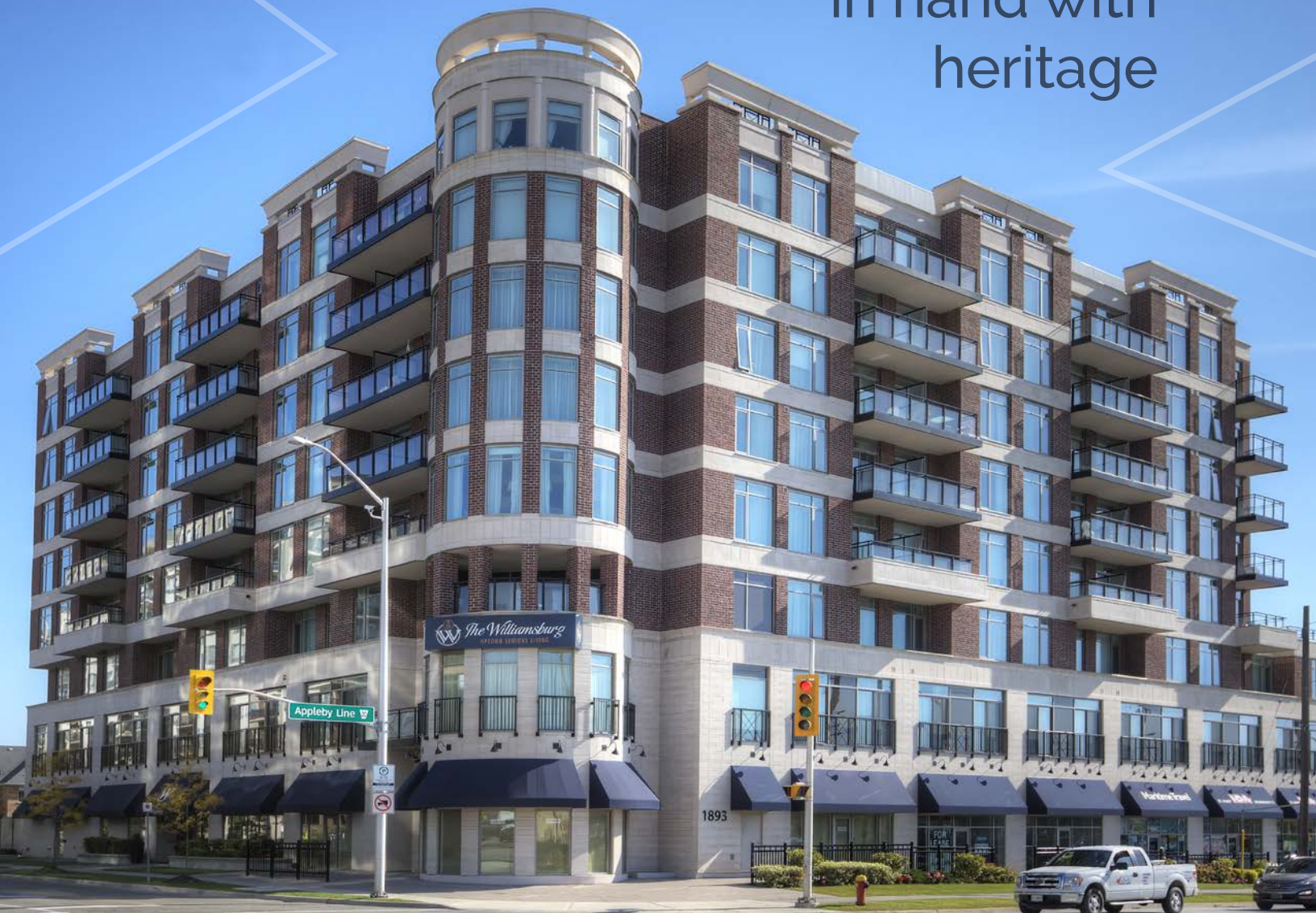


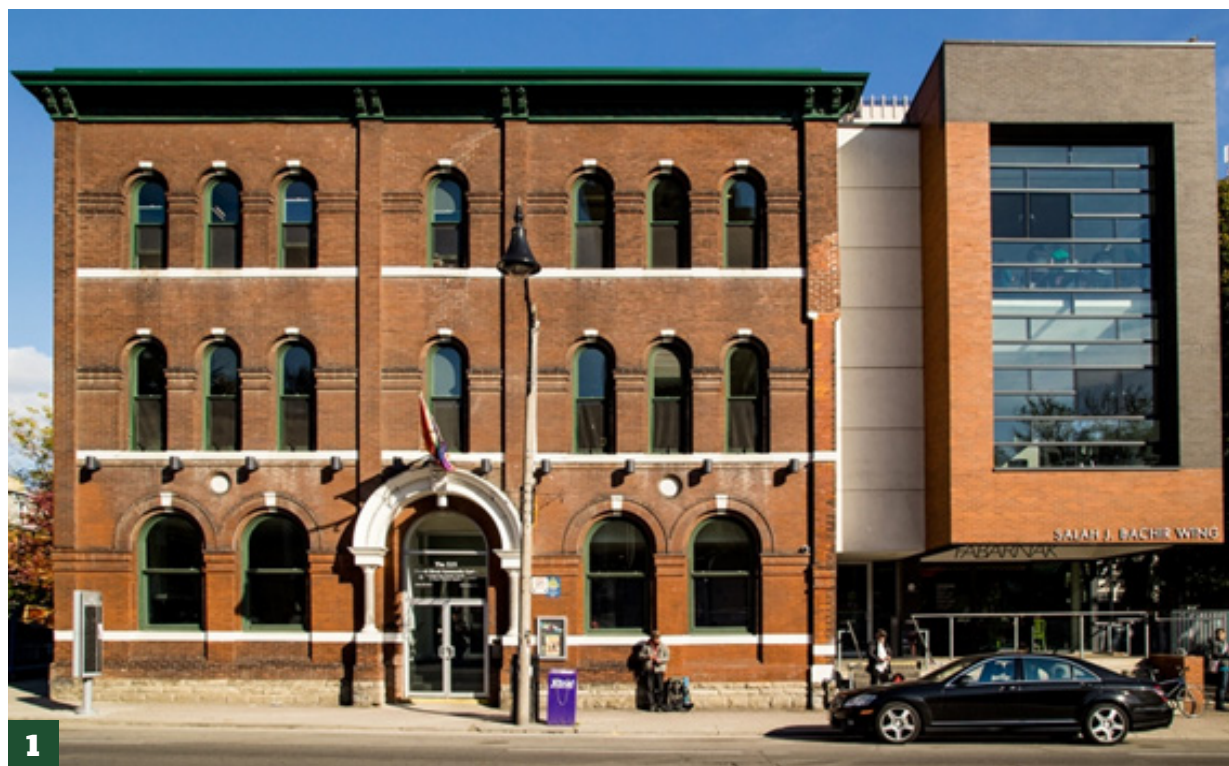


SPECIAL EDITION

HERITAGE TRANSITIONS

Building hand
in hand with
heritage





Building hand in hand with heritage

at the Borders of Heritage Districts, Integrating the New With the Old

1

In Toronto, the 1906-era Granite Club building was complemented with a 2004 addition by architect Kohn Shnier. The initial building itself, designed by Edwin R. Babington, was an addition to the original structure, which burned in 1913. The building continues to operate as a community centre.

Photo: Vic Pahwa via Architectural Conservancy Ontario, TOBuilt, Jan 2011

Ontario is growing steadily, and that leaves community planners with a challenge as new neighbourhoods and main streets begin to branch out from the heritage neighbourhoods that have long defined many municipalities.

As the province's population grows, the Greater Toronto Area's growth is steadily being driven to smaller communities further out from the Golden Horseshoe's epicentre. Municipalities like Shelburne, Milton, Bradford-West Gwillimbury, King City and Whitchurch-Stouffville were the beneficiaries of much of that

growth between 2011 and 2016, all experiencing population booms of more than 20 per cent.

