



344 East Hastings Street in Vancouver, B.C., before and after rehabilitation in 2018. Photo: BC Housing

Heritage versus more housing

Unpacking a false opposition

The housing crisis and the need for affordable, inclusive, and safe housing has dominated headlines for months. Meanwhile, municipal heritage property programs have sporadically garnered criticism from housing advocates on the grounds that heritage conservation tools create barriers to developing new housing supply. In Ontario, that occasional criticism of the heritage system leapt to the forefront with the release of the Ontario government's Report of the Housing Affordability Task Force in February 2022.

The report called out heritage directly, declaring: "While true heritage sites are important, heritage preservation has also become a tool to block more housing." Many of the report's recommendations around heritage were included in Bill 23, *More Homes Built Faster Act, 2022*.

Spun as being essential to slash through "red tape" in 10 existing provincial acts in order to create 1.5 million new homes in 10 years, the bill was rushed into

law on Nov. 28, 2022, after a month's consideration and almost no public consultation. What's more, while the Act jeopardizes the cultural heritage of the traditional territories of Indigenous communities, review of the legislation did not involve consultations with First Nations as Inherent and Treaty Rightsholders. The Act contains changes that gut out key heritage protection tools in the *Ontario Heritage Act*, including:

- making heritage designation for individual properties and heritage districts much harder to obtain and easier to repeal;
- curtailing the protection of undesignated but listed places deemed as having heritage potential by imposing a two-year limit on their inclusion on municipal heritage registers; and
- prohibiting heritage designation once a planning application has been made.

Stakeholders in Canada's heritage conservation sector are pragmatic and recognize the need to review and revise the existing heritage systems. While there are instances in Ontario and other jurisdictions where community groups have seized upon heritage status as a last-ditch NIMBY gambit to slow development, this is the rare exception rather than the rule. Nevertheless, perceptions around heritage as a mechanism suppressing housing continue to circulate in the media, much of it extrapolated from high-profile, one-off cases.

When it comes to the impact of heritage designation on housing, how much is perception and how much is reality? The following data and case studies



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fundamentally disrupt that narrative of heritage protection as a housing-squelching culprit.

Myth #1: Heritage Is Thwarting Urban Intensification

There is a recurring argument that heritage protection is accelerating out of control, and that too many properties and districts are being recognized for their heritage value.

When compared to the U.S., Canada generally has half (often far less) of the heritage property designations. Toronto, for instance, has approximately 450,000 total properties. There are only 1,403 individually designated properties, with 5,608 falling within heritage districts and an additional 3,973 on the heritage register (with “heritage potential” but not legally protected). In other words, only 2.4 percent of the building stock in Toronto is recognized as heritage in some way.

Similarly, Ottawa and Mississauga clock in at 2.6 percent, while most cities come in sharply lower. Edmonton has only 168 designated and 960 inventoried (heritage potential) – a mere 0.28 percent of the 407,000 properties in the city. Looking south of the border, we see a much higher proportion of heritage recognition within their building stock: three percent in Tulsa, OK; 3.9 percent in New York City, NY; 5.2 percent in Boise, ID; and 6.1 percent in Tampa, FL.

As for accelerating designations, this perception doesn’t match the data either, as most Ontario municipalities average one or two heritage designations per year, while the bigger cities (Hamilton and Ottawa) see around five per year, a statistic in line with other Canadian cities like Winnipeg and Calgary.

Myth #2: Inflexible Conservation Practices are Holding Back Housing

There are numerous high-profile examples where heritage professionals, municipal staff, and heritage advisory committees have demonstrated remarkable flexibility in adapting heritage places to accommodate new residential uses and greater density.

In Halifax, creative solutions were found to accommodate new infill for a 1873 historic wooden cottage initially threatened with demolition. With the cottage positioned perpendicular to the

street, making infill difficult, the developer, city, and heritage representatives compromised by lifting the heritage building, pivoting it 90 degrees, and placing it on a new foundation facing the street. This relocation work freed up space on the lot to add a three-storey structure with eight residential units.

This same spirit of pragmatism is evident in other Canadian municipalities.

