

A History Lesson:

CHURCH OF OUR LADY IMMACULATE





Reviving the Gothic Revival

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY TEIGAN BAKER

For the past several years, Guelph's most prominent church (Church of Our Lady Immaculate) has been undergoing a major restoration. This fall marks the final phase of its long-anticipated renewal.

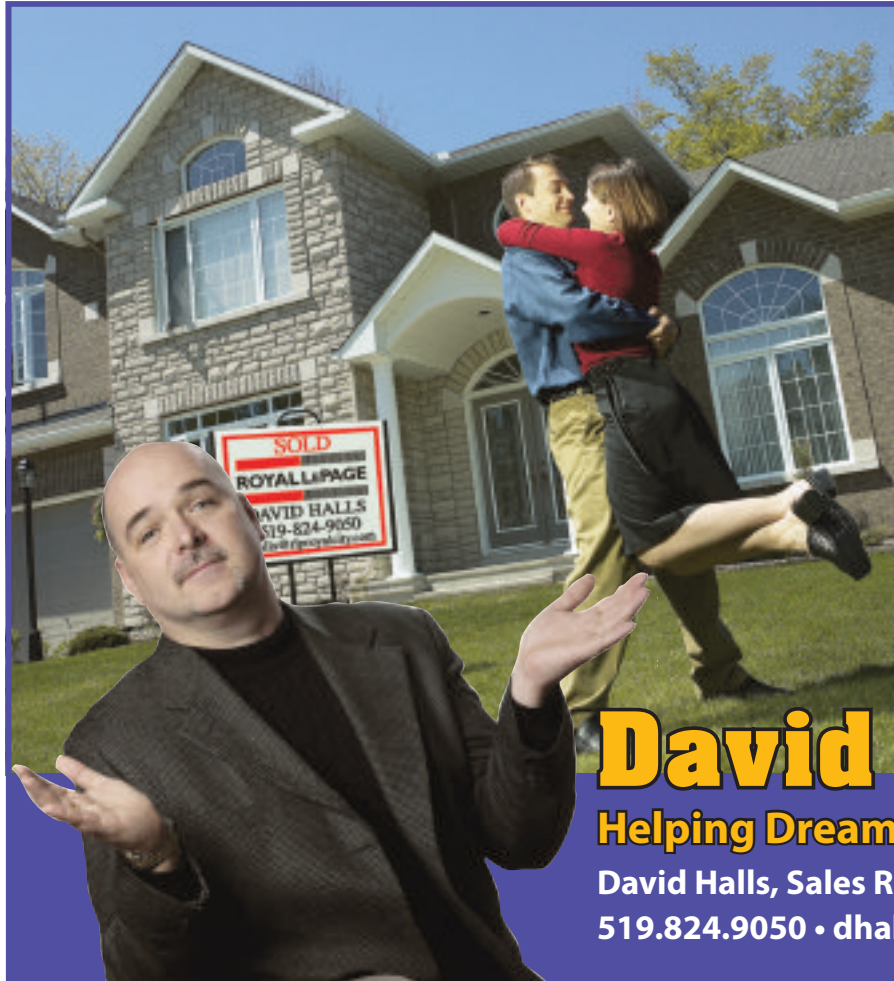
The Church of Our Lady has majestically stood sentry over Guelph's cityscape since 1888 when it was dedicated to Our Lady Immaculate. It was John Galt, the city's founding father, who promised the highest point of the nascent town to Roman Catholics in honour of his friend, Bishop Alexander Macdonell. >>



In 1877 construction began on the church and was overseen by famed architect Joseph Connolly, who is said to have modelled its towers on Germany's legendary Cologne cathedral. The church, which is a stunning example of Gothic Revival architecture, is considered by many to be the architect's masterpiece.

This year marks the church's 125th anniversary and although the stately structure has had previous updates and renovations, this restoration is the largest and most comprehensive in Church of Our Lady's history. Plans for a restoration began in 2004, but it wasn't until 2008 that the work began in earnest on the roof, towers, and the foundation.

