

## Mississauga: Heritage Management in an Ordinary Place

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### Résumé de l'article

La gestion des ressources architecturales pose des défis particuliers dans une ville qui compte un grand nombre de constructions ordinaires et peu d'édifices ou de sites traditionnellement considérés comme remarquables. Lorsque les bâtiments ne se distinguent pas de façon évidente, des affiches appropriées peuvent aider les citoyens. Toutefois, ce processus d'identification risque de devenir incontrôlable étant donné l'abondance des caractéristiques susceptibles d'être retenues. L'exemple de Mississauga illustre le besoin essentiel d'une stratégie de conservation du patrimoine pour des localités de ce type et montre comment une telle stratégie peut servir avantageusement les intérêts d'une ville au sens large.

## Research Note/Note de recherche

### Mississauga: Heritage Management in an Ordinary Place

Thomas F. McIlwraith

#### Résumé/Abstract

*La gestion des ressources architecturales pose des défis particuliers dans une ville qui compte un grand nombre de constructions ordinaires et peu d'édifices ou de sites traditionnellement considérés comme remarquables. Lorsque les bâtiments ne se distinguent pas de façon évidente, des affiches appropriées peuvent aider les citoyens. Toutefois, ce processus d'identification risque de devenir incontrôlable étant donné l'abondance des caractéristiques susceptibles d'être retenues. L'exemple de Mississauga illustre le besoin essentiel d'une stratégie de conservation du patrimoine pour des localités de ce type et montre comment une telle stratégie peut servir avantageusement les intérêts d'une ville au sens large.*

*The management of the built resources in a city dominated by large numbers of ordinary structures and few landmarks of the traditional sort presents special challenges. When structures do not speak for themselves, citizens may be assisted by appropriate labelling, a procedure which can get out of control as the features which might be recognized are almost without limit. The city of Mississauga is used to illustrate the vital need for a heritage strategy in such places, and how such a strategy might be beneficial to broad city interests.*

It is a truism that heritage conservation activities in Canada over the past decade have been spurred on by individual attempts to preserve or restore particular buildings. In Ontario, for instance, the Ontario Heritage Foundation (OHF) was established in 1967 to acquire buildings of province-wide significance, and a small endowment of public money was provided for this purpose.<sup>1</sup> The Niagara Apothecary, the house once occupied by the novelist Mazo de la Roche in Mississauga, and the Barnum house — a Greek revival house in Grafton celebrated by architectural historians for its uniqueness and stylistic purity — are all owned by the OHF. They are three of about thirty such properties, isolated from one another and representative of all that was unique and “high-art” design in nineteenth century Ontario. Furthermore, they are the chance survivors of their types,

and identified in the fear that if lost, their kind will never again be seen.

The Ontario Heritage Act of 1974<sup>2</sup> addressed the problem of public acquisition of heritage structures by encouraging local participation in their management. By allowing municipalities to establish Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committees (LACACs), support was decentralized, and recognition — “designation” — rather than acquisition, was to be the operative word. Various consequences followed which were by and large for the better. With hundreds of people involved in some 140 LACACs, and generally all of them enthusiastic volunteers, the list of worthy structures swelled and inevitably the list included more and more ordinary, or vernacular, buildings. Thus, the Heritage Act, despite its humanities roots which traditionally encouraged designation of structures of capital ‘A’ Architectural and/or capital ‘H’ Historical importance, began to show that it was also flexible enough to allow for



**MAP 1.** Mississauga in relation to Toronto.

the recognition of social significance. A builder-designed, storey-and-a-half farmhouse could be celebrated for its architecture, if not its architect, and the lives of ordinary people could be considered as historically significant as the birthplace of a future prime minister.

This process of diffusion of the influence of the Ontario Heritage Act has been further encouraged by the opportunity to establish heritage districts.<sup>3</sup> Districts consist of a building or, more commonly, a series of buildings and their setting. Fences, gardens, ditches and so on all receive attention which they never could have achieved alone. Now the intangible aspects of scale and change were also incorporated into LACACs' concerns. Public ownership made less sense than before. Rather, it is public participation in private individuals' efforts to preserve their built heritage; a heritage that has a small but important element of "publicness" about it, simply because anybody can look at private places as they pass along public streets.

The Ontario Heritage Act has thus evolved as a planning tool, and has taken its place alongside the Environmental Assessment Act (1975) and the new Planning Act (1983).<sup>4</sup> Together the three pieces of legislation address the basic question: what is the socially most acceptable way of utilizing the cultural landscape? Or, less abstractly, how might changes in land use take place in a previously-used setting? One economically acceptable way has been fashionable for years: assume existing features to be liabilities, remove them, and start fresh with a clean slate.

