

## New Perspective, New Challenges for Sacred Places Sites

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Pictured:  
Participants of  
'The Changing  
Nature of  
Sacred Places'  
workshop  
standing in front  
of Sharon  
Temple NHS



It was a small and intimate group that gathered at Sharon Temple NHS on June 11, 2009, for the NHTSO's "The Changing Nature of Sacred Places" workshop. As with all Sacred Places initiatives, the workshop was intended for nationally designated sites of spiritual and religious value to come together and share their experiences with each other. Stories were told, challenges brought up and new issues discovered. While finding solutions in such a short amount of time is often hard, the workshop and its participants opened up a much needed discourse surrounding our sacred sites.

Setting the tone for the day was the brilliant Keynote Speaker, Brigitte Shim, from the Shim-Sutcliffe architecture firm. Knowledgeable and keen, Shim's interest lies in relationships among the sacred, the landscape, and modern architecture. What is the purpose of light within a space? How can a site engage visitors and create a meaningful experience *despite* its urban or suburban environment? How do we create a stewardship model based on sustainability? These were some of the questions that were discussed. Showcasing examples from her research in Scandinavia and her own corporate projects in Toronto and the United States, Shim hoped that they would act as useful precedents for current and

future sites. Many participants found Shim both practical and exceptional, offering fresh and relevant perspectives for many to muse on.

Following a tour of the Sharon Temple and its grounds, Erin Semande and Laura Hatcher took over for the second half of the day. As Places of Worship researchers from the Ontario Heritage Trust, Erin and Laura have spent the past three years travelling the province to survey and map churches and other places of worship. This is part of their work for the OHT's Ontario Places of Worship Inventory. It will soon cumulate in an extensive online database open for public use. The inventory is to be a tool for heritage organizations, faith groups, communities, or municipalities searching for different forms of preservation methods and strategies for their sites. They highlighted current trends and challenges facing redundant and underutilized places of worship, including best practices for adaptive reuse models.

It is important to note that the inventory itself is part of a secular analysis of the use of purpose-built religious buildings that have been designed for worship. It does not aim to make any value judgements on any of the sites researched. However, many participants felt concerned over the OHT's approach to the inventory. Most found the

## “The Challenging Nature of Sacred Places” Workshop cont’d...

mandate too narrow and limiting as it excluded many groups whose places of worship do not have clearly defined architectural space. Participants asked how sites such as an Aboriginal sweat lodge would be handled – or even if it would be considered being surveyed. While the OHT is not trying to make any value judgements, value judgments can be seen through what is not being included in a database that is meant to be comprehensive, especially in a multicultural society. How can OHT’s Places of Worship Inventory take into consideration the needs and concerns of non-Judaeo-Christian faith groups? This notwithstanding the fact that Judaeo-Christian architecture is the most common existing form of places of worship in Canada.

It was a challenging and tense discussion. What be-

came apparent was that this was an issue that would have to be addressed from a different initiative and not necessarily through the Places of Worship Inventory.

The day ended well. It was a worthwhile and informative event, and many appreciated the chance to speak to one and other and learn of the different challenges facing sites from across the province. Many thanks to the wonderful work by Sheryl Smith, Aboriginal Affairs Advisor for the Ontario Service Centre; John McIntyre and Katherine Belrose of Sharon Temple; and Ezaz Uddin, previous NHSO Coordinator.