

Losing Saskatoon's Tangible History: When Heritage Preservation Falls Short

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Image Source: <http://lawydrummer.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/kgm-lydias-saskatoon-july-23-2013.jpg>



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Abstract

It is widely accepted that there is value in the preservation of a city's historic buildings, structures, and monuments. Historic preservation has the potential to lead to greater returns, not only economically, environmentally, and socially, but also in terms of the heritage and cultural context of a city. In Saskatoon, SK, is the case in which policy and practice can fail to protect historic elements within the city.

There is a clear relationship between policy and municipal action. Despite policy mechanisms being in place, there is a disconnect between their goals and their implementation. Although policy frameworks and guiding documents specific to heritage preservation exist, Saskatoon continues to lose historic buildings and structures. The recent demolition of the 103-year-old Farnam Block is an example of this. As grassroots support grows and policies improve, the question remains: why does the disconnect between process and decision making persist? This paper aims to shed light on the shortcomings of policy and process, as well as the role of municipal officials in terms of their influence on heritage designations.

Introduction

Heritage preservation is broadly defined as the employment of policy as a “mechanism to protect local cultural landmarks, as well as promote local development,” (Noonan, 2010, p. 2). Historic preservation has the potential to lead to greater returns, not only economically, environmentally, and socially, but also in terms of the historic and cultural context of a city. In North America, it is widely accepted that the responsibility of heritage preservation is mainly that of municipal governments – this institutionalization of preservation began during the 1960s and 1970s as a “strategy to counter the devastating effects of modern development,” (Angel, 1998, pp. 2 – 3).

In 2007 the Provincial government outlined the “the protection and conservation of culture and heritage resources” as one of fourteen Statements of Provincial Interest (Moore, 2012, pp. 14 – 15). In Saskatoon, the *Official Community Plan* (2015) guides municipal policy making, including policies concerning heritage. According to Moore (2012), “the focus in the OCP is more on providing information regarding heritage properties than on actively conserving them,” (p. 21).

The City of Saskatoon *Heritage Plan* (2014) was updated for the first time since its inception in 1996 as result of a policy review process. In 2012, the review process began, with its findings published in the City of Saskatoon *Heritage Policy and Program Review* (2012). This document reviewed the dated preservation policies from 1996, and suggested new strategies that the

City could implement to strengthen the preservation of historic properties. Although best-practices are outlined within the new heritage plan, the implementation of said best-practices in Saskatoon has become an example of when policy and practice can fail. Thus, there is cause for concern regarding the current state of heritage preservation in the city. There is a clear relationship between policy and

concerning Broadway Avenue and the surrounding neighbourhood of Nutana broadly address heritage preservation goals, such as the *Nutana Local Area Plan* (2001) and the *Broadway 360 Development Plan* (2009).

Although policy documents specific to heritage preservation exist, Saskatoon continues to lose historic buildings and structures. Ageing buildings are



Image Source: City of Saskatoon Broadway 360 Development Plan (2009), p. 20)

municipal action, but despite policy mechanisms being in place, there is a disconnect between their goals and their implementation.

Background

Broadway Avenue’s Heritage Core has been identified as the focus of this case-in-point, as it is an example of the wider issues facing heritage preservation in the city. Multiple municipal planning documents

demolished not only to make way for new development, but also as a means to save property owners from paying property taxes on otherwise vacant buildings that do not produce a source of revenue. For example, in 1912 the Farnam Block was built in what is currently the heart of Broadway’s Heritage Core. The building was home to a mix of commercial and residential uses over its 103-year lifespan, with a popular bar being its last use. The

building was closed to the public in 2013 as ownership of the property changed and as the overall condition of the building had deteriorated. It was demolished in February of 2015, despite public outcry, and now sits empty as an unpaved parking lot.

Because the Farnam Block was not formally designated as a Municipal Heritage property, little could be done to stop the building from being torn down once the demolition permit had been applied for. The *Broadway 360 Development Plan* (2009) identified the building as a “property of interest,” (p. 75), however, this was not a formal recognition of heritage status. The demolition made the National Trust for Canada’s Worst Heritage Building Losses in 2015. Sadly, and not surprisingly, this is not the first time that the demolition of historic buildings in Saskatoon have made this list.

Due to the property tax structure in Saskatoon, which assesses higher taxes on a building than an empty lot, it is sometimes more affordable to tear down an ageing building than it is to retain and or maintain it (Raine, 2015), particularly if it is empty and not producing an income. Such appears to have been the case with the Farnam Block.