As communities expand, however, new pressures are placed on the urban fabric. Planners are faced with the challenge of maintaining "small-town feel" or ensuring that development built up around existing heritage areas respects the look and feel of the community.

"Look around nature and the transition is always organic," says Anthony Wong, policy planner for the Town of Milton. The same should be true for heritage districts and surrounding urban zones, he says.

"The appearance might be different, but (transitions) are subtle and progressive, creating a pleasant treat in appearance and experience."

Making those transitions successful is a challenge many communities will face. Heritage consultancy ASI estimates that there are approximately 130 Heritage Conservation Districts in 40 communities across Ontario. These districts collectively cover more than 22,000 properties

"(Policy) choices related to materiality and fabric for additions can be powerful when introduced

in, and surrounding, these kinds of places," according to ASI contributors Kristina Martens, Rebecca Sciarra, Meredith Stewart and Laura Wickett. "If done sensitively, they can be seen to blend or ease points of transition, and can present opportunities to accommodate change."

Preserving a sense of place

The nature of heritage districts can vary widely, from neighbourhoods to main streets to entire villages and hamlets. But while their look and feel may be different from community to community, they share, according to the ASI team, "a sense of entry and exit and creation of unique 'places.'"

These assets should be treated sensitively, argues Milton policy and urban design planner Hugo Rincon. "Every area, whether it is a border area or non-border area, is unique and should be treated according to its own contribution to the urban experience.

“They are important anchors, economic engines and treasured assets of communities.”

“Massing of buildings, building separation, setbacks or stepbacks or material treatments apply in every area. Border areas should be treated as transition areas, and development should be sympathetic and respectful of the unique features that define the adjacent heritage district and that are valued – and meant to be protected.”

Rincon, who is presently spearheading a design study of Milton's mature neighbourhoods, notes that architectural and urban design have important roles to play in policymaking when protecting these heritage areas. Whether for infill development or surrounding projects, policymakers have the tools to exercise input that can preserve the heritage features the community values.

“Urban design ensures a safe and attractive interface between the buildings and the public realm for the benefit and enjoyment of the public,” he said. “Architectural design considers how the building is perceived from the exterior and how the interior spaces take advantage of the interface – open spaces, views, connections. Compatibility and transition are important architectural considerations in the design of the interface.”

Finding that compatibility leaves designers with a question of generational architecture. How can planners ensure that modern design trends can mesh seamlessly and harmoniously with classic heritage architecture?

For the team at ASI, there's no contradiction: Traditional and contemporary architecture can coexist. The team believes heritage districts should not be “frozen in the past.” A successful modern design not only complements the surrounding heritage properties, it can add new history to the district without dominating it.

Successfully integrating a modern building in or near a heritage district means being conscientious of scale, massing and material. Without respecting the surrounding context, the new building can stand out like a sore thumb.

A vital aspect of that compatibility is materiality. As ASI notes, “contemporary construction may use modern brick as part of an infill project with the intent of ‘matching’ materials. However, often the objective is to find compatible solutions rather than matching.”

For instance, while adding modern brick to a 1920s bungalow clad in tapestry brick may seem logical, the effect is actually not good conservation. Modern brick is smooth, while tapestry brick is highly textured. The compatibility is not the same, and the effect becomes jarring.

Communities have had success around the world by building in ways which use contemporary materials to match traditional styles. For instance, in Riga, Latvia, a 2015 residential building built in a historic city square was constructed with textured brick patterning along the façade, evoking the texture and roof colours of neighbouring heritage structures.

“There are good examples of modern architecture used in the exterior and interior of historic buildings, which brings expression, technology and innovation,” Rincon says. “At the same time, building new structures that combine elements of traditional architecture can ensure a good fit in an area. The role of architecture in design is important as it is a subjective field and subject to interpretation.”



2

Projects such as River's Edge (top) and this red-brick residence building at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (bottom) demonstrate the effectiveness of brick, stone and block in combining modern architectural and development projects with traditional styles and sense of place.

