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Bold new plans for Casa Loma revealed

140-seat fine dining restaurant plus much more

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DAVID PATERSON



Nick Di Donato hopes to attract 200,000 new visitors to Casa Loma each year

For 70 years, Casa Loma has been sitting in genteel semi-retirement on a hill overlooking Toronto. Because it was too glorious to demolish but lacked an obvious use, the city has left the grand old lady to languish like some embarrassing aging relative clinging to life well after her best years are behind her.

Having taken direct control of the castle in 2011 after the Kiwanis Club — which had run it for 74 years — stepped aside, the city now believes it might finally have a solution to the problem of what to do with Casa Loma.

It plans to turn over the running of large parts of the site to Liberty Group, a

Toronto-based company that operates restaurants and event spaces. At its November meeting, Toronto City Council took a break from gutting the powers of the mayor long enough to approve the deal almost unanimously.

Liberty Group says it will invest \$3 million in upgrading the castle's interior, including installing a new air conditioning system and upgrading the heritage experience with new smartphone apps and tablet computers.

It's also planning on adding new exhibits, including turning an underground tunnel into a museum dedicated to Toronto's seedier side.

But the company also wants to put the castle on the everyday radar of Torontonians. Liberty Group President Nick Di Donato said he wants to increase visitor numbers from the current 300,000 a year to 500,000, and drawing more local visitors to the castle is crucial to that goal.

"What we find, when we ask Torontonians if they have been to Casa Loma, is (if it wasn't for a wedding), the last time they went was likely at school," he said.



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The company hopes it can lure Torontonians back with attractions and exhibitions themed around events like Black History Month or Fashion Week. But much of its success will hinge on the opening of a new restaurant that will be accessible from the street and aims to draw foodies who are not necessarily looking to visit the rest of the castle.

Though Liberty Group has not released details of its ideas for a restaurant, in its proposal, the company promises a destination dining experience that “will revolutionize the way Casa Loma is perceived within the marketplace.”

Di Donato said it is envisioning a mid- to high-end eatery, set amid the castle’s Gothic revival splendour, and perhaps a terrace for taking coffee while enjoying the view of the city afforded by Casa Loma’s hilltop location.

However, there are questions about whether a restaurant at Casa Loma can succeed, given its quiet neighbourhood location and the intense competition in Toronto’s dining scene.

Mark McEwan, whose McEwan Group runs a number of restaurants, including Yorkville’s One, believes the new eatery will have its work cut out for it.

“The restaurant industry in the city is overblown right now and you have to work hard to keep your clients,” he said.

McEwan sees a high-end restaurant being difficult to sustain and suggested that the new operators might have to riff off the location with a menu that evokes the castle setting.

Di Donato points out that it is experienced in running restaurants and events in heritage properties and currently operates the elegant Liberty Grand ballroom at Exhibition Place and the Coral Gables Country Club, a Miami landmark built in 1924.

Among those who support Liberty Group’s plans is Trelawny Howell, great-grandniece of Sir Henry Pellatt, who built Casa Loma in 1914. Howell has been sharply critical of the way the property has been managed in the past.

“You want to see how things are run, look at the best in the world. Go to the Louvre; look at the restaurant there. They have a phenomenal restaurant. It’s massive and it’s beautiful,” she said.

Joe Mihevc, councillor for Ward 21, in which Casa Loma resides, firmly supports the deal with Liberty Group and believes the company will prove very capable of operating the castle as an attraction while maintaining its heritage value. He added that the City of Toronto stands to benefit monetarily from the deal.

“This was a very good deal for us financially, and it will allow us to invest in the buildings to the north side of Austin Terrace,” he said, referring to the castle’s hunting lodge and stables.

The city is mulling over turning one of the buildings into a museum of Toronto.

The castle has always struggled to find a place in the hearts and minds of Torontonians.

Whether the new operators can draw in sufficient numbers of visitors to spark a recovery in the castle’s fortunes is currently impossible to say. Either way, another chapter in Casa Loma’s strange but compelling story is about to be written.

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