Utilizing the built forms already on the site is a new question for many persons developing land, and it is often seen as an unwelcome intrusion.<sup>5</sup> For example, the LACACs hope for a farmhouse or country school to survive the transition from rural countryside to prestige industrial use, have had to develop strong persuasive powers. Hence an educational role has been added to LACAC responsibilities, and to be truly effective the pitch must be positive and promote more than mere survival. Development interests must translate the "social acceptance" criterion favoured by heritage supporters into the familiar "economic acceptance" terminology of owner and developer. By making pre-existing landscape features clearly attractive in the development/redevelopment process, everyone can be a winner.

In short, the concept of heritage is widening: from famous to ordinary places; from public to private ownership; from objects to contexts; and, from scattered crusaders to a wide community. Heritage awareness and the effect of heritage groups in the country is vast. Instead of just picking over the leftovers, heritage proponents in the 1980s may assertively explore particular avenues and encourage their municipalities to establish workable heritage strategies — through legislative or other means. More than ever before, there is

an opportunity to engage in what might properly be called a heritage by choice, rather than by chance.

\* \* \*

Mississauga is ideally suited to demonstrate the theme of heritage by choice. The City of Mississauga (in the Region of Peel) was incorporated in 1974, taking in the former Town of Mississauga of 1967, which was successor to the Township of Toronto, laid out early in the nineteenth century. Within the city limits lie the Credit River, the former villages of Port Credit, Clarkson, Cooksville, Streetsville, Meadowvale, and Malton, and Lester B. Pearson International Airport. Toronto Township was an important area of Canadian wheat production in the boom years prior to Confederation, and two flour mills in Streetsville continue to process a major portion of Ontario's winter wheat production. From the late nineteenth century until well after World War II, market gardens and orchards were major land uses, and many producing fruit trees may still be found in suburban yards or on remnant parcels of unredeveloped land.

Toronto's outward growth could be felt as early as the 1880s, as cottagers built along the lake front. By the 1920s a few wealthy estates were established along the Credit River and the suburbs sprawled westward along the Lakeshore Road streetcar line, as far as a new cornstarch plant on the lake at Port Credit. A substantial community developed around the wartime industries in the 1940s, and more in the vicinity of Malton Airport, established in 1937.

The effect of the opening of the Queen Elizabeth highway in 1939 was evident through the rapid suburban subdivision after the 1950s, giving Mississauga a role of tributary to Toronto's business district, a role it has continually sought to redress by energetically encouraging employment opportunities within its own limits. Today, the city of 320,000 is traversed by three super highways and three railway commuter lines and continues to wrestle with its own identity. In May 1984, a farm field was broken for a new \$55 million city hall and civic centre in what local politicians hope will be the first step in creating a downtown for the twenty-first century.

In visual terms, the city may be described as that part of agricultural Ontario which grows houses and factories in its fields, or simply as suburban Toronto. Whatever the image, Mississauga lacks landmarks. It is hard to imagine that the Ontario Heritage Foundation could have identified a second building of Provincial significance, as even Mazo de la Roche is hardly a household name. It was a great relief to LACAC to discover that the alleged summer retreat of the one-time Chief Justice of Upper Canada, Sir John Beverly Robinson, was a good building architecturally and did not have to depend on finding an elusive link to Sir John (see Figure 1). Mississauga is noted for large numbers of ordinary buildings



**FIGURE 1.** Regency cottage of the 1830s. Associations with famous people are not necessary to the survival of old buildings.

SOURCE: T. McIlwraith, 26 June 1984

in which nice people engaged in hum-drum routines. It is generic rather than gourmet Ontario.

Generics lack identity by definition. And that is Mississauga's problem: nominally urban, but by many appearances suburban or rural. It is only in the 1980s that a farm ceased to operate opposite City Hall. The fields and fence lines may still be seen in 1984. It is no wonder that the first of several goals set out in the Official Plan (1980) is to establish an identity at both city-wide and local levels.<sup>6</sup> Construction of a city core is under way; a downtown with a distinctive City Hall building is rising at what was until the early 1970s a country crossroads. The plan is all future-oriented, starting with, to all intents and purposes, a clean slate.

