

THE ONCE AND FUTURE CITY

CONFLICT OVER HERITAGE DESIGNATION IN WINNIPEG'S CRESCENTWOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD



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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

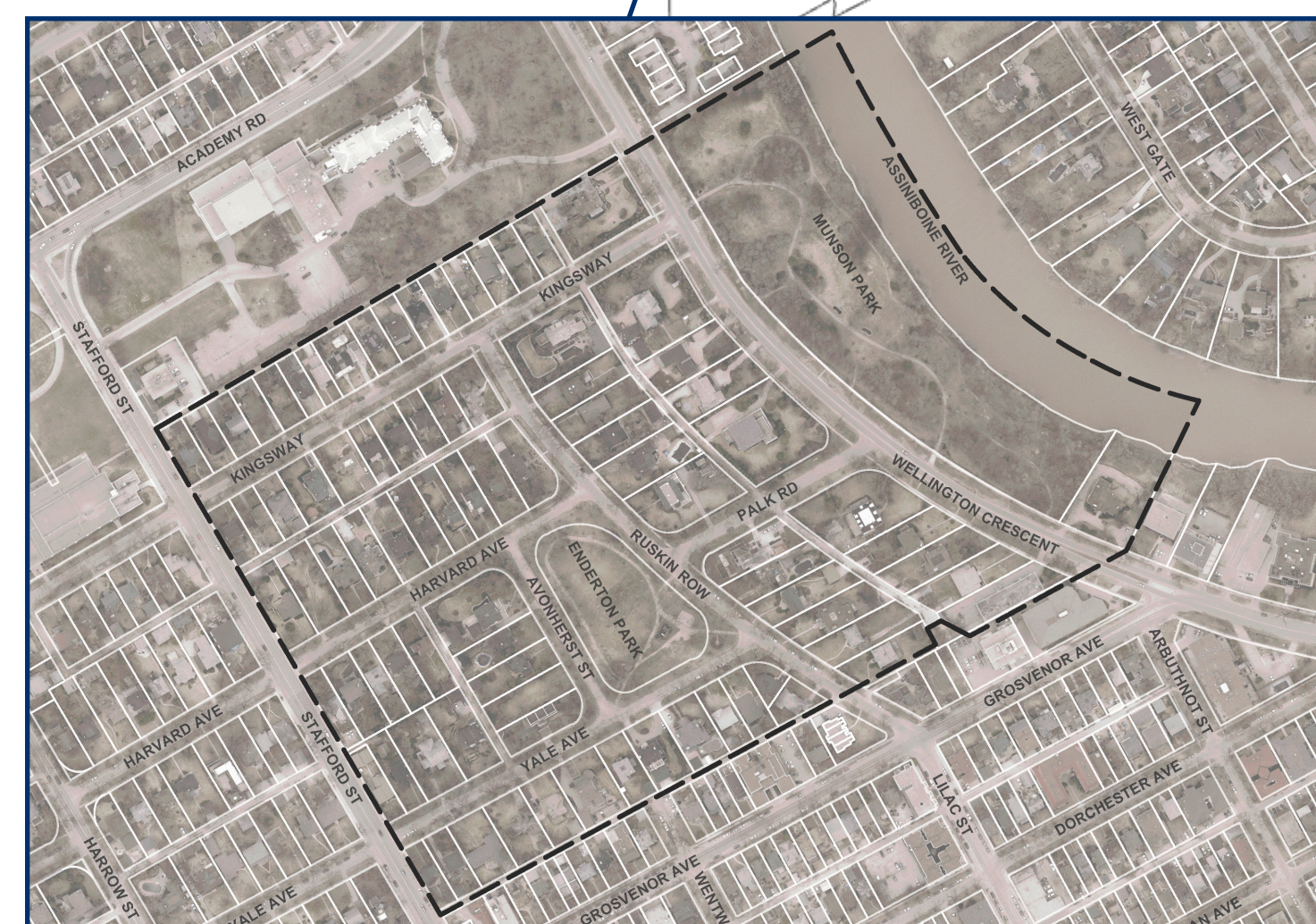
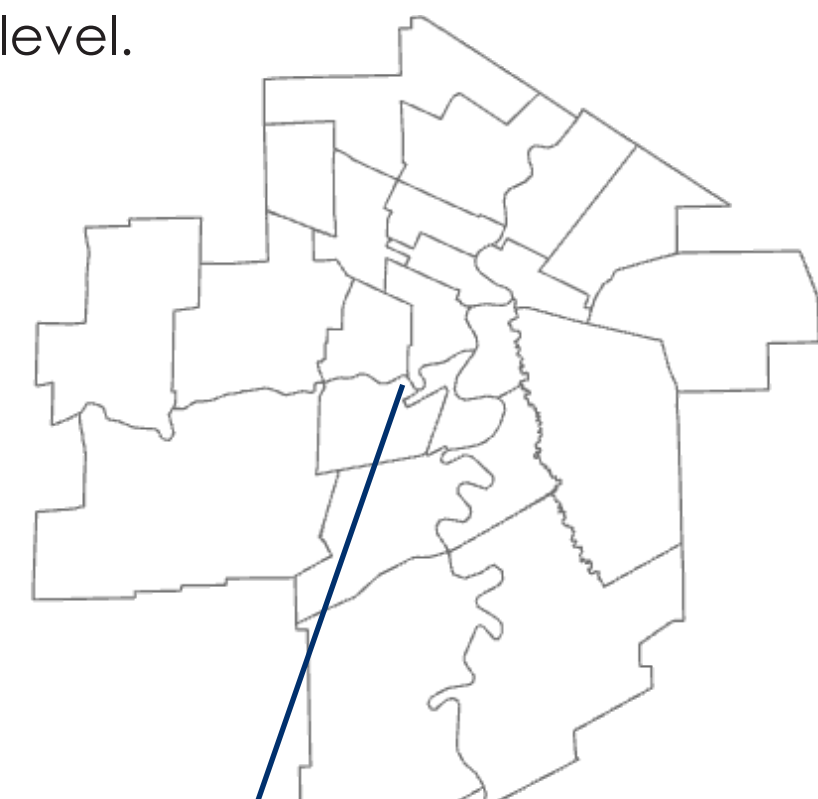
In 2019, Winnipeg's Crescentwood neighbourhood, a wealthy area with a high concentration of century-old homes, was nominated as a possible heritage conservation district (HCD). HCD designation gives heritage protection to areas comprised of multiple properties, and identifies a set of character-defining elements which are unique to the district.