There are many other examples in Saskatoon of the loss of historic properties and the prioritization of new development. For example, the Gathercole Building, built in 1931, was demolished in 2004. More recently, the demolition of the Victoria Bridge, Saskatoon’s first bridge, built in 1907. The loss of this historic bridge, much like the Gathercole Building, was

subject to much controversy and public protest. Public consultations were held for both of these sites, a formality the Farnam Block was not afforded due to its lack of official heritage status.

The demolition of the Farnam Block came less than one year after the newly updated *Heritage Plan* (2014) was adopted by City Council. Identifying and registering heritage properties is a slow process, and the trend of favouring new development over preservation endures. Thus, the question remains ‘why does this disconnect between process and decision making persist?’

Heritage Preservation Process

In Saskatchewan, the *Heritage Property Act* (1980) is a legislative document that grants municipalities administrative control over heritage preservation, in terms of assigning formal heritage designations, and appointing an advisory committee – known as the Municipal Heritage Advisory Committee (MHAC). This policy document outlines the role of the municipality, and their rights concerning designation of heritage status, appeals, demolition, easements, etc. Additionally, the Act gives the municipality the authority to unilaterally grant heritage status to privately owned buildings, stating that it is the responsibility of the municipality to notify property owners of the formal decision making process. Ultimately, the decision to designate is one made by City Council.

The role of the MHAC is limited to advising City Council regarding issues of heritage preservation in

Saskatoon. However, in response to years of poor heritage preservation, the MHAC created an updated and comprehensive list, called the Register of Historic Places, of 192 buildings, structures, and monuments in order to help more properties gain formal designation. The new list outlines three status categories defined below:



Image Source: Saskatoon Public Library Local History

- Designated – a property that is formally protected;
- Holding By-law – a property of interest in which a demolition permit prompts a review of whether the property should be advanced to ‘designated’ status; and
- Undesignated – a property of interest.

The benefit to more buildings being recognized by this list, and ultimately receiving formal heritage status, is that they are not likely to be demolished in the future (Trembath, 2015). Additionally, the review process, as prompted by a demolition permit application, may result in more properties being upgraded from the Holding By-law to formal heritage designation. However, receiving the status of designated heritage property remains slow due to an outdated heritage evaluation criterion that is based on a numerical scoring system

rather than a “value-based criteria based on a more thematic framework approach,” (Donald Luxton and Associates Inc., 2012, p. 23).

Not only is the heritage evaluation process slow and cumbersome, there are other challenges in terms of the incentivizing property owners to seek heritage designation. Criticisms of the incentives offered by the City are that they are “minimal, ineffective, ... [and] insufficient to achieve good conservation outcomes,” (Donald Luxton and Associates Inc., 2012, p. 26).

The Heritage Plan

The recently updated *Heritage Plan* (2014) outlines goals for the future of heritage preservation in Saskatoon, along with a set of specific policies to achieve these goals. Additionally, the plan “describes the City’s long-term approach to support the preservation of Saskatoon’s historic resources by linking the updated civic heritage policy with implementation actions,” (City of Saskatoon, 2014, p. 8). The goals of the heritage plan, as well as the action items, were recommended

as part of a “renewed heritage program” (Donald Luxton & Associates, 2012, p. 28) stemming from the heritage plan review in 2012. Linking policy directly with actions outcomes, such as “evaluat[ing] the ability for the [MHAC] to have an initiating role in bringing issues forward to Council,” (City of Saskatoon, 2014, p. 18) or “undertak[ing] a review of a range of potential new heritage incentives,” (City of Saskatoon, 2014, p. 22) attempt to repair the disconnect between goals and implementation.

Broader Policy Goals

A review of the planning documents relating to Broadway Avenue and the neighbourhood of Nutana revealed that while there was a general consensus for the need to preserve and protect historic properties, the means to achieve this are generally vague. The *Nutana Local Area Plan* (2001) states that the “local built environment is of significant heritage value and its protection is a local priority,” (p. 29). The plan offers some future directions in terms of preserving the architectural heritage of the neighbourhood,

suggesting the adoption of “architectural design guidelines within an architectural control district.” (City of Saskatoon, 2001, p. 18).