In Toronto, the rear warehouse section of a heritage building was removed in order to accommodate a 15-storey affordable housing project for Indigenous seniors led by the Mississauga Cree First Nation.

In a residential neighbourhood in downtown Ottawa, substantial density will be added to the site occupied by the heritage designated Andrew Fleck House by enfolding the original house with a nine-storey, L-shaped mid-rise. Heritage Ottawa, the local heritage advocacy non-governmental organization, praised the project as a good example of increasing density while retaining heritage resources.

Myth #3: Conservation is About Grand Homes, Not Affordable Housing

Heritage conservation gained momentum in Canada in the 1960s as a social movement concerned with the displacement of communities and loss of traditional buildings in the era of urban renewal. The heritage field continues to evolve and adapt, expanding the range and diversity of places it considers beyond architecturally exceptional buildings and recognizing intangible as well as physical values.

In Toronto’s historic Cabbagetown neighbourhood, the existing row houses at 508 Parliament Street are being converted into 44 multi-tenant units with shared kitchen space. The project will restore heritage features and upgrade the landscaped yards for the tenants.

In Vancouver, the largest Public Private Partnership (P3) social housing project in North America – the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Renewal Initiative project by BC Housing – involved the rehabilitation of 13 heritage buildings from the early 1900s in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Completed in 2017, the project’s primary goal was to provide safe, functional, and habitable

accommodations for residents of the community and ensure they weren't displaced. BC Housing simultaneously achieved these social goals by improving all major building systems as well as carefully conserving the heritage features of the 13 buildings during rehabilitation.

The historic Morris House in Halifax – built in 1764 and the city's oldest wooden house – was at risk of demolition, but it was reimagined and reborn with an exciting new vocation. The Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia purchased the rundown building for \$1 and worked with the Ecology Action Centre and other social agency groups to relocate the structure several kilometres away and turn it into a home for at-risk youth.

Golden Opportunity to Fight Climate Change and Create Housing

Measures like Bill 23 in Ontario are predicated on the notion of more housing through new construction – with its attendant carbon footprint, resource use, and waste. But housing creation shouldn't come at the expense of the environment – the two undertakings should be intertwined.

It is now broadly recognized by key international organizations like the World Green Building Council and Architecture 2030 that reusing and upgrading the performance of our existing buildings is one of the quickest ways to reach our climate action targets. Existing buildings – including heritage ones – represent embodied carbon (greenhouse gas emissions already expended) and precious natural resources and should be reused as long as possible.

The winners of the world-famous Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2021, French architects Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal – who have revived rather than razed many derelict mid-century housing complexes in Europe – are known for their motto: "Never demolish,

never remove or replace, always add, transform, and reuse."

The opportunity that older/heritage building reuse represents is huge. The construction and building operation sector is the world's largest single-source of energy use and emissions – 47 percent of the carbon footprint worldwide – and therefore offers potential for dramatic decarbonization returns. While current Canadian carbon mitigation efforts primarily focus on reducing emissions from building operations (27 percent of emissions), new building materials and new construction represents 20 percent of embodied emissions. Canada needs to add to and transform older/heritage buildings – for housing and other uses – rather than destroy them to create new ones.

This will require transformative change to the demolition-new construction dynamic that currently holds sway in the Canadian construction and real estate development industry. Municipalities will also need to change their practices as well. Zoning strongly influences the lifespans of older/heritage buildings, and particular zoning reforms would swing the pendulum toward adaptive reuse and away from needless demolition:

- correct permissive zoning that invites speculative demolition and replacement;
- do away with outdated parking minimums, setback requirements, and other measures that make adaptive use tough; and
- amend zoning constraints that prohibit alternative uses (e.g., residential) for older buildings and limit infill opportunities.

Municipalities, the development industry, and the heritage conservation sector need to work together to leverage older/heritage buildings as crucial players in Canada's housing and climate solutions. **MW**

CORRECTION

Canada's longest municipal strike ends with a new agreement – January 2023, p. 27.

In the January 2023 print edition, the article by Ibrahim Daair contained an error in the title. The correct title is "One of Canada's longest municipal strike ends with a new agreement."

Municipal World regrets any confusion caused as a result of this error.



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