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■ HERITAGE IN THE GARDEN DISTRICT

BALANCING ACT

Andrew Cohrs

A proposed heritage conservation designation for the Garden District is attempting to strike a balance among priorities—architectural preservation, much-needed social service organizations and redevelopment opportunities.

“[There is] an incredible wealth of heritage [in the Garden District] in terms of architectural assets.... I’m particularly proud of the fact that the consultants and the local community acknowledged that the cultural value of the area goes beyond the built form... [and includes] Indigenous culture... [and historical] social struggles... In many ways it’s a [proposal] that has been very sensitive to an area that seems to be a place where we have vulnerable people,” Ward 27 Toronto Centre-Rosedale councillor **Kristyn Wong-Tam** told *NRU*.

The Toronto Preservation Board has recommended that council designate the

Garden District as a Heritage Conservation District. As defined by the heritage study—led by the city heritage preservation services staff and consultant **MHBC Planning**—the Garden District is bordered by George Street to the west, Sherbourne Street to the east, Allen Gardens to the north and Moss Park to the south. Originally designed as an upscale residential neighbourhood in the mid-19th century, the district includes examples of a variety of architectural styles including Gothic Revival, Second Empire, Italianate, Romanesque Revival and Edwardian Classicism.

The district also has a rich cultural heritage that needs to be recognized, including the history and continued presence of the **Anishnawbe First Nation**, Toronto preservation services program manager **Tamara Anson-Cartwright** told *NRU*.

“That history and

association with social services, be it from the very beginning with the establishment of the Allan School, to the evolved history and use of the buildings by the Indigenous community and organizations, has been something that that we really wanted to acknowledge... and not just look to this [district] as a Victorian period of architecture, and that’s it.”

While boasting diverse architecture and cultural significance, the area is also home to some of Toronto’s poorest residents, as well

as many social service providers, including shelters and addiction support organizations. Thus, a heritage conservation district could be a double-edged sword, says Toronto downtown planning manager **David Oikawa**. He explains that while heritage conservation districts mostly prevent land assembly, they can protect or displace certain uses, and can make areas more desirable places to live.

“For example, say there is a building that is a rooming

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BALANCING ACT

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house. Having the ability to say ‘No, you can’t tear that down.’ could protect it as a rooming house. On the other hand, if the area gentrifies, as was the case in Rosedale... as property values rose, people who had the means purchased [large homes that had been converted to rooming houses] and converted them back to single-family houses.”

Given its location in downtown Toronto, the Garden District and surrounding neighbourhoods are experiencing increased redevelopment interest. Wong-Tam says that the proposed designation is an important tool for preserving the Garden District as an inclusive area, as well as guiding appropriate redevelopment.

“I believe there is a way for intelligent development to take place in a community [designated as] a Heritage Conservation District.

[Developers] just have to [propose redevelopments] with an outcome that is going to be respectful of the local and existing cultural heritage value. And I think that’s actually a good thing,” Wong-Tam said.

Wong-Tam suggests that the proposed designation will serve to reinforce the social services that currently exist. Because the proposed heritage conservation district incorporates not only

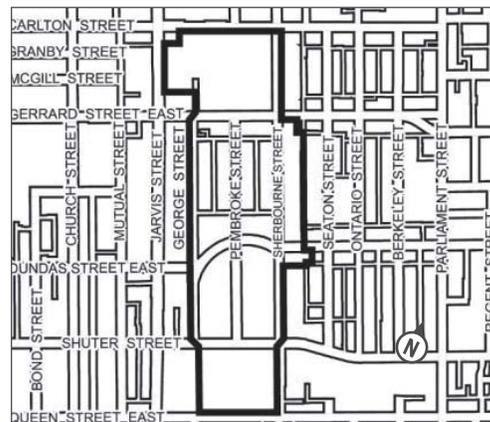
architecture and built form, but also recognizes the importance of community support institutions, she believes that developers seeking to redevelop in the district will respect the community that is already in place.

Above right: View east along Dundas Street East at the intersection with George Street in 1923, Toronto

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

Right: Example of Second Empire architecture at 48 Pembroke Street, Toronto

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO



Map of proposed Garden District Heritage Conservation District

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

Street Haven at the Crossroads operations director **Kenda Hoffer** agrees. She told *NRU* that her organization is not concerned that the heritage designation will negatively impact its ability to operate a women’s housing support



Seaton House men’s hostel at 339 George Street, Toronto

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

service. Instead it will serve to protect it. The designation will help inform prospective developers about the existing neighbourhood.

“Different types of services are all mixed within these couple of blocks... If the area wasn’t what it was already, yes for sure, we’d be worried... Obviously we don’t want any services removed, but we are not worried... We are

definitely on board with [the designation].”

Toronto and East York Community Council will consider the [staff report](#) at its meeting January 17. 🌿