

IN PROFILE

Peter Sage

BUILDER

By Steve Campbell

With two of the County's largest projects on the go, I might have expected Peter Sage to spend an interview shamelessly promoting his concepts for fresh new living spaces in the heart of downtown Picton.

But Peter is one of those rare people who has accomplished a lot, and yet maintains a cool and steady hand on his company, Elliott Sage Design and Construction.

The company has recently launched two ventures which will change the face of the Town of Picton: the creation of Town Hill Place - in an admittedly awkward site on the edge of Bridge Street where it joins Main - and the much-talked about acquisition of The Royal Hotel ... which was famous in Ontario when your grandfather was a teenager.

These are major endeavours, yet Peter Sage sits comfortably - self-

effacing yet proud - when he talks about his newest 'babies'.

He is quiet-spoken, but also intensely focused on large projects which don't just add new accommodation facilities to the town, but approach the concept of 'modern living' through fresh eyes, with engineering concepts in tune with comfort and conservation.

Peter has grown and evolved through different levels of the building trade ... but he doesn't parade out a list of diplomas and degrees.

"I don't have any university degrees," he said. "But that doesn't bother me."

"I've spent my whole life learn-

ing, and I believe you can never stop learning. I read a lot ... and I learn a lot from the people around me - the people I work with."

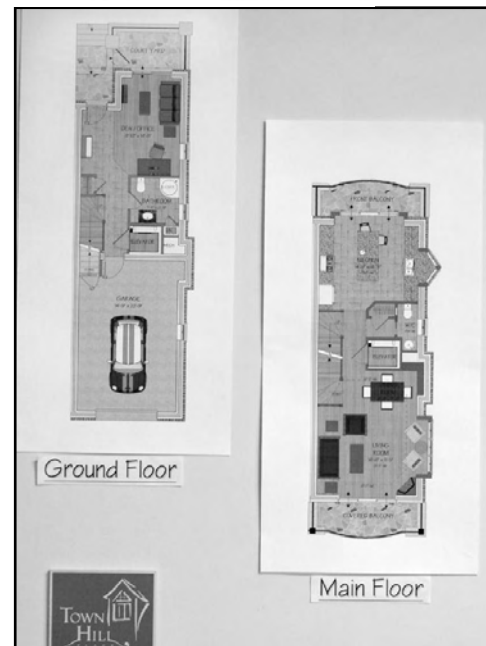
"If I have a gift," he said, "it's my ability to surround myself with people who have expertise. The strength of the company is in finding good people, keeping them, and helping them grow."

Peter grew up in Oshawa, and moved to Belleville at the age of 18. He did some land surveying, then starting working as a draftsman on building projects.

"Things were a lot different then," he said. "We would hand-draw and hand-letter ... no computers to help us then."

From transferring architects' plans into workable building plans - and dealing with all the minute details that transform a blueprint into a building - he headed down the road which would lead him to the County.

He joined with a close friend, Paul Elliott, to tackle a project here: the restoration of the locally famous Rickarton Hotel.



Above: Peter Sage, president of Elliott Sage Design & Construction, has built and developed the business since 1989. From his start as a draftsman, to designer, to a manager with a building crew and staff of 45 people, Peter has never turned away from a learning opportunity.

"Everybody shares their knowledge here. We all learn from each other, and we're all connected to the success of the project," he says. Near left: Sketches and plans for Town Hill Place, now in progress at the corner of Main and Bridge Streets.

Far left: One glimpse at this scale model of the Royal Hotel project gets everybody's blood flowing. Peter hopes to bring Five-Star quality and service to the Royal, while maintaining its historic facade.

They spent long hours building a plan and prospectus for 'The Rick', but the deal didn't go down. And then the Rickarton was gone.

"Still, though, we had set up the structure for the company, and I was anxious to get back into the County," Peter said. "Paul stayed with the company another year, and then went into the States for work."

"Now, we've been brought back together again ... he's a partner in both the Town Hill and Royal projects."

Elliott and Sage started the company in 1989, in the height of a recession. Still, you never know where life is going to lead you ... and smart people make their life decisions based on what they want to do, not what they are forced to do.

Peter was now established in the County, with his wife Celia (an accomplished local artist) and a growing family.

"I was tired of commuting to Toronto," he said. "It's even harder with a young family ... I'd only get to see the kids on weekends."

The shift away from the city - where the bulk of the design and building work was located - started with the advent of the fax machine.

Top right: Two sketches of the Royal project: top, the atrium, which will re-open the centre court all the way up to the roof and, below, the Jazz Lounge, a pet project of Peter and Celia.

Below: An artist's rendering of Town Hill Place and, opposite, a sample of a traditional Guildcrest home.



