oft-maligned part of Toronto. In its glory days, few would have imagined that such a magnificent cultural facility could exist in dowdy Scarborough. Centennial wants to restore its glory.

Starting in 1932, Rosa and Spencer Clark, titans of arts and culture, sold off more than 162 hectares of Guildwood Village to developers, with strict conditions on design and scale. And they kept 36 hectares along the magnificent bluffs as a natural sanctuary and creative birthing room for artists and artisans.

When old downtown buildings were being demolished to make way for the current bank towers, Clark waged a one-man rescue mission, often saving gargoyles, façades, capitals, reliefs, columns and other fragments. These he re-erected on the Guild site. Some he buried for future use. Others, like the columns from the Bank of Toronto building demolished in 1966, he reused to construct the framing of an outdoor Greek theatre.

In addition, Clark often bought supplies, gave them to artists and then purchased the finished work. He started a rudimentary outdoor sculpture garden but ran out of steam and energy. He

died before realizing the dream, but did give us a taste of it, on the 50th anniversary of the Guild in 1982, with a temporary exhibit.

But time has not been kind to the site. The original inn and its eight-storey addition hasn't seen a guest since 2002. The architectural fragments desperately need to be interpreted in a sculpture park. The garden is still special. And the walk to the lake, past the E.B. Cox sculpture and the Emanuel Hahn quarter horse, still delivers a vista of the lake that needs to be seen by more than the few who cherish its delightful secret.

City staff prepared a Guild Cultural Precinct Report in 2006. It captured Spencer Clark's vision of the site. And it arrived as a developer seemed certain to build a hotel and restaurant to enliven the place. But the deal fell apart as investors got cold feet.

The proposal from Centennial has a lot going for it. The college's development officer, Rita Karakas, says it will house a Cultural Heritage Institute that will prepare students for cultural and heritage tourism.

The \$45 million project proposes a conference centre and a 120-room boutique hotel with restaurant. A hotel operator would run the facility, with the college guaranteeing a certain number of rooms booked per year. Centennial would attract guests for international conferences on cultural and heritage tourism.

"We are sitting on top of a waterfront trail. You have the vastness of the lake, the monumentality of the bluffs and the linear public space," says Glenn Garwood, a Toronto staff member negotiating the lease agreement. Guildwood residents are "fed up with seeing the place rot."

But with a faltering economy, lease negotiations are rocky. There are still miles to go before anyone sleeps at a new Guild Inn.

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