

## **"Grim history lurks beneath the new Exhibition Place hotel"**

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by Ian Merringer

Among Toronto's new crop of luxury hotels, the new boutique digs at Exhibition Place might offer the most unique amenity: a sombre history lesson.

To be built on the site of a First World War-era internment camp, the Hotel in the Garden project will raise a few eyebrows – not just for its guests, but also for a public unfamiliar with Canada's early attempts at mass civilian internments.

Below the dreary parking lot where the Hotel in the Garden will eventually stand are limestone foundations from a 19th-century military fort. Those walls once penned in civilians from Eastern Europe deemed enemy aliens. The internees were waiting to be shipped to remote work camps.

Large sections of the property's basement will be excavated and opened up to the hotel's ground floor. An imposing display will kick off a city-approved Heritage Walk featuring a large interpretive plaque explaining what happened to less-willing guests a century earlier.

The city's heritage office will spend the better part of a year determining if anything further might be appropriate.

"This was a black spot on Canadian history," explains Lubomyr Luciuk, a professor at the Royal Military College in Kingston and chairman of the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association.

After some prodding from the Ukrainian community, the city is making sure the developer showcases the history of the site as a prominent part of the luxury hotel.

"It took me 25 years to convince the government what happened," says Mr. Luciuk, "but now we are going to hallow the memory of innocents who were held and dispersed through this site."

When war spilled out of Sarajevo in 1914, Canada's factories and fields were already filled with roughly 170,000 Ukrainians lured here with promises of jobs and free land. They had come with big expectations – and Austro-Hungarian passports. When Canada went to battle with the immigrants' former emperors, more than 80,000 non-naturalized Ukrainians had to register as "enemy aliens," along with far fewer Germans, Austrians, Serbians, Croatians and Hungarians. Close to 9,000 civilians were forcibly held at 24 camps across Canada, and New Fort was Toronto's collecting ground for detainees who were shipped to wilderness camps with electrified fences, where they would build roads and railways for no pay.

Descendants of internees have had a difficult time getting their story told – author Peter Melnycky contends that in the 1950s and 1960s, Archives Canada intentionally destroyed records of the internments. But in 2008, the federal government established a \$10-million Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund to educate the country about this dark period.

Working with the city, the fund managers made sure that any project built on the site of New Fort would raise awareness of what happened there. Plans for the Heritage Walk were built into the original bidding process.

Henry Kallan, the project's developer, doesn't seem scared of a little history, no matter its connotations.

“There is nothing negative about history,” says the owner of HK, a company with four boutique hotels in New York. “Bad things happen, but they are part of life. What is important is that you recognize it. The plan now is to erect a plaque, but we are more than happy to do more. The more communities involved, the better. We'd like to make Toronto's diversity very much a part of this project. Finally we are going to create life at this site.”

He'll have room to cultivate both diversity and life there. The 26-storey hotel will take up just 30 per cent of his land lease; the rest will become public gardens, where architect Rocco Maragna plans to carry forward momentum he builds on the Heritage Walk.

“The Ukrainian internment is one part of what will be an incredible story. I want a walk in the gardens to be like following a narrative of this city's evolution. It's a balance between the positive and the negative, but what makes a great city is understanding who we are.”

As cities evolve, so too do luxury hotels.