The Gordon House, located at 514 Wellington Crescent, was a historic Crescentwood mansion slated for demolition, despite resistance from local residents and heritage advocates. A land developer planned to erect a condominium complex on the empty lot. The nomination of the Crescentwood HCD prevented the home from being torn down, just hours before demolition was meant to begin. This outraged the property owner, who appealed the nomination, and ratcheting up tensions in the community. 514 Wellington became a flashpoint issue, and the controversy surrounding its future came to symbolize the wider debate concerning the district as a whole.

This research provides a case study of what happens when two planning values, heritage conservation and infill development, are in conflict with one another, and how these tensions manifest themselves at the neighbourhood level.

Map and location of the proposed Crescentwood HCD.

Source: City of Winnipeg and HTFC Planning + Design



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How have members of the public responded to the nomination/designation of Winnipeg's Crescentwood neighbourhood as a Heritage Conservation District?
2. What are the motivating factors which contributed to the public response to the designation of the Crescentwood HCD?
3. What are best practices for navigating public controversy when designating future HCDs?

METHODS



Media Scan

Scan of material published by local news organizations to establish a baseline understanding of how the HCD designation process evolved



Document and Discourse Analysis

Statements and submissions made at a City of Winnipeg appeal hearing were then analyzed to determine how the public initially reacted to the proposed district