Photo: MasonryWorx files

Timelessness and materiality

When it comes to exercising influence over how new builds integrate with heritage architecture, many planners have found their tool of choice: Urban Design Guidelines and similar policies.

“Many architectural and urban design guidelines can be found on how to integrate new infill construction within heritage districts,” says Wong. “Most address the need to understand the context in order to come up with the appropriate design solution that is sympathetic to the historical context. The same sensitivity to the fit, scale, rhythm, form, materials and colour, just to name a few that are important.”

A key part of these policies is materiality – policies addressing the exterior materials of new buildings. More than anything, exterior building materials define the character of a structure.

Many Ontario communities are built around traditional red-brick downtowns. The bulk of Ontario's surviving heritage buildings are built with masonry. The material's timelessness is well-



3

The building at left is a 2015 residential building facing on a historic town square in Riga, Latvia. The building, designed by Jaunromans un Abele, features brickwork on the facade which evokes the patterned rooftop of the adjacent historic church.

Photo: Ansis Starks

recognized, including by the Milton team. "We only need to look at ancient buildings and we quickly realize that the rubble of the ruins are mostly masonry," says Wong.

Wong notes that if designers value timelessness, masonry is a proven and tested material, one found in many historic buildings. Brick and stone can be used in a range of ways to reflect a designer's style. As such, if masonry materials are prevalent in a heritage district, they should carry through to the present.

"It is the most obvious material that can help in the transitional strategy," Wong notes.

ASI notes that many existing masonry heritage buildings convey warmth and endurance, and utilizing brick and stone for new builds can help to carry those qualities forward.

"On a new building façade, masonry units can create a more fine-grained composition than other contemporary materials such as metal and glass. Masonry can also convey a sense of craft that integrates a new building into a heritage district," ASI notes. As well, masonry can "soften" the impact of a new building, ensuring that more contemporary designs don't overpower the traditional ones.

"In particular, in urban settings where buildings may have little to no separation or set-back, material choices can become even more integral to the design as other factors like shape, form or landscaping are constrained."

Time-tested tools: planners' powers

Through existing planning policy, Ontario communities have the power to set strong guidelines for material standards not only in heritage districts, but in areas along their borders.

Heritage policies in Ontario can be extensive. But the Planning Act empowers communities to exercise power over the exterior design of most buildings in a community, provided appropriate language exists within the Official Plan.

Powers added to the Planning Act in 2006, retained by the Ford Government in 2020, invest local planners with authority to influence exterior design through the Site Plan Control process. By identifying specific regions of a community as areas where drawings may be required – and by extending this requirement to types of buildings beyond the Planning Act's default – planners can ensure their input is heard for virtually any building.

For infill areas, such policies are vital, and even more so when dealing with the sensitivities of building near or around heritage properties. This extends not only to materiality, but to densities. Heritage districts themselves may have specific density objectives, but border areas may be desirable for mid-rise and high-rise infill projects.

Wong notes that Urban Design tools give planners the power to regulate this as well. Planners can implement policies concerning pedestrian-scale podiums, angular planes, setbacks, design of the public realm, shadow, wind impact and other factors.

Rincon adds, "Engagement and consultation on the development application may contribute to the design as public concerns and input can ensure the ultimate density, massing and architecture attributes of the new development are established in cooperation (with the community).

Strong policies can even help to revitalize a border area where the quality of architecture is derelict, weak or in decline. "This could be an opportunity for the designer and enhance economic revitalization," says Wong. "The only setback is the will and the desire to turn derelict into an economic opportunity sensitive to its context."

The tools exist to make these policies work. For Wong, will and vision are key to putting them to use.

"Have a clear vision, listen to the community and adopt time-tested formulas that already exist," Wong says.

"One need only to ask what the most memorable and exciting places (citizens) like to visit when traveling to arrive at the most desired place when making principles they should include in their guidelines – all carefully chosen to reflect the appropriate context."



“Have a clear vision, listen to the community and adopt time-tested formulas that already exist.”

- ANTHONY WONG

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BLOCK
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