The *Nutana Local Area Plan* (2001) feeds into the *Broadway 360 Development Plan* (2009). This development plan states that it “takes over where the Nutana Local Area Plan left off by providing a necessary layer of detail and guidance for the Broadway commercial district and its relationship to the adjacent residential neighbourhoods,” (City of Saskatoon, 2009, p. 3). Of key importance in this statement is the use of the word ‘guidance’ – the plan is not municipally mandated, meaning that development guidelines are strongly suggested, but not required. There are specific heritage design guidelines outlined in the plan, however, there is no promise that they will be upheld as future development occurs along Broadway or throughout Nutana.

Lessons Learned

It has been nearly two years since the City of Saskatoon *Heritage Plan* (2014)



Image Source: http://saskatoon.ctvnews.ca/polopoly_fs/1.2275837.14261317531/httpImage/image.jpg_gen/derivatives/landscape_960/image.jpg

was passed by City Council. In that time, a significant piece of Saskatoon's history was lost. Despite there being a new plan, with updated policies and action items for implementation, the Farnam Block was demolished. Although the property was recognized by the *Broadway 360 Development Plan* (2009), without formal designation there was little that could be done to preserve it. This is an example of how simply updating policy does not result in its intended outcomes.

The role of the MHAC, defined by the OCP, is to advise City Council on issues concerning heritage preservation in the city. However, Moore (2012), recommends that the role of the committee ought to be expanded. The initiative shown by the committee as per the establishment of the Register of Historic Places in 2015, suggests that their responsibilities could be expanded. As such, the *Heritage Plan* (2014) indicates as an action item that expanding the duties of the MHAC is something to be considered. Of course, redefining these duties would not be possible without an amendment to the OCP being passed.

It is evident that the process to formally designating historic properties with heritage status is lengthy and outdated. As it is currently organized, it is a challenge to save historic properties unless more of them receive formal designation. "Multiple planning best-practices now support the development of thematic frameworks as the basis of heritage planning," (Donald Luxton & Associates Inc., 2012, p. 23). The *Heritage Policy and Program Review* (2012) suggests that a more modern scheme for identifying

and designating historic sites would improve heritage preservation in the city. That being said, there is more to the designation process than a formal checklist. The choices made by owners of historic properties are equally, if not more, impactful. One of the key determining factors of whether or not property owners seek heritage designation is their access to municipal incentives. The existing incentives are, for the most part, inadequate and unrealistic. Thus, it can be more cost effective for historic property owners to pursue other development avenues. This is especially true if the incentives are not equivalent to the cost of maintenance, or are spread out over a lengthy period of time.

As the *Heritage Policy and Program Review* (2012) indicates, heritage preservation lacks a clearly defined definition across broader policy documents. The *Nutana Local Area Plan* (2001) and the *Broadway 360 Development Plan* (2009) are no exception to this observation. These plans mention the importance of preserving historic buildings in Saskatoon, but without a clear and consistent definition, it becomes difficult to guide heritage preservation in any subsequent documents.

Even though there is a lack of clear definitions, the *Heritage Property Act* (1980) provides municipalities with the authority to designate privately owned buildings. Despite this authority, few buildings receive status. Other city-owned buildings have been torn down as a result of City Council decisions, such as the Gathercole Building, which City Council chose to demolish as part of its River Landing

development project, to make the site more attractive to potential developers. The City is not leading example and failing to protect its historic structures. Perhaps this is the result of a reluctance to adapt to other, more complex, methods of heritage preservation by looking to other cities for precedence. Or perhaps the City wishes to avoid conflict with property owners over the contentious designation process. Moore (2012, p. 21 – 22) suggests that "the City's heritage policies and differences in interpretation and valuation of the policies" have been issues experienced in the past.

Conclusion

As per the *Heritage Policy and Program Review* (2012), action items for the successful implementation of heritage preservation were included, and expanded upon, in the updated *Heritage Plan* (2014). However, the practice of implementing policies that support heritage preservation remains unchanged in Saskatoon. It is unclear if any of the action items will be successfully implemented in the future.

The Farnam Block is only one example of the loss of historic buildings that Saskatoon frequently experiences. The building was demolished after heritage policies had been renewed, revealing that simply updating policies is not enough. Ultimately this demonstrates that not only are the broader policies of heritage preservation insufficient, but also that there is a reluctance to enforce them. As a result, the city may continue to lose its tangible history.

Resources

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Image Source: Saskatoon Public Library Local History Room