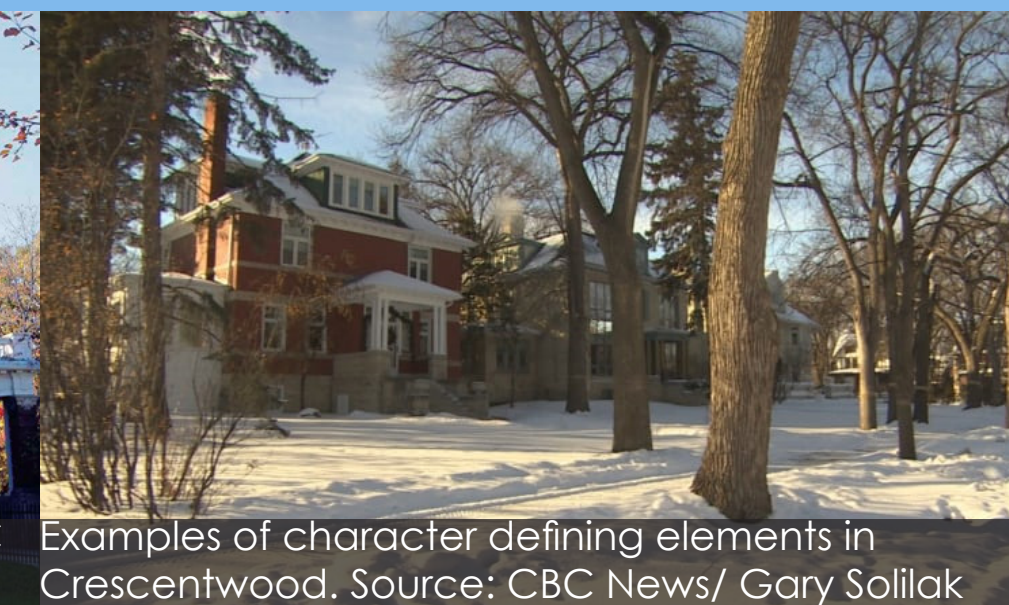
Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Crescentwood homeowners and three planning professionals with experience in heritage conservation.

Icon source: Flaticon.com



The Gordon House at 514 Wellington. Source: CBC News/Boris Minkevich



Examples of character-defining elements in Crescentwood. Source: CBC News/Gary Solilak



An infill development next to a Crescentwood heritage home. Source: CBC News/Holly Caruk

Key Findings

- 1. The most vocal members of the public supported the HCD.** Approximately 90% of appeal hearing submissions reviewed were in support of the HCD. Although this might indicate high levels of support for the district, these findings may also reflect the coordinated grass-roots campaign to preserve Crescentwood's heritage homes.
- 2. Preservation of character-defining elements, including 514 Wellington, and infill controls were top priority.** Many members of the public supported the HCD to prevent the demolition of 514 Wellington, or to protect character-defining elements across the neighbourhood. Some submissions identified the control or prevention of infill development their main objective. The fostering of civic pride and economic development were also sometimes cited as desired outcomes.
- 3. Previous conservation experiences empowered local residents.** Residents discussed how the neighbourhood has previously come together to restore Peanut Park, a historic greenspace within the HCD boundary. Working with the City and other stakeholders to execute this project created strong bond between neighbours, and empowered residents to pursue their vision for Crescentwood.
- 4. Opponents of the HCD were most concerned about property rights and values.** Many critics of the HCD complained that heritage protections infringe on the property rights of homeowners. Economic knock-on effects, such as a depreciation of property values, and increased difficulty in selling home, were also cited frequently as potential downsides of the designation. Some opponents also painted heritage advocates as a "vocal minority".
- 5. Heritage is about identity.** Several public submissions connected Crescentwood's built heritage to wider identity narratives, viewing historic buildings as the embodiment of community values, a legacy to be left for future generations, or a connection to romanticized ideals about Winnipeg's past. People's deep connections to heritage make it an emotionally-charged issue.
- 6. Neither side trusted the City of Winnipeg.** Both supporters and critics of the HCD did not believe the City was capable of managing the HCD process responsibly, but for different reasons. This mistrust fueled tensions between opposing viewpoints, as members of the public felt they had to step up in the absence of a strong approach from municipal leaders.
- 7. Communication is key.** Using evidence to clearly communicate the realities of heritage conservation can help planners manage controversial projects. Showing public why compromising with broader planning policy objectives in necessary, and how heritage areas benefit the entire city or municipality, can help planners remain in control of the narratives surrounding a particular project.
- 8. Keep the focus on heritage values.** NIMBYism veiled as legitimate heritage concerns is a threat to conservation exercises. Planning professionals can counteract NIMBYism by identifying heritage value shared by all stakeholders early, and consistently referring back to these values. When the focus is kept on heritage, controversy can actually be helpful in clearly articulating what a community's heritage values might be.

CONCLUSION

The Crescentwood HCD represented a missed opportunity for discourses surrounding the competing planning values of heritage conservation and infill development to move forward productively. Instead, the process was hindered by conflict and distraction. When managed properly, controversy can be useful, but in the case of Crescentwood, an overly antagonistic atmosphere and the intertwining of NIMBYism with heritage concerns meant that productive discussion about planning priorities and values was not possible.