But included in the Official Plan's list of goals appears the statement: "to preserve and enhance the natural and built environment."<sup>7</sup> We are reminded that heritage conservation is also future-oriented. It must be if land-owners are to respect the heritage process and acknowledge the existing built environment. The opportunity is here to fuse heritage interests, land economics, and the City's quest for an identity. The scarcity of obvious landmarks is arguably an asset, compelling heritage supporters to face the question "what are the meaningful aspects of the city's land." Recognizing — and acting on — those features that warrant their continued visibility is the responsibility of the LACACs, groups so often seen only narrowly as "saving old buildings."

If there is one distinguishing characteristic woven into the Mississauga fabric, it is change. The transformation from

rural to urban is both a functional and visual jolt, and even more dramatic than renewal within an existing urban situation. Before-and-after comparisons, and contrasts between adjacent sites are strongly evocative experiences for both long-time residents of the villages and tenants gazing out from newly-finished high-rise buildings (Figure 2). Both groups are witnessing the forces of change; forces that are bulldozing their way into the city's countryside as they have for a generation, and promise to do for the years ahead. Mississauga is a city beset with visual change and strong contrasts, and a heritage strategy which illuminates that experience is touching the essence of the place.

Change and contrast are not traditional heritage conservation virtues. With the roots of the movement firmly established in architectural history, it is little wonder that those Mississauga buildings designated under the Ontario Heritage Act are architecturally closer to the period of their construction than to the present.<sup>8</sup> Nor is it surprising that subsequent alterations or renovations tend to further restore them to the original design. This process should not be discouraged, as it assures the survival of period cross-sections, and citizens should cherish the ability of such structures to present unobstructed views of past periods. What makes this process exciting is the likelihood of enhanced contrasts between structures having different histories in the same vicinity. These could be newer or older buildings which may have been, more or less altered from their original style, configuration, or function. But by just the coincidental occurrence of a pampered building among others, the whole



**FIGURE 2.** Adjacent 1870s and 1970s dwellings. Old age and youth are enhanced by each other's presence.

SOURCE: T. McIlwraith, 1977

scene takes on meaning (see Figure 1). Everywhere in the city — indeed, in any city — these chance juxtapositions set up instructive contrasts.

But, going a step further, individual buildings may themselves reflect change. Some were eclectic when built. Quite apart from any subsequent modifications, these mongrels betray a builder either bemused by what he saw in the cross-currents of taste swirling around him, or unconscious of different styles. Mississauga has many such buildings which have powerful messages about change, and they do not even have to be old. As for altered structures, these have all too commonly been discredited in heritage considerations. Again, this is the purists' influence and a feeling that heritage is concerned with the remote past rather than the recent past, and certainly not about the future. Changes and renovations have been considered an aesthetic weakness rather than a sign of functional resilience. When Clarkson United (formerly Methodist Episcopal) Church was converted to a flooring salesroom, it ceased to look like a "good" church building and never would become a "good" retail building (see Figure 3). But the structure survives, showing signs of its former and present self, and presenting a "good" example of a social and economic process which recognizes the benefits of adaptive reuse. Recognition of this structure is evidence of the way society is coming to understand its landscape — a most important social statement.

Locales rich in contrast are weakened as particular elements disappear and reduce the variety. Barns, for example, are not easily converted to urban uses, highly susceptible to vandalism, and prized for their materials. Mississauga has one museum barn, a second which was until recently a theatre, and a third which is an antique shop (besides several still more or less in agricultural use). Barns are not realistically part of a city's fabric, and their removal symbolizes, more clearly than any single change, the end of farming, or certainly of the farming landscape. Reminders of this and

other agricultural uses of the city's territory, therefore, demand cues other than the structures, which announced the past in the present simply by being there. The lilacs, windbreak, and other plantings at a protected farmstead site will only be meaningful for future office workers enjoying a summer lunch hour in the locale if a label or sign is provided (Figure 4). The context of such areas is just too blurred, and



**FIGURE 3.** Converted church. Altered buildings exhibit resilience, not submission, amid change.

SOURCE: T. McIlwraith, 26 June 1984





**FIGURE 4.** Consciously retained farmstead remains. A simple label is adequate to inform a new generation of users from nearby office buildings.

