Feature: Toronto's Casa Loma castle to undergo transformation for revitalization

Xinhua, November 22, 2013

A popular tourist destination in the heart of Canada's largest city of Toronto will soon be undergoing a major transformation for revitalization.

Over the years, Toronto's beloved Casa Loma has drawn in numerous international visitors for its grand architecture, rich history and heartwarming stories of the former owner, Sir Henry Pellatt. However, the castle-style mansion has long fallen off the radar of those in its hometown.

Many living nearby have been calling for a new operator for Casa Loma to make good use of the "House of the Hill" since the City of Toronto took back the day-to-day operations from the Kiwanis Club in 2011. Now it seems the longed-for revitalization is on its way.

The 98-room building, soon to be managed by The Liberty Entertainment Group, is to get a complete make-over. While retaining its heritage, the new management company has plans to install a Toronto museum, restaurant, event rooms and exhibition spaces devoted to telling the city's history into the spacious mansion when it takes over in January.

Built in the early 1900s by Sir Henry Pellatt for his sweetheart Mary Pellatt, Casa Loma is a historical treasure that took three years, millions of Canadian dollars and the work of 300 people to be completed. However, the philanthropist was forced to give up his castle due to financial troubles just a decade later.

Casa Loma's incoming president Catherine Bridgman said her goal is to keep the Pellatt story alive for generations to come.

"Sir Henry only lived here for 10 years, I don't think that the entire vision had an opportunity to be told," said Bridgman.

"I think that there's a lot more story, so we're not only going to tell the story of what was happening outside the walls of Casa Loma, but we also want to continue the legacy of Sir Henry and have magnificent events here and really use the castle the way that he meant it to be used."

The city-owned mansion has lost its allure over the decades. Though it still attracts over 250,000 tourists every year, locals rarely visit the site and for most, it's a place that they may not visit for a second time.

"It's the type of thing that if a friend wanted to go see it then I'd go gladly with my friend, but once you've seen it once you pretty much know what you're seeing so there's no big surprises or anything like that," said local Paul Thompson, who has been to Casa Loma twice in his life.

Christian Blake, who lives close by, noted how desolate the building has become over the past few years.

"I think it could just be put to better use instead of just sitting there empty a lot of the time," said Blake.
Bridgman says they hope to change these views with the new plans, noting that the program will also make the castle a reflection of the city’s diversified stories.

"Toronto today is really different than it was in the early 1900s," she said. "It's a multi-cultural city and what we'd like to do is to celebrate those cultures by celebrating Black History Month, Italian Heritage, Chinese New Year."

Visitors will also get to see parts of the building that have been closed off to the public, including a 244-meter tunnel connecting the castle to a stable. The "dark, damp" space, Bridgman says, will be transformed into an underground gallery to tell "the part of city's history that is kept in the dark: The Depression, The Great Fire, some notorious criminals, those types of things in Toronto that I think make it more interesting and bring it to life for visitors."

The space will also be kitted out with air conditioning -- a substantial expense, but one that Bridgman believes is long overdue.

"When you are here in the summer, obviously it is hot. Sir Henry had electric light in here and he had telephones in every room, but he didn't have air conditioning," she said. "So here we are in 2014, we're going to be adding air conditioning to the castle, finally."

Bridgman says the plan is to keep the castle doors open and implement changes step by step, with the company spending 7 million Canadian dollars (6.66 million U.S. dollars) on Casa Loma for first five years of its program.

With such a project in place, the new management hope the "House of the Hill" will once again become a draw for overseas and local visitors alike. Endi