

Conserving the dynamic city: The role of Heritage Conservation Districts in city-building

By Jennifer Keesmaat

SUMMARY

Toronto's historic and evolving urban landscape reflects the history, realities, and aspirations of the city's over 2.5 million residents, and the identification of cultural heritage resources is increasingly informing contextual, place-based development that builds on what makes Toronto a unique, competitive, and livable city. Toronto's rapid and intense growth presents a number of challenges - unexpected high-profile demolitions have sparked increased community interest in heritage conservation, revealing peoples' connection to place. Alongside complementary planning activities, heritage planning is being embraced for its value-based approach, with many Torontonians pushing for change that challenges the status quo, inspiring new approaches to urban development and city building.

RÉSUMÉ

Le paysage urbain historique en constante évolution de Toronto reflète son histoire, ses réalités et les aspirations des 2,5 millions de personnes qui y habitent. L'identification des ressources culturelles patrimoniales est de plus en plus éclairante sur le plan du contexte, de l'aménagement conçu en fonction des lieux qui tire parti des caractéristiques qui font de Toronto une ville unique, avantageusement concurrentielle et habitable. La croissance rapide et soutenue de Toronto pose un certain nombre de défis. Des démolitions inattendues et très médiatisées d'immeubles ont suscité un intérêt accru de la collectivité pour la conservation du patrimoine témoignant ainsi d'un sens d'appartenance aux lieux. Parallèlement à des activités d'aménagement complémentaires, l'aménagement patrimonial suscite de l'intérêt en raison de son approche axée sur la valeur. C'est pourquoi nombreux sont les Torontois et les Torontoises insistent pour voir des changements qui remettent en cause le statu quo, inspirent de nouvelles approches en développement urbain et en aménagement de la ville.

Heritage is an intrinsic part of Toronto's historic and evolving urban landscape. Historic districts, landmark buildings, archaeological resources, natural systems, cultural events, and layers of associated memories and stories convey what makes it distinct from other places, and reflect the towns, villages, and communities that have been stitched together over time. Heritage properties, areas, and sites are assets valued by residents and visitors alike. They tell the story of Toronto while laying the foundation for future growth. The identification of cultural heritage resources is increasingly informing contextual, place-based development that builds on what makes Toronto a unique, competitive, and livable city. Although Toronto's rapid and intense development environment presents a number of challenges, heritage planning is being embraced for its value-based approach to city building.

Unlike cities that have static and well-defined historic cores, Toronto still contains significant opportunities for development. Growth and intensification, if planned appropriately, will have a positive impact on established communities, while attracting newcomers and investment. Heritage conservation plays an important role in city planning, and is a critical component of public policy in major cities across the globe; despite the common criticism that heritage conservation functions merely as a tool to prevent change and progress, heritage planning is recognized as one of the more powerful values-based approaches to helping cities to meet and exceed their social, economic, and environmental targets.

As part of sustainable urban development, heritage planning can also be leveraged as a tool to strengthen social participation, support inclusive communities, advance sustainable building practices, and support diverse cultural economies. Recent and unexpected high-profile demolitions in Toronto have sparked increased community interest in heritage conservation, revealing peoples' connection to place. Many Torontonians are pushing for change that challenges the status quo, inspiring new approaches to urban development.

Heritage Conservation Districts (HCDs) are one tool in the city planning toolkit that Toronto uses to conserve significant heritage neighbourhoods and areas with defined historic character. The key piece of legislation that governs heritage conservation in Ontario is the Ontario Heritage Act (OHA) (RSO 1990, Amended 2005), which was created to support conservation, protection and preservation of heritage resources in the province. Under Part V of the OHA municipalities are enabled to establish HCDs where their official plan outlines provisions to do so. The Provincial Policy Statement (2014) states that long-term economic prosperity and a sense of place can be supported by conserving heritage resources and districts, and the City of Toronto's Official Plan supports the identification, evaluation and designation of HCDs.