SOURCE: T. McIlwraith, 26 June 1984



**FIGURE 5.** Weedy mill race.

SOURCE: T. McIlwraith, 26 June 1984



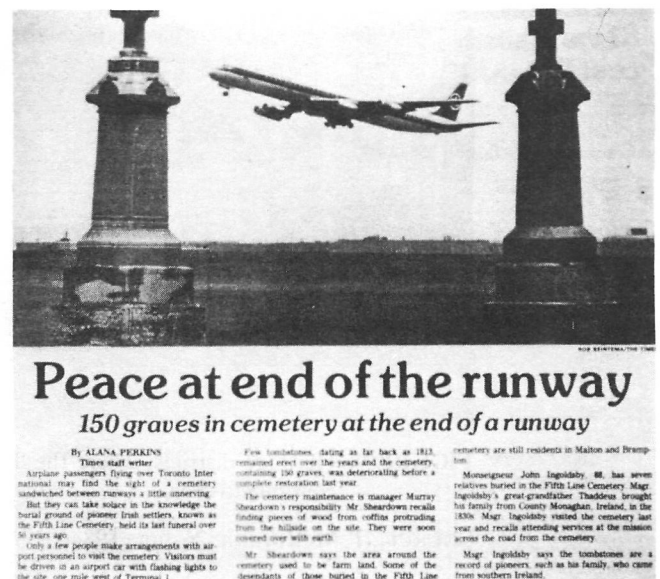
**FIGURE 6.** Ash heap at Fly Ash Park, now renamed Birchwood Park. The weedy mill race and ash heap are subtle reminders of past and current waste management procedures.

SOURCE: T. McIlwraith, 26 June 1984

the contrast too subtle for many culturally-significant sites to disclose their historical cultural meaning to most interlopers.

Once the idea of erecting signs to announce the elements of the city is considered a number of processes are set in motion. First, there is the exhilarating realization that there are no limits to what might be marked, as everything has some social significance. A painted-over bus-stop marker of the Toronto city system marks the day when Port Credit faced eastward to Yonge Street, not northward to Square One. Flyash Park — a grassy mound carpeting the residue from the coal-fired generating station at Lakeview, and innocuously renamed Birchwood Park — and a disused tail-race from a long-gone waterpowered mill in old Meadowvale village represent alternative responses to the wastes of producing power. These sites are miles apart, but a marker at each could remind readers of the other (see Figures 5 and 6). From the observation deck atop Terminal 1 at Pearson International Airport Elmbank cemetery can be seen amid the runways, but a sign is needed to direct the traveller to look for this onetime village site (see Figure 7). And the vertically-oriented Barberton Mill of the 1860s, with its adjacent company housing, sets off numerous contrasts with long low factories remote from the employee's houses so common today (see Figure 8). There are endless possibilities. The spectre of overwhelming numbers of signs and the resultant museumification is unacceptable for obvious economic and social reasons. A process of selecting and planning is needed — an exercise all LACACs have undertaken — but based upon wider criteria than being the “best” among existing buildings.

For this reason, the creation of the Meadowvale village heritage district in 1982 warrants attention.<sup>9</sup> This rural vil-



**FIGURE 7.** Gravestones by the runway. Valued sites beyond normal reach need not be forgotten.

SOURCE: *Mississauga News*, date unknown

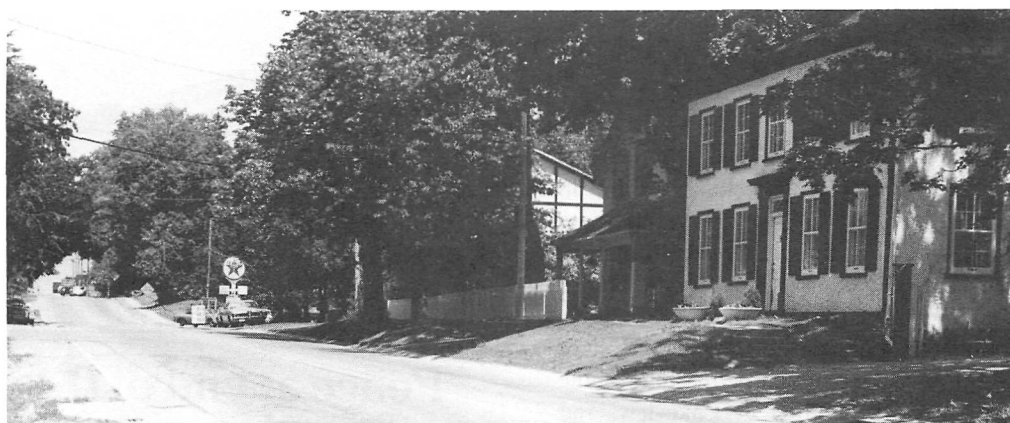
lage occupies less than 100 acres on the banks of the Credit River, surrounded by floodplain and greenbelt, and is also a secondary (neighbourhood) planning district in the Official Plan (Figure 9). Two pieces of legislation have meshed in an unprecedented instance of site management in which the ambience of the village is preserved. Some structures are specifically designated, but all features, including a supporting cast of trees, culverts, and vacant lots, are recognized as contributing to a whole which is greater than the sum of the parts. Ambience is a specifically cultural attribute, reaching



**FIGURE 8.** Roadside rental rowhousing, a five minute walk from the company's woollen mill. Social meaning is signalled by ordinary buildings.