Divided into five specific phases, this fall marks the conclusion of phase four, which entailed, among other things, extensive masonry work, renovating the transepts, and adding some finishing touches to the towers. >>



We finally decided to move forward on the purchase of our first house in 2012. We worked alone for the first few months of our search, looking at several dozen homes in that time. As our focus began to narrow, we came to realize that the properties we were interested in were selling immediately after – or even before – the listings were available on Realtor.ca. It was at this point that we called David and Jan. Right from the beginning they did a great job of not taking over our search, but of joining it. They spent the time to look over what we had already seen and find out what we had liked and disliked. Within a week or two, it was as though we had been working with them for those previous few months.

We could certainly go on about the day-to-day things that David and Jan did very well, from providing great advice throughout the entire process to working at seemingly any hour to accommodate our schedule, but those are the things you expect from any Realtor®. When it comes down to it, the thing that set them apart was this: despite having repeatedly looked over every listing in our search area, the house that we ended up buying was one that we had dismissed entirely. One weekday evening as Jan took us out to look at some houses on our list, they had appended our future house to the schedule because they thought it would fit us – and they were right.

Aron and Yayoi



David did it again

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Opposite page - The main entrance to Church of Our Lady Immaculate.
This page: The church exterior and stained glass window.





The interior of the church.

The major—and certainly most delicate—work was the restoration of the spectacular, incredibly vibrant, stained glass windows. Brought over from France and Germany, the windows have been untouched since they were installed in the early 1900s. All 82 windows (equalling a total of 550 panes of glass) had to be taken out, cleaned, re-lead and given new frames and protective screens. All of the windows with the exception of the stunning rose window will be gracing the church again in September.

Once the windows are complete, the church will begin to prepare to enter the fifth and final phase of its lengthy restoration. Phase five, which will start in the new year, will focus on the interior of the church, where a great deal of work still needs to be done. The interior will get a welcome fresh coat of paint (it has not been painted since 1968), the pews will be refinished, new flooring and lighting will be installed, and the sanctuary and basement will be renovated. The church's cherished organ, which has been playing melliflously since it was installed in 1919, will have all of its 2000 pipes

cleaned as part of its refurbishment.

The restoration is scheduled for completion on Dec 1, 2014, “and so far we are right on schedule,” says Father Dennis Noon, pastor at the church, enthusiastically. He is quick to thank his parishioners for their generous spiritual and financial support of the restoration, which is expected to cost approximately 10 million dollars. Although the church has received some funding from the federal government, most of the money has been privately donated.

In general, the citizens of Guelph, whether or not they are part of the Church of Our Lady's congregation, seem to feel invested in the restoration. “I get a lot of comments from people telling me how much they admire how hard we are working to keep the church up and we really appreciate that,” says Father Noon.

It's no surprise that even those who are not members of the congregation are anxious to see this historic site restored. The Church of Our Lady is said to be the most visited tourist site in Guelph and with its towering spires visible throughout much of the city, it is undoubtedly an

indelible part of the population's sense of what it means to be a Guelphite.

“Everyone is awe-struck by it,” explains Father Noon, who emphasizes the church's significance with a personal story of a visit to Galway, Ireland where he went to see the city's famous cathedral. While touring the site, Father Noon met a priest who asked him where he was from. When he said he was from Guelph, Ontario, the priest said to him “are you at that beautiful church on the hill?” It truly is an iconic landmark.

Church of Our Lady's singular beauty and historic significance was officially recognized in 1990 when it was designated a National Historic Site of Canada and praised for its stained glass windows, views of the city, and resplendent Gothic Revival architecture.

Satisfied with the progress of the restoration, Father Noon is excited to begin the final phase, saying “The interior of the building is tired. It needs a refreshing.” As an essential part of both Guelph's landscape and spirit, one can't help but think that this “refreshing” will translate into a similarly energizing effect on the city and its citizens. **MG**