



Case-in-Point 2023

PHOTO CREDIT: MHS, 2006

514 WELLINGTON CRESCENT

Character, conservation, and sustainable development

Jonathan Klassen and Rina Ricci, Heritage Planner, City of Winnipeg

1.0 Abstract

Gordon House, an architecturally and historically significant house in Winnipeg's Crescentwood neighbourhood, was demolished in 2020 to make way for a multi-family condominium development. Vocal opposition by area residents to the proposed redevelopment, covered extensively by the media, evoked threats to the 'character' of the neighbourhood and contributed to the City of Winnipeg creating a Heritage Conservation District (HCD) plan designed

to protect the character-defining elements of Crescentwood-Enderton Park. This case-in-point considers the varying meanings of 'character' and the media's amplification of voices that evoke character to resist density and change associated with multi-family development. Through the case study of 514 Wellington Cres., the case-in-point draws the following lessons: the media play an underacknowledged role in Winnipeg's planning processes, elevating outspoken viewpoints that may subsequently inform the decisions of elected officials in opposition

to density and other strategic priorities of the City; HCD plans should emphasize the compatibility of character and heritage value with increased density and multi-family development to better support the City of Winnipeg's sustainable development goals and ambitious residential intensification targets; and the City's policy 'toolkit' should be expanded to include an adaptive re-use policy, incentivizing the protection of buildings like Gordon House even in the absence of HCD designation.

2.0 Context

Gordon House was built in 1909 to a design by notable local architect James Chisholm, for a wealthy industrialist. The house, built in the Classical Revival style, was one of the finest mansions on Wellington Crescent in Winnipeg's Crescentwood neighbourhood, prominently situated on a spacious corner lot. A grand entrance, classical ornamentation, and brick and stone construction throughout reflected the owner's prosperity and taste and the aspirations of the young city's business elite, as did the other new houses of similar grandeur that were its neighbours. Over the century that followed, influential residents at 514 Wellington Cres. included a newspaper publisher and, most recently, Senator Douglas Everett. While many of the large houses of similar age south of the Assiniboine River were demolished over time, Gordon House preserved many of its original elements and design, and the historical streetscape of which it was a part remained substantially intact (Peterson Projects, 2009).

In 2016, 514 Wellington Cres. was purchased by a group seeking to redevelop the site, replacing the existing house with a multi-family condominium building. Notwithstanding the structurally sound condition of the house, Jeff Thompson, spokesman for the developers, claimed that bringing Gordon House to acceptable building standards would be prohibitively

Character-Defining Element:

"Any element which contributes to the heritage values of an HCD... includ(ing) built features, landscaping or streetscaping."

- City of Winnipeg, 2022

expensive (McNeill, 2016b). Area residents immediately reacted against the proposed demolition of the house, as did advocacy group Heritage Winnipeg, and they determined to oppose Thompson's planned applications for rezoning and demolition in the fall.



Figure 1: Gordon House occupied the site at 514 Wellington Cres. until its demolition in 2020. (Manitoba Historical Society, 2020).

OurWinnipeg 2045, the City of Winnipeg's development plan, uses the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) localized for Winnipeg to inform its objectives and policies and requires that "all City policy implementation and enforcement tools must be aligned with" the UN's SDGs (City of Winnipeg, 2022c, p. 14). The plan identifies heritage conservation as a policy intent in support of three of these goals – environmental resilience, social equity, and city building – and directs the city to:

"identify, designate and conserve heritage"

“Character is:

‘the feel of a place, what it represents to you, the people(,) the buildings(,) the things that happen there are all part of the urban character.’”

- Dovey, 2016

resources and districts, including lands and artifacts significant to Indigenous Peoples, that illustrate the broad range of heritage values, as defined in Complete Communities, while supporting efforts toward carbon-neutrality, energy-efficiency, and embodied carbon reduction.” (City of Winnipeg, 2022c, p. 2.14)



Figure 2: Jeff Thompson’s proposed development at 514 Wellington Cres. (City of Winnipeg, 2023).

The City of Winnipeg approved the *Heritage Conservation Districts By-law* in 2018, providing a new tool to aid in the conservation of the city’s built heritage. Heritage Conservation Districts (HCDs) are intended to help protect a neighbourhood’s character and heritage values over the long term and ensure that new development is consistent with the HCD plan created by community residents with the City of Winnipeg. The plan relies on conservation policies and design guidelines to protect the neighbourhood’s character-defining elements and does not regulate land use or

density (City of Winnipeg, 2022b, p. 6).

3.0 Facts of the case

The news media has extensively covered Jeff Thompson’s efforts to redevelop 514 Wellington Cres., as well as the opposition of neighbourhood residents and others in response. Much of the coverage from outlets like the *Winnipeg Free Press* and *CBC News* has fulfilled the essential responsibility to inform audiences about the progress of an important local development project with implications for the city’s historical landscape and the activities of Council and citizens groups as they relate to the development. However, media coverage has also had a polarizing effect. News stories relating to the redevelopment of 514 Wellington Cres. have amplified voices that distract from the City of Winnipeg’s professed objectives in heritage conservation and obscure its motives for seeking to conserve historic buildings and neighbourhoods. In these ways, the media play meaningful roles in the planning process, sometimes to ambiguous ends.

In April 2019, Jeff Thompson began preparations to demolish Gordon House and proceed with redevelopment of the site, having had demolition and building permits approved by Council. The day before final demolition was to occur, however, the City’s Director of Planning, Property, and Development nominated the Crescentwood-Enderton Park neighbourhood as an HCD and the demolition permit was suspended (Kavanagh, 2019). Gordon House’s reprieve was only temporary. An amendment of the HCD by-law in 2020 removed protections for heritage buildings if they posed a safety risk. The house, now gutted and in a state of neglect, was demolished in November of that year (Durrani, 2020).

Neighbourhood residents expressed their opposition to the redevelopment of 514 Wellington Cres. in interactions with the

media and representations to Council. Initially, residents' opposition was ad hoc, but they soon organized as the *Save 514 Wellington* campaign. Many of their concerns related to increased density and perceived threats to the 'character' of the neighbourhood. "Neighbourhoods like Crescentwood are fragile communities," Nick Logan, an early spokesman for residents, told the *Free Press* in response to Thompson's initial redevelopment proposal. "When the outