



PLANNING TO PROTECT THE PAST: Addressing Demolition by Neglect in Winnipeg

CASE-IN-POINT 2019

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ABSTRACT

Winnipeg is blessed with an abundance of heritage buildings, from Red River frame houses to modernist marvels. A repository of our past, many heritage buildings survived the clearances of urban renewal and went on to become protected by the city's *Heritage Buildings By-law* of the 1970s. But since then a new enemy of heritage buildings has emerged: demolition by neglect. The product of irresponsible owners, helped by weather and time, it is slowly

robbing Winnipeg of its history. None of Winnipeg's legislation intended to protect heritage buildings make mention of this silent assailant, yet the city reported 10% of Winnipeg's designated heritage buildings at risk of it in 2016. As current attempts to address the problem are failing, it is time for the city to change its approach from reactive to proactive. Knowledge and expertise could be powerful tools in the hands of heritage buildings owners, helping win the fight against neglect.

Figure 1 (top of page): The Chelsea Court Apartments (1914) at 440-442 Assiniboine Avenue in Winnipeg were demolished in 2008 (Kramer, *Memorable Manitobans: Peter Cornelius Samwell (1874-1951)*, 2015). A municipally designated heritage building, the apartments were a victim of demolition by neglect. As of 2019, the lot remains vacant. Retrieved from: <https://hiveminer.com/Tags/chelsea%2Cwinnipeg>.

BACKGROUND

During the 1960s and 1970s Winnipeg was gripped by urban renewal, when wrecking balls reigned supreme, leveling the past to make way for modernization. Despite its best intentions, to transform crumbling downtowns into shiny, towering central business districts and lure back residents who had moved to the suburbs, urban renewal did not often produce the desired results. People lost their homes, communities and sense of place, and were forced off the streets into enclosed walkway systems (Warkentin & Vachon, 2010, pp. 58-59). Winnipeg did not escape this fate, having lively neighbourhoods filled with historic buildings razed to the ground and replaced with what are now considered some of the "worst planning mistakes in the city's history" (Warkentin & Vachon, 2010, p. 59).



Figure 2: Central Park in Winnipeg as envisioned by the Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969 Downtown Development Plan (Section 10, Plate 26). Retrieved from <http://pcag.uwinnipeg.ca/Prairie-Perspectives/PP-Vol13/warkentin-vachon.pdf>.

The *Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969 Downtown Development Plan* was heralded as Winnipeg's blueprint to salvation, implementing the latest planning ideas to rebuild the aging city in the image of Toronto or Montreal (Warkentin & Vachon, 2010, pp. 58-59). Yet in less than two years, work on the plan came to a halt (Warkentin & Vachon, 2010, pp. 58, 65). Winnipeg had fallen into a deep economic recession, with interest rates climbing, investors fleeing and no public money to continue the plan (Warkentin & Vachon, 2010, p. 65). The city was left to crumble, with historic buildings being torn down and unsightly gravel parking lots being left in their wake (Cassidy, 2015).



Figure 3: The McIntyre Block, seen here in the 1970s, was located at 416 Main Street, just north of Winnipeg's famous intersection of Portage and Main. Built in 1898 as commercial office space, the building was demolished in 1979 and replaced with a gravel parking lot that remains virtually unchanged as of 2019 (Goldsborough, 2019b). Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uo_fm%3A2632037.

As the 1970s progressed, ideas about heritage conservation were changing, with historic districts finally being seen as valuable assets. But this change in attitude was slow to reach Winnipeg. It was the proposed demolition of two historic banks, 389 and 395 Main Street, to be replaced with surface parking, that was the catalyst for change. People took to the streets to protest their demolition, hoping the city's freshly drafted heritage by-law would be passed in time to protect them (Cassidy, 2015).



Figure 4: Citizens of Winnipeg protest the proposed demolition of the former Canadian Bank of Commerce and Bank of Hamilton on Mains Street in 1978. Their efforts helped start the heritage movement in the city. Retrieved from <http://heritagewinnipeg.blogspot.com/2018/07/heritage-winnipeg-forty-years-on-front.html>.

Winnipeg's first heritage by-law, the *Historical Buildings By-law 1474/77*, was passed on February 2, 1977. It established the Building Conservation List, for "the conservation and preservation of buildings of an architectural and historical interest in the City of Winnipeg" (City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, 1979, p. 3) but fell short on details, including criteria for placing buildings on the list. It was not until 1978 that an amendment to the by-law addressed these shortfalls (City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, 1979, p. 3). Amended, the by-law protected designated buildings from alteration or demolition without a Certificate of Suitability issued by the Committee on Environment. Owners of designated buildings then became eligible for grants (at council's discretion) to assist with conservation and penalties could be levied against those who disregarded the legislation (City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, 1979, p. 5).

The legislation was passed in time to save the two former banks on Main Street, which were both added to the City of Winnipeg's List of Historic Resources on November 7, 1979 (City of Winnipeg, 2019c). It would seem that Winnipeg's built heritage had a bright future, with significant buildings being protected for generations to come. But soon the wrecking balls were back in business as a new problem for Winnipeg's heritage buildings reared its ugly head: demolition by neglect (Newman & Saginor, 2014, p. 623).

Demolition by neglect is a phrase used by the international heritage community to describe designated heritage buildings which cannot be legally demolished having their maintenance deferred to the point that the buildings must be demolished in the name of public safety (Albinger, 2014, p. 14; Brazil, 2003, p. 1; Corbett Richardson, 2008, p. 5; Hildebrandt, 2012, p. 1; Miller, 2010, p. 1; Newman & Saginor, 2014, p. 623; Renz

Swyers, 2013, p. 1). Although demolition by neglect is generally associated with nefarious building owners wishing to circumvent a heritage designation to profit through demolition and redevelopment, there are other causes (Albinger, 2014, p. 1; Brazil, 2003, p. 1; Corbett Richardson, 2008, p. 5; Hildebrandt, 2012, p. 1; Martin, 2007, p. 3; Miller, 2010, p. 6; Muratore, 2013, p. 3; Newman & Saginor, 2014, p. 624; Renz Swyers, 2013, p. 1). A building owner may not be able to afford proper maintenance (Albinger, 2014, p. 15; Corbett Richardson, 2008, p. 6; Martin, 2007, p. 2; Muratore, 2013, pp. 3-4; Newman & Saginor, 2014, p. 624; Renz Swyers, 2013, p. 1) or may be physically or mentally absent, unaware of their building's ongoing decay (Albinger, 2014, pp. 15-16; Brazil, 2003, p. 7; Corbett Richardson, 2008, p. 6; Muratore, 2013, p. 4; Newman & Saginor, 2014, p. 624; Renz Swyers, 2013, p. 1).



Figure 5: Sir Sam Steele School (1921) in Winnipeg was a municipally designated heritage building demolished in 2012 (Kramer & Goldsboroug, 2017) because the private owner of the decommissioned school could not afford maintenance, resulting in serious neglect. (Skerritt, 2011). Retrieved from <https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/image-image.aspx?id=8220#i1>.

FACTS OF THE CASE

Legislation

The City of Winnipeg has a range of legislation that pertains to the conservation of heritage buildings. *OurWinnipeg*, (2011a) the city's 25 year plan, has a section on

heritage that lays out six directions including planning for conservation, celebrating heritage, providing leadership in conservation, conserving heritage in the downtown, improving the viability of the Exchange District and planning to include historic character in neighbourhoods (pp. 69-71).

Complete Communities (2011a) is a direction strategy publication designed to support *OurWinnipeg*, and simply reiterates the six directions laid out in *OurWinnipeg* (pp 133-135). The documents clearly recognize the value of heritage buildings and support the conservation and use of them, but there is no mention of demolition by neglect.

The latest iteration of the City of Winnipeg's *Historic Resources By-law No. 55/2014* (2014) was amended in 2016. It establishes how buildings are added to the List of Historical Resources, which takes into consideration the architectural or historical significance and economic viability of the building. No work can be done on a designated building without a heritage permit and demolition is not allowed. Heritage buildings can then only be removed from the list if "the resources is damaged or destroyed to the point where the resource no longer embodies heritage values sufficient to justify its continued inclusion of the List; or the resource poses a health of safety hazard" (City of Winnipeg, 2016b). The by-law also establishes a Commemorative List to encourage the conservation of significant heritage buildings, which are not afforded any legal protection from alteration or demolition.

Contravening the *Historic Resources By-law* can result in a fine of \$1000 to \$1 million for each day the building is in violation (City of Winnipeg, 2016b, p. 20). As of 2019, over 300 heritage buildings have been placed on the List of Historical Resources (City of Winnipeg, 2019c).



Figure 6: Knox United (Presbyterian) Church (1914-1918) (Goldsborough, 2019a) at 400 Edmonton Street was one of the most recent addition to the City of Winnipeg's List of Historical Resources on March 4, 2019 (City of Winnipeg, 2019c). Retrieved from <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/sites/knoxunitedwinnipeg.shtml>.

Two other by-laws that play a role in protecting heritage buildings are the *Neighbourhood Liveability By-law No. 1/2008* and the *Vacant Buildings By-law No. 79/2010*. The *Neighbourhood Livability By-law* (2018) "regulate[s] the maintenance of properties and other aspects of neighbourhood liveability in order to develop and maintain safe, orderly, viable and sustainable communities and to promote and maintain the health, safety and welfare of residents" (p. 1). The *Vacant Buildings By-law* (2017) "regulate[s] the condition of vacant buildings and to discourage the boarding of vacant buildings" (p. 1). Both by-laws should help ensure heritage buildings do not fall into a state of disrepair.

Financial Support

It is recognized that owning a designated heritage building can be more costly, as work done on the building must be historically sensitive. To help offset this burden, there are several means of financial support available to designated building owners.

The *Gail Parvin Hammerquist Fund – City-Wide Program By-law 9/2019* (City of Winnipeg, 2019a) sets aside 5% of the gross revenues of City of Winnipeg real estate sales to be handed out in matching grants of up to \$50,000 for approved capital projects on designated heritage buildings in Winnipeg (p. 3). From 2012 to 2017, an average of three heritage buildings per year received funding from this grant (City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, 2012, p. 6; 2013, p. 25; 2014, p. 30; 2015, p. 33; 2016, pp. 49 - 50; 2017, p. 50).



Figure 7: The Inglis Building (1908-1916) (Parks Canada, n.d.) at 291 Garry Street in Winnipeg received a grant from the Gail Parvin Hammerquist Fund in 2017 to restore its terra cotta facade (City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, 2017, p. 50). Retrieved from <http://heritagewinnipeg.blogspot.com/2018/10/petite-perfection-inglis-building.html>.

Winnipeg's *Heritage Conservation Grant Program By-law No. 63/2018* (City of Winnipeg, 2019b) is a pilot program that "offer[s] incremental tax grants to encourage the restoration and rehabilitation of vacant or underutilized heritage properties". Only available to designated buildings in Winnipeg but outside the S.H.E.D., it requires the owner to first spend at least \$10,000 on conservation. The program is set to close after five years or after three applications, whichever ever occurs first.

The City of Winnipeg also offered a *Heritage Conservation Tax Credit Program*, but only intended to "assist a limited number of strategic projects," (City of Winnipeg, 2019b) it is currently fully subscribed.

Additionally, the Province of Manitoba offers matching grants up to \$35,000 for approved projects on provincially or municipally designated heritage buildings. The average grant received from this program is \$8,000. (Province of Manitoba, 2016, p. 3).

OUTCOMES

Demolition by neglect has plighted heritage buildings for over 100 years, but it only started to garner attention around 1990. (Albinger, 2014, p. 1; Newman & Saginor, 2014, p. 623). It is now recognized as a pressing issue because heritage buildings are tangible history (Corbett Richardson, 2008, p. 7; Renz Swyers, 2013, p. 11), contribute to a community's sense of place (Martin, 2007, p. 2; Shipley & McKernan, 2001, p. 83), environmental sustainability (Corbett Richardson, 2008, p. 7; Gilderbloom, Hanka, & Ambrosius, 2009, pp. 92-96; Martin, 2007, p. 2; Newman & Saginor, 2014, p. 624) and economic vitality (Albinger, 2014, p. 8; Corbett Richardson, 2008, p. 7; Gilderbloom, Hanka, & Ambrosius, 2009, p. 99; Newman & Saginor, 2014, p. 624). The irreparable loss of these buildings goes far beyond bricks and mortar, negatively impacting communities for generations.

A 2016 report by the City of Winnipeg acknowledged that demolition by neglect is an "on-going concern" (City of Winnipeg, 2016a, p. 5) with approximately 30 heritage buildings being at risk (City of Winnipeg, 2016a, p. 6). The report suggested strengthening the *Vacant Buildings By-law* and *Neighbourhood Liveability By-law*, and allocating more human and financial resources to address the problem (City of Winnipeg, 2016a, pp. 5-6).

The suggested by-laws were amended in May 2016 (City of Winnipeg, 2016c), but anecdotal evidence from heritage advocates suggests demolition by neglect continues to plague the city. Most recently, the neglected Monte Cassino Court at 639 Portage Avenue is fighting a heritage designation as the owners would like to demolish the building and redevelop. The building is currently on the Nominated List of Historical Resources and cannot be demolished, but its condition continues to decline as the owners claim not to have the resources to maintain it (City of Winnipeg, 2019d; Neufeldt, 2019).

