

Attachment G - NEWS ARTICLE

'McMansion' threat in Modernist Scarborough community ignites activism

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Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Sep. 10, 2015 4:06PM EDT

It has received the UNESCO stamp of approval. The World Monuments Fund advocates for it. Entire cities, such as Palm Springs, Calif., rely on it for tourism. Governments routinely designate single buildings and whole neighbourhoods because of it.

It's finally safe to say that Modernism – that distinctive, unadorned, optimistic, future-forward and magical architecture that changed the way we see ourselves during the postwar period – has more admirers than detractors.

But what it really needs to survive is hard-working folk who go above and beyond; people who do the legwork, digging, organizing, door-to-door pamphlet dropping, phone calls and letter writing.

When Lisa Duperreault and her husband Garnet bought a home in Midland Park in 1994, “Mid-century Modern” was not part of her vocabulary; while the low-slung, 1959 post-and-beam homes in this leafy, central Scarborough enclave were certainly a textbook example of that style, and their realtor had used the term “California Modern” to describe them, “we didn't know what it meant,” she says.

Midland Park dates to the late-fifties and many of houses retain the Mid-Century Modern sensibilities that to this day remain a selling point.

“The fronts looked very plain,” she says. “I found that really strange because, normally, you're used to the living room window at the front – a big bay window thing. And, no garage was something that we were kind of concerned about, because every house that I've ever lived in, and Garnet as well, had a garage.”

However, the neighbourhood spoke a clear language regardless; after all, fluency in Italian isn't required to identify an Italian love song, and the love that architect Edward Ross lavished on these homes for developer Curran Hall was obvious.

It wasn't until over a decade later, however, that Ms. Duperreault learned the specifics as to why Modernist architects favoured carports over garages (they dissolve into the streetscape better), and eschewed front porches and showboating picture windows in favour of floor-to-ceiling windows that look onto private backyard gardens.

Soon, she was energized. While a mural (completed in late 2010) celebrating the neighbourhood's history at Oakley Boulevard and Ellesmere Avenue helped educate residents and passersby, she felt it wasn't enough. So, Ms. Duperreault formed the Midland Park Modernism Alliance in 2011. "I really wanted to do it for the people who live here," she says. "Everyone knows they have something special, but they don't know why."

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She created a website, midlandparktoronto.com, and filled it with history – Curran Hall was owned by Paul Hellyer, Canada's defence minister in the 1960s – and with entertaining tidbits on how to identify Modernism. At first, she envisioned the site as a resource for those seeking to understand their homes and, with hope, to be a little more sympathetic when renovating. "You can't go to Home Depot and buy the skinny baseboards," she says, "and when you're working with contractors, they want to give you the homogenized stuff. And if you don't have your wits about you, you end up decorating all wrong."

And it worked, she says. "Right from the get-go, it has had what we call in sales 'stickiness,' and I've had this slow momentum building."

A reissue of the original Curran Hall brochure, featuring floor plans and original prices – "from \$14,270 to \$17,930" – was a hit with residents, and taught them that six of the homes were Design Council Award winners. A few original residents of Midland Park sent Ms. Duperreault snapshots of their homes when new, with muddy roads and baby trees (although it should be noted that mature trees, wherever possible, were retained, as well as the site's natural topography – this was no bulldoze-and-start-fresh approach).

Then, a couple of things happened that changed everything.

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In March, 2013, Canada's first Heritage Conservation District (HCD) of Modernist homes, Briarcliffe in Ottawa, was created. Then, in the summer of 2014, Midland Park residents learned an application to develop a "McMansion" had been filed on Rosswood Crescent; while other Toronto Mid-century hotbeds, such as Don Mills, already have dozens, this would be Midland Park's first, and its nearly 5,000 square feet not only would tower over other homes, it would set a dangerous precedent.

While Ms. Duperreault had already written to the city's Heritage Preservation Services about considering Midland Park as Toronto's first Modernist HCD – something the department wholeheartedly agrees with but says budgets prevent until 2017 – the monster home threat galvanized her into taking further action. Within two weeks, a focus group of

25 “active community members” was formed to discuss both the HCD option and the public hearing for the “minor variance” that would make a major difference on Rosswood.

Ms. Duperreault stresses, however, that the HCD was the main agenda item, since “it’s better to focus on what your goal is, because the rest sorts itself out.” By the end of January, 2015, door-to-door volunteers had collected 500 signatures that represented about 300 homes – or almost half of the homes in Midland Park – in support of a heritage designation. A further 50 residents signed a form letter and sent it to their city councillor.

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At Ms. Duperreault’s request, the campaign received support letters. Mr. Hellyer, now 92, wrote that he “wanted to create something different from the tract housing subdivisions” he’d seen elsewhere. Scarborough Community Preservation Panel chairman Rick Schofield observed that it is “quite unusual” for a neighbourhood to have “retained all the original architectural styles” with renovations that are “in keeping with the original design.” The son and grandsons of John Race, Curran Hall’s secretary-treasurer, wrote that the “heritage features of the Midland Park neighbourhood have created a cultural identity that resonates with its occupants.”

While the McMansion will almost certainly get built, this avalanche of appreciation has resulted in a sine die on the application and forced consultations between the property owner and concerned residents. Even though a more sympathetic architectural plan may result, only an HCD can dictate the size and setbacks of complete rebuilds or additions.

This doesn’t faze Ms. Duperreault, however, who has seen what happens when people come together: “Whatever chemistry we have, it’s magic,” she says. “I have not fought to make this happen, I haven’t struggled, it has all just been a real nice evolution.

“And even the variance, it came at a perfect time – I think everything happens for a reason, and I think this is meant to be.”