HCDs provide place-based policies that conserve and enhance storied neighbourhoods, while pointing to opportunities for contextually appropriate growth and change. In 2012, Toronto City Council adopted *Heritage Conservation Districts in Toronto: Procedures, Policies and Terms of Reference*, with City Planning leading an emerging practice in developing the next generation of HCDs. Currently there are 24 HCDs in Toronto (four of which were recently adopted by Council and under appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board), with an additional nine HCDs in development. City Council will next consider another 12 areas authorized for study and seven areas nominated by the community under preliminary review.

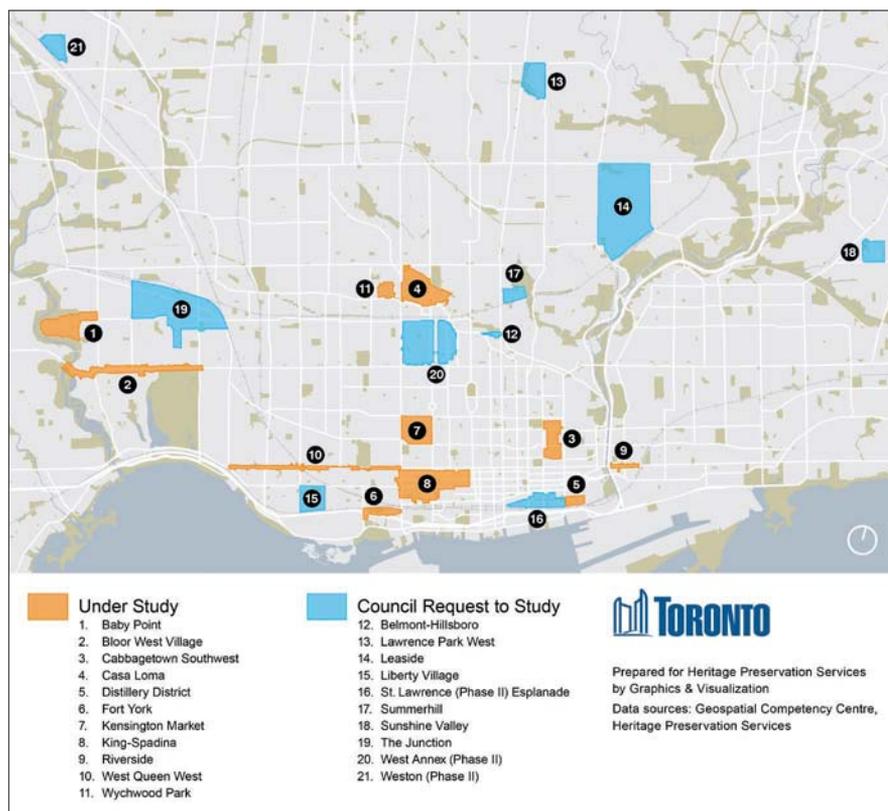
Central to the successful creation and implementation of any HCD is public engagement. Community input ensures that local knowledge is reflected within each HCD Plan and the process of consultation nurtures neighbourhood partners who

will champion heritage conservation at the local level for the long-term. Heritage planning is inherently a conversation-driven process – we are constantly debating what stays, what goes, and the rationale for why. While this negotiation is not without its challenges, the conversations that emerge amongst residents, planners, politicians, and developers are an invaluable part of understanding community values.

Since 2015 an important part of each HCD Study in Toronto has been the formulation of a community advisory group, composed of local residents, business owners, and community members. These groups provide an opportunity for the project team to listen to local stakeholders who represent a variety of perspectives, and to receive feedback on the evaluation of the area's heritage character. In 2016, City Planning initiated the Kensington Market HCD Study and established a community advisory group to develop an understanding of the market's heritage value and to inform the determination of whether an HCD is an appropriate tool to conserve what makes it unique. In addition to the dozens of neighbourhood characteristics, the Kensington Market community advisory group identified as important to the area's

heritage character, the group emphasized that the area's sense of anarchy, inclusivity, and history of experimentation – part of its intangible heritage – are essential attributes that help define the market. The area's buildings and public spaces are the staging ground for the activities and uses that occur within the market. The advisory group will continue to be an integral part of the HCD process, representing the market's diverse community and ensuring that Kensington's authenticity and integrity is comprehensively identified and conserved.

