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Georgetown gem

A Brampton man spotted crumbling remnants of the past and saw the future

GEORGETOWN—Victor Boutin, who grew up in Lévis across the St. Lawrence River from Quebec City, appreciates historic stone buildings. So, two years ago, when the Brampton businessman first saw the neglected 19th-century remnants of the Barber Paper Mill, he was upset.

Despite security fences, the handsome buildings, some of which date from 1854, were crumbling and vandalized. But now, Boutin has big plans to restore the historic landmark, which is believed to have been North America's largest wallpaper manufacturer in the 1860s. "This is the heritage and beginning of Georgetown," says Boutin. "You can't let it go to waste. It would be a crime to do so." Last year, he managed to buy the old mill, near Maple Ave. and River Dr. on the northeast outskirts of Georgetown, under power of sale. He has since embarked on an ambitious plan, estimated at around \$75 million, to refurbish and transform the property. "It will be a top-notch project and something out of the ordinary for Georgetown," says Boutin. "The aim is to do it up really nice and preserve as much of the original buildings as possible, as well as the beautiful treed scenery along the river."

The project has been likened to a small-scale version of the Distillery District site in downtown Toronto. Plans include the preservation of about a dozen old buildings to house a restaurant, banquet hall, art gallery, artisan studios and specialty shops. New construction of a condominium, as well as a country inn, is also contemplated for the brownfields site. While 14 storeys of condos are proposed, the height would be subject to negotiation. Some refurbishing work has already begun on the mill, which claims to have been the first industry in Canada and possibly North America operated with electricity transmitted over a distance. The power was generated three kilometres downstream by a hydro dynamo.

Boutin is a partner and vice-president in Sota Glazing Inc. of Brampton, lives in Brampton and also owns farms in Terra Cotta. His company makes and installs super-size windows for big industrial, office, condo and commercial buildings worldwide and has annual sales of \$50 to \$60 million.

His other company, Everlast Restoration Inc., has been in business since 1973. It has been doing preliminary cleanup and restoration work at the Barber Mill with permits obtained last fall. The company has done extensive rehabilitation of buildings all over Ontario, including huge underground garages.

Boutin figures the project will take five to eight years to complete. The estimated \$75 million cost doesn't include possible later restoration of the river dynamo. Site plans, prepared by architects Archicon Canada Inc. of Toronto, are scheduled to be filed with the Town of Halton Hills on Monday. So far, about \$500,000 has been spent on the project, including environmental studies that have even counted salamanders. The site has been lying vacant since 1984. Zoning and official plan amendments are required before the redevelopment can proceed, although rights granted to previous owners to develop a 65-unit hotel on the site remain valid. In recent months, Boutin's proposals have been discussed with Halton Region, the Credit Valley Conservation Authority and federal and provincial ministries. The possibility of aid from Parks Canada under an historic preservation grants program has been explored.

Mark Rowe, chairman of Heritage Halton Hills, a local agency involved with historic preservation, has asked town council to apply for an official heritage designation for the Barber Mill property. He says in a report that the proposal is exciting and Boutin should be "commended for his vision." Rowe notes that in recent years "neglect, squatters and weekend drinking parties" took their toll on the buildings, as well as several fires. Even so, several buildings remain structurally sound and "are worth preserving as an excellent example of heritage industrial architecture." The Ontario Heritage Foundation and the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Recreation marked the property with an official sign in 1977. It notes that in 1888 the paper pulp mill "was reputedly the first in Canada to produce hydroelectric power for use in industrial production."

In recent years, the property was owned by a Toronto numbered company, which acquired it for \$2.2 million. Boutin wouldn't reveal what he paid under a power of sale. While the area taken up by almost 100,000 square feet of mill

buildings is more than five hectares, Boutin Holdings Ltd. owns almost 10 hectares in all. This includes property on both sides of the Credit River south to the CNR rail line trestle bridge that spans the water. It was built in 1856 and is attributed to Sir Casmir Gzowski. The huge complex of stone and brick mill buildings, including original roof slates, is a virtual rabbit warren inside. Some parts have soaring ceilings. Lovely arched windows overlook the river in what's designated to become a fine restaurant.

He says that of all the buildings on the site, just one, which dates from 1869 and is nearest to Maple Ave., may be incapable of restoration, as it was too badly damaged last year in a fire, apparently sparked by vandals. Vacant land that abuts the existing mill to the south is the site of the proposed 245-suite condominium. The adjoining inn is slated to have 48 rooms and Boutin sees the restored area developing into a tourist attraction as well as a venue for events like weddings.

Boutin hopes to start condo sales in 2005 and also begin construction. It's too early, he says to estimate the likely asking prices for condo suites. "We have hired some very talented architects and we don't want to destroy but keep and preserve for the next generation," he says. "We will take things step by step."

The Credit Valley Footpath, which is part of the Bruce Trail, is across the river from the mill. It follows the river valley past the village of Glen Williams through fields, forests, the Sheridan Nurseries farm and steep hillsides. Boutin says he'd like to restore the original dam in the Credit River below the River Dr. bridge, make a footpath over it and take steps to enhance the fish habitat. Mill buildings were mostly constructed with stone from the Credit Valley and some show handprints and date markings from the original stonemasons. Where brick has been used, it came from the old brickworks at Cheltenham, a site that's still a quarry on Mississauga Rd. and operated by Brampton Brick.

Boutin came to Ontario from Quebec in 1969, got into construction, went home to marry in 1973 but later returned to Ontario. He says he "fell in love with Ontario," where life in the construction industry has been good to him, especially since buying Sota from a U.S. company in 1989.