Casa Loma to become restaurant, event space and museum: Hume

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By: Christopher Hume

Torontoans have never quite known what to make of Casa Loma. Henry Pellatt’s great folly has been a feature on the skyline for a full century, but in a community that distrusts those who would stand out its grandiosity has kept it from becoming a feature of city existence.

Nick Di Donato hopes to change all that. The president of the Liberty Entertainment Group wants to reintroduce the “House on the Hill” to Torontonians and make it part of their lives.

If things go according to plan, Di Donato will turn the architectural extravaganza into a mixed-use complex that includes a restaurant and event rooms, as well as a museum and exhibition spaces devoted to the history of Toronto.

“We describe it as the Toronto experience,” Di Donato explains. “We think Casa Loma is an opportunity to have a museum of Toronto that explores history

through revolving exhibits that will change on a quarterly basis.”

But as Di Donato also admits, “Casa Loma must do more in terms of what it does for Toronto, not just tourists.”

Though it receives between 250,000 and 300,000 visitors annually, Pellatt’s fairy tale chateau has fallen into disrepair and been diminished by unsympathetic additions such as the nearby parking structure. Inside, the building is in relatively good shape, but sparsely furnished and somewhat desolate. The Kiwanis Club, which has run the castle since 1937, never succeeded in making it an exciting place to spend time. On the other hand, Di Donato credits Kiwanis with having saved it from demolition. But the fact Casa Loma could have faced destruction says much about the city’s ambivalence.

“It’s a historical venue,” Di Donato insists. “And we believe people love heritage buildings. We also believe we have to maintain heritage buildings. From a business perspective, these buildings give us a unique opportunity to differentiate ourselves from everyone else.”

The Liberty Group proposes a Toronto museum for the third floor, a display of architectural models in the attic and a function space at street level. An underground tunnel would become a gallery dedicated to “the underbelly of Toronto, the Depression, the Great Fire, criminals and negative stuff.”

Di Donato also has high hope for Casa Loma’s towers, which he calls “quite spectacular,” though currently, he says, “there’s nothing there.”

As he imagines it, Casa Loma will be transformed into an educational facility where students can learn about early 20th-century Toronto and the Industrial Revolution that was fast changing the city. Pellatt, who made a fortune in electricity, built his home to showcase the potential of new developments such as the light bulb.

The largest single expense, however, will be adding air conditioning; modern visitors like to keep their cool. Exterior restoration, partially complete, will continue in phases, which means the building will not have to close.

The Liberty Group, which successfully restored the old Ontario Government Building at Exhibition Place as well as the former Consumers’ Gas showroom on Toronto St., expects to take possession of Casa Loma in January.

As Di Donato explains it, the new arrangement “is a sign of Toronto accepting itself as a great city. Like every great city, Toronto has a history and architecture is a part of that history.”

In the aftermath of Rob Ford, the notion of Toronto as a “great city” doesn’t have quite the force it once did. Indeed, there’s a direct connection between the kind of jeering hostility that greeted Pellatt’s downfall decades ago and the mentality that more recently gave rise to Ford Nation. As Casa Loma’s history makes clear, if Toronto does achieve greatness, it will have to be thrust upon us.

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