This past spring, City Planning brought forward the West Queen West HCD Study, which looked at a 2.4-kilometer stretch of Queen Street West. The study area bisects two City wards and encompasses a handful of distinct and highly-engaged neighbourhoods that care deeply about the future of this historic arterial main street. Active participation of stakeholders was critical to the development of the draft recommendations that benefitted from and reflect a deeper understanding of the various neighbourhoods, as well as the social and community values that are attributed to West Queen West along its full length, regardless of interruption in its continuous built form. Stakeholder feedback helped refine the City's understanding of the significance



of the area, and provided the necessary foundation for a recommended HCD boundary. The engagement process not only ensured that the proposed HCDs reflected the communities' understanding of their neighbourhoods, it also resulted in stakeholders knowing that their perspectives are a valued and valuable part of the HCD process.

Toronto is dotted with neighbourhoods that, like Kensington Market and West Queen West, have a distinct character that is valued by the local community and that attracts new residents, businesses, and investment. Whether it's King-Spadina's warehouse buildings, Weston's small town charm, Sunshine Valley's veteran housing, or Cabbagetown's rows of bay-and-gables, these neighbourhoods have an established historic built form and a public realm that support human-scaled communities, where residents have a strong attachment to place. The planning goal for these areas isn't to 'make place' but to ensure that future change conserves and enhances those features that support these attachments.

Many of our historic neighbourhoods were designed as complete communities, and include features that we now see finding their way back into the planning process. Toronto's HCDs include some of city's most walkable neighbourhoods, with healthy tree canopies, architectural diversity, a range of housing options, and spectacular public spaces. In King-Spadina, the HCD Plan identified the network of laneways as being a heritage attribute, valued for the story the lanes tell about the history of the district, and for how the network continues to be re-interpreted, providing midblock pedestrian connections and spaces for formal and informal commercial and creative uses.

Far from being static, Toronto's HCDs continue to evolve and accommodate

change in the form of sensitive additions, new development, increased density, new businesses and residents. Creative and contextually-informed interventions are encouraged within the city's HCDs and, as a dynamic and evolving city, these new layers have the potential to contribute to an area's value when designed with an appreciation for the local community's heritage character.

In January 2017, Toronto's Planning Review Panel – a representative group of 28 Torontonians who provide feedback on City Planning initiatives – examined the heritage preservation process in the city. The Panel emphasized that it is critical for City Planning to nurture and sustain relationships with community members as stewards of their neighbourhood, and support attachment to place through continued initiatives and policies that conserve social and community value. Through increased community engagement City Planning will identify long-term local heritage champions, who will help ensure that the defining features of each HCD are conserved while complementary new development supports the area's defined sense of place.

Heritage planning is and will continue to be an invaluable component of city building in Canada's rapidly evolving urban centres. However, tension that cities like Toronto are facing – that heritage is often portrayed as an impediment to positive new growth – must be addressed if we are to benefit from the positive contributions historic buildings and HCDs provide. While not without its challenges, by having heritage policies firmly embedded within the planning framework and by taking advantage of all the tools in the toolkit, the conversation in Toronto is evolving. In response, City Planning and its private sector partners are identifying innovative new opportunities for

responsive design interventions within the historic urban landscape.

As we've seen in Toronto, recent and ongoing HCD studies have inspired neighbourhood champions, engaged residents in the planning process, and supported existing attachments to place. Although Canadian urban centres are facing new and complex growth-related challenges, the world's most fascinating cities know that maintaining urban heritage adds long-term value. Toronto mustn't lose sight of this. Going forward, we need to continue ensuring our approaches to urban development integrate the best of the past, with an eye to the future.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON HERITAGE CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

- Heritage Conservation Districts: A Guide to District Designation under the Ontario Heritage Act. (2006).
- Heritage Conservation Districts in Toronto: Policies, Procedures and Terms of Reference. (2012).
- Heritage Conservation Districts in Toronto [blog]
- Heritage Districts Work! Heritage Conservation District Study Summary Report. (2009). ■