SOURCE: T. McIlwraith, 26 June 1984





**FIGURE 9.** Heritage districts, where the diffuse and modern evidence of cultural evidence may continue to evolve.

SOURCE: T. McIlwraith, 26 June 1984

beyond tangible ones to consider scale, rhythm, and texture. The spirit of heritage by choice is alive in Meadowvale.

The LACAC debate leading up to the Meadowvale designation considered the appearance of the village in the year 2000.<sup>10</sup> It was agreed that without any direction the village-like atmosphere would certainly be lost, and the outcome would be the same if it were frozen in its 1980s appearance or altered back to any particular earlier decade. Somewhere between no change and headlong change lay a middle course. District designation allows Meadowvale to evolve in such a way that in the year 2000, the sense of generations of adaptation will be as evident as it is today or has been at any date in the past century. Just as mills vanished more than sixty years ago, the odds favour the construction of a new building here or there and the demise of old ones in the next twenty years. Yet, like grandfather's axe with its succession of new heads and new handles, the essence remains and the continuity unbroken. In Meadowvale the paradox of change and stability working hand in hand is manifested.

In a city filled with land undergoing development and with ordinary widely scattered cultural features, this wedding of plans and heritage is an achievement of major significance. Instead of heritage being restricted to *ad hoc* arrays of fine old buildings, the Mississaugas of the nation could be drawing attention more broadly to those elements that reflect their essential personalities. Change is perhaps an overly simple cliché to use for characterizing a place, and any chosen focus will generate its own range of examples. Furthermore, many of these do not require the Heritage Act for recognition and may properly be illuminated by private interests. There is a need for an imaginative awareness of the built environment. For an ordinary-looking place like Mississauga, a heritage by choice is a heritage geared to lifting it above the hum-drum, towards achievement of that elusive identity.

## NOTES

1. The Ontario Heritage Foundation Act, R.S.O. 1970, c. 315.
2. The Ontario Heritage Act, R.S.O. 1980, c. 337.
3. *Ibid.*, Part V.
4. Environmental Assessment Act, R.S.O. 1980, c. 140. Planning Act, R.S.O. 1980, c. 379; S.O. 1981, c. 15; S.O. 1983, c. 1, 82.
5. The value of heritage to private and public interests is of wide-ranging concern, and underscores the writing in all of the following selected references: Mark Farm and John Weiler, eds., *Continuity with Change: Planning for the Conservation of Ontario's Man-Made Heritage* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation, 1981); Larry R. Ford, "Urban Preservation and the Geography of the City in the United States," *Progress in Human Geography*, 3 (1979), 211-38; S. Todd Lowry, "An Economist's View of Preservation," *Pioneer America*, 8 (1976): 28-35; Marc C. Denhez, *Heritage Fights Back* (Ottawa: Heritage Canada, 1978).
6. City of Mississauga, *Official Plan, 1980*, p. 12.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
8. Amongst founding figures in heritage conservation, Eric Arthur and Anthony Adamson should be recognized; see Eric Arthur, "Early Architecture in Ontario," *Ontario Historical Society, Papers and Records*, 28 (1932), 150-54; *idem*, *The Early Buildings of Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1938); *idem*, *Iron* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983); Anthony Adamson and Marion MacRae, *The Ancestral Roof* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1963).
9. City of Mississauga, Bylaw 453-80. Mississauga LACAC consists of twelve members:
  - two councillors (from nine; some turnover with elections; Mayor is ex officio);
  - three city staff members (secretary/coordinator from Clerk's Dept.; city historian/museum curator trained in museology from Recreation and Parks Dept.; architect — as it happens, but not necessarily — from Planning Dept.);
  - five representatives from local bodies (two city historical societies, reflecting old village traditions; one Regional — formerly County — historical society; one museum foundation; Erindale, the university campus); and,
  - three volunteer citizens.
 Occupations include an architect (in addition to the planner), professor, curator of Black Creek pioneer village, and writer; the architectural historian Anthony Adamson was a founding member, now retired.
10. City of Mississauga, LACAC minutes, March 28, 1977, item 7, file 178-77.