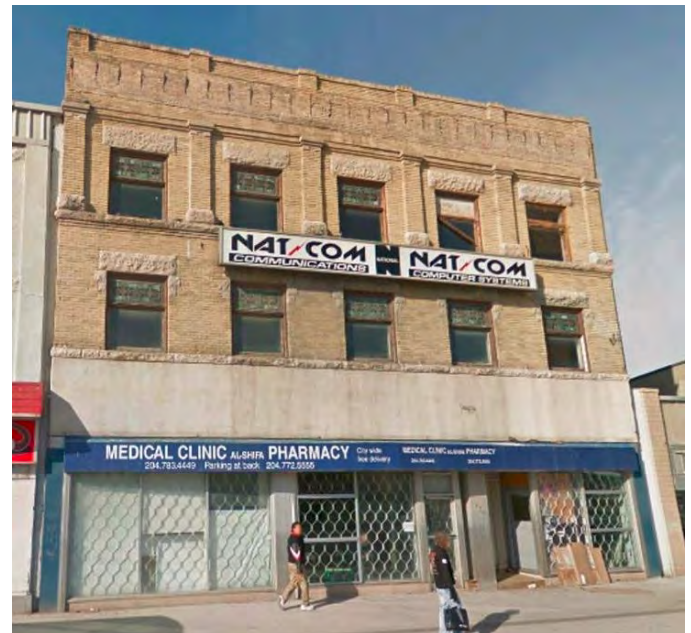


Figure 8: Unless action is taken in the near future, the Monte Cassino Court (1907, 1910) (City of Winnipeg, 2019d) at 639 Portage Avenue could be the city's next victim of demolition by neglect. Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/maps/@49.88858,-97.1586226,3a,75y,353.29h,101.56t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sx1xkPFrJDAC4DoDzajubng!2e0!7i13312!8i6656>.

LESSONS LEARNED

The City of Winnipeg's reactive approach to demolition by neglect is not succeeding. Hoping that all owners of designated heritage buildings will properly maintain them is wishful thinking that has been proven ineffective. Equally ineffective is only acting on cases of demolition by neglect when the problem is so severe that the public takes notice.

If Winnipeg is truly invested in conserving its heritage buildings, action needs to be taken the moment the building is placed on the Nominated List of Historical Resources, ensuring deferred maintenance does not escalate into neglect. Building owners need to be educated on heritage building maintenance, so they are aware of the expectations being placed on them. This type of information would also be useful in dissuading potential purchasers of heritage buildings that do not have the will or resources required to properly maintain the building.

Recommendations

Money currently used for heritage grants could be better spent on a team of heritage professionals, such as architects and engineers, ready to evaluate what regular maintenance and major projects would need to be undertaken. A heritage building could be evaluated when it was designated, and then on an annual basis. The knowledge gained could then be passed on to the owner so they could make informed decisions about their building. This would also be a means of inspecting the condition of the building on a regular basis so the city could take action before problems escalated.

Additionally, the city could provide owners with a list of conservation experts in the city, as finding people qualified to work on a heritage building can be challenging. By arming designated heritage building owners

with this knowledge, they would hopefully engage in better maintenance practices. It could also encourage those who are uninterested in such maintenance obligations to move on.



Figure 9: An artist's rendering of the fully renovated Fortune and McDonald Blocks (1882, 1883) at 226-234 Main Street, which are an excellent example of a successfully redeveloped designated heritage building that the previous owner applied to demolish after years of neglect (Bernhardt, 2018). Retrieved from <https://www.u7arc.com/projects/display/project/102/fortune-building>.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The 2019 report from Heritage Toronto makes it clear that conserving built heritage is good business for a city, supporting its economy and sustainability (Heritage Toronto, 2019). In 2015 alone, historic sites contributed \$145 million to the Canadian economy (Heritage Toronto, 2019, p. 14). It is also financially advantageous for owners to redevelop heritage buildings as opposed to the more costly option of demolition and redevelopment (Heritage Toronto, 2019, p. 17).

If Winnipeg is truly committed to preserving its past and building a brighter future, it should not hesitate to try new, innovative solutions for addressing demolition by neglect. Heritage buildings are a community asset that we all benefit from. Owning a designated one should be a badge of honour, that people strive for, not something to be loathed and subverted.

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