

Alton Mill: Preserving heritage, art, and family ties

The vacant and deteriorating Mill was acquired in 1988 by Jack Grant, entrepreneur, social activist and founder of Seaton Group. Sharing the same love for the heritage that their father had, sons Jeremy and Jordan Grant took over the management of this 'jewel in the rough' in the early 90's

Alton Mill Arts Centre is a heritage building that has been preserved and nurtured with architectural precision while keeping its promise to the past to maintain its rustic and quaint qualities. A vibrant arts centre featuring some 20 artists and artisans in working studios, 4 art galleries, a fiber art and fashion market, hand-crafted jewellery, a heritage exhibit, and café, Alton Mill is a place for anyone who wants to appreciate the beauty of art, creative use of space and history.

We met Jeremy and Jordan Grant to ask them about Alton Mill Arts Centre and their future plans:

Tell us about yourself...

Jordan: Our father started the development business back in 1950's. Jeremy always wanted to get into the field of development because he had studied planning but I got into this field in the early 90's when one of the projects was facing some problems. We have been working together as a team since early 1990's.

Jeremy: The company had worked on projects in smaller communities outside Toronto. Even though our father was from Toronto, most of his company projects included places like Uxbridge and Unionville, which now are suburban communities.

Jordan: What we do is community development in smaller regions but we got our first taste of major development in Woodbridge where we worked on a mainstream heritage building. The business has evolved but we focus on smaller infill projects and we have branched into related real estate projects. We also have land in Belize where we operate tourist resorts.

Both of you restored an 1880's stone mill and converted it into the Alton Mill Arts Centre with studios, galleries, shops and event spaces, what inspired you to take this step?

Jordan: Initially, we didn't have a business plan to open an arts centre, our father owned this property and it fell into our laps as a vacant derelict building. It was a jewel in the rough and the question was what can we do with it? We looked at a lot of different options during the early 90's recession. We tried to sell it but the offers were too low and a real estate agent advised us to demolish the building as the land had a higher value. Our father had feelings for heritage buildings and so did we. We decided to take a different route and focused on other priorities to rebuild our business.

Jeremy: We did look at several different uses like seniors home, rental housing, residential condominiums, residential, arts and even a craft market hall. The building was zoned industrial so we looked at several industrial uses for it. The building was without electricity and heat, stripped out by vandals, and the well that had served the property was contaminated. There were many issues that had to be resolved.

Jordan: A local woodworker Carl Borgstram approached Jeremy and wanted to set up his art shop here. He thought there would be a demand for studios by other artists and craftspeople. We decided to give it a try. After converting the east section of the mill, he set up his woodworking shop in the building and we created six studios upstairs.

Jeremy: That really was an evolutionary start at the time. We were approached by those who wanted to be here. We literally put two walls in place and then others came. The six studios were a test at the time and it took a year to set it all up. We still have three family members from those original shop owners and tenants.

Tell us about the restoration process of the Alton Mill. Did you convey your vision to the architect Catherine Nasmith? What sort of design contributions did you make towards the process?

Jordan: When Jeremy got involved with Headwaters Arts Network, we started to develop a vision to create a space for arts. At the time, there was economic development money that could be allocated towards a space for arts.

Courtesy: Town of Caledon