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STORY

HERITAGE HOUSE'S HISTORY INCLUDES FACT AND FICTION

By Avi Saper

Nov. 13, 2008

Rae Bridgman remembers the first time she saw Kelly House, the 126-year-old structure on Adelaide Street that is the last remaining heritage home in the Exchange District.

"We must have been going by here about 10 years ago when we saw this house. It was completely out of place," said the children's author and illustrator who incorporated the house in her MiddleGate books, a series of fantasy adventures.

"There's no rhyme or reason to its existence other than it's obviously a leftover from a previous time period."

Now, instead of writing about Kelly House as the secret portal to the magical city of MiddleGate, Bridgman is trying to ensure that the building won't be turned into a parking lot.

David Rich, the building's owner, has requested that the city remove Kelly House's status as a Grade III heritage building. If the request is granted, it will allow for the house to be demolished.

Bridgman believes the house has been neglected for years, to the point that it is now an eyesore.

"Part of my thinking at the time when I saw the house is this house needs protecting," she said. "It's derelict, it's not being taken care of."

The city's historic buildings committee, chaired by Coun. Jenny Gerbasi, ruled last month that the building shouldn't have its status removed.

However, the historic building committee won't have the final say. Next, the matter will be discussed by the city's planning and property development committee on Nov. 25. From there it could go to city council depending on the outcome. "The experts on the committee believe that the heritage value of the building remains," Gerbasi said, noting that the committee looks at a wide range of criteria when evaluating a request.

The building's uniqueness was a major factor in keeping it protected, Gerbasi said.

According to the councillor, this isn't the first example of "demolition by neglect," a disturbing trend of property owners failing to maintain older buildings until the best option is to tear them down.

Owners have certain responsibilities, but the current bylaws don't have enough teeth," Gerbasi said.

Gerbasi said she was unaware of the building's literary history when the committee was discussing Kelly House, but said it was something that should be taken into consideration.

"I would hope that council in making its decisions would value that," Gerbasi said.

"Look at Prince Edward Island; half its economy is based on Anne of Green Gables."

Bridgman said she's received many emails from people who are concerned about the future of Kelly House, and is expecting strong opposition to the delisting request at the Nov. 25 meeting.

Parking lots don't feed the imagination of our kids," she said.

Both Bridgman and Gerbasi can see the building being restored for use as a restaurant or offices.

"I think there would be a lot of potential interest in this type of building. If you don't want to fix it up or take care of it, put it on the market," said Gerbasi, adding that an engineer evaluated the building and declared it could be repaired.

"Grant money could be obtained through CentreVenture and the provincial government for someone who wanted to restore the building," Gerbasi added.



Avi Saper

Author and illustrator Rae Bridgman fell in love with Kelly House the first time she saw it, and made it a focal point of her MiddleGate series of books.