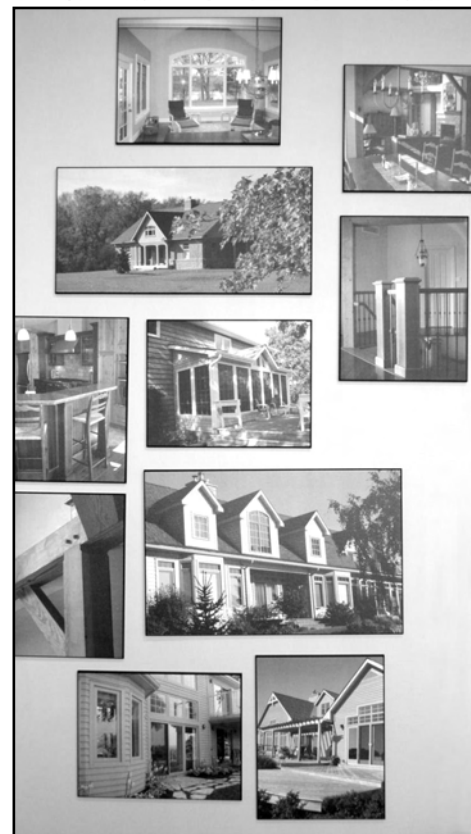
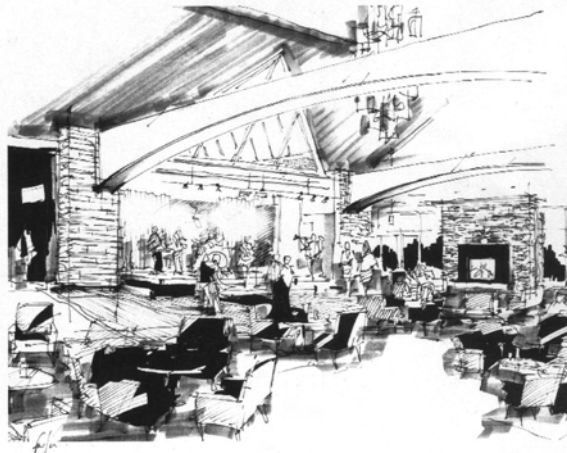
"There was no internet then," he says. "But the fax machine allowed me to come home on Friday, and work from there. I would live off voicemail and the fax machine."

The local work started to build, and it wasn't long before Peter had both feet in the County ... permanently.

"Chris Williams gave me my first job ... designing the facade for his storefront. Frank Wright gave me my second job (on the historic Williamson Insurance building)."

Another large job came from an unexpected source, but at the right time. Fred Weeks had recently purchased The Merrill Inn, which was to be the foundation and flagship for his new company, Someplace(s) Different.

Responding to a request for designers to bring the historic building back to life - while meeting modern standards of fire, safety and health reg-



ulations - Peter fit the bill.

He spent three years helping Someplace(s) Different develop and execute similar projects in Kingston, London and Toronto.

All of this helped to shape the next chapter in Peter's life.

"I realized that I was good at design and project management," he said, "rather than hiring crews to build."

This was the focus for about eight years, until he started hiring his own building tradespeople to execute the final stages of the projects.

"The people I work with are involved in both the process and the project," he said. "In the end,

all of us have a pride of ownership in the project."

As the company evolved, Elliott Sage became an authorized dealer for Guildcrest Homes - a factory-built home manufacturer - which became a separate part of the company.

"Guildcrest offered something we needed in the County ... affordable, well-built homes, put together in a short time, without creating a sub-division."

Even now, his crew builds 10 or 12 Guildcrest homes a year, complete with homeowner modifications, and they consistently win

sales awards from the company.

Years have been spent gathering the right team of professionals to launch new projects, and Town Hill Place was the place to start.

"It's all about opportunities," Peter said. "I spied that place with the burned-out building - and I saw the potential in it. It's right in the middle of downtown, with a terrific view of the harbour."

It took some time to develop the project - and to convince people that it was an esthetic and viable project - and that was only the initial hurdle.

"Yes, it's taking a long time to build," Peter said. "But, right from the beginning, we wanted to create 'sustainable living'."

"We want it to last for years ... and stay low-maintenance for the owners. I believe that, if you build it once, properly, it adds value to the home."



Town Hill Place, still under construction, is an all-concrete structure. The concrete adds soundproofing and fireproofing elements ... and also a huge thermal mass, which figures heavily into the 'green' aspects of the building.

The floors are all heated, through the use of solar energy and a small back-up system.

"We're aiming for the retired community," he said. "Each unit features nine-foot ceilings, and personal elevators."

"It's important to me that we have a vital downtown ... bring people into the town, not into suburbs."

It is a mighty engineering job, bringing state-of-the-art technology to the town. So why, then, would he launch an even bigger project?

Because, for the Royal Hotel, the time was *now*. And it was an opportunity that could not wait.

And it is a project that is dear to his heart. He doesn't brag himself up but, when he starts talking about the Royal Hotel, his eyes light up.

"Follow me," he said, and jumped out of his chair.

In the next room was an incredibly detailed model of the project, about a cubic metre in size. This is the Royal Reborn, and there's no denying it will change the face of Picton.

One glance and you can't help but project yourself into the lobby, with cafés on both sides. The trademark stairs will still be in place, but the central atrium will once again be opened up, right to the top of the building – no County residents can recall that feature of the old Royal.

"It's going to be a five-star hotel," Peter says. "And to do that, we have to pay attention to every detail."

And the details are endless: restaurants, thermal heating and cooling, outdoor rooftop spaces with gardens and barbecues, a basement spa, preserving the arched limestone walls of the original building.

And, his favorite: a rooftop jazz lounge.

"Celia and I both love jazz, and I've always hoped for a permanent venue," he said. "I'd like to take jazz out of the the smoky basements, and raise it to where it can be celebrated ... in a rooftop lounge."

Even in the model, you can look through the tiny glass window and see a miniature drum kit and an upright bass, ready to go.

Even at this stage, Peter has consulted with professional chefs to design the kitchen layout, and spa operators to check their needs. Even the room rates have been established, leaving nothing to chance.

"If you want to be a five-star hotel, you need to cover every detail," he said. "You have to get it right first time. It's not just about what you see, but the service you get."

He says that the original building will be preserved, the facade restored, and steel girders will be driven into the ground to support the three new floors above.

"Structurally, it's in great shape," he said, "but it wasn't designed to support the extra floors we have planned."

"This is what we do," he said. "We now have 45 employees, and everybody shares their knowledge here. We all learn from each other, and we're all connected to the success of the project."

Picton is enjoying a revitalization ... and this project might once again make the town a regular stop ... just as it was in the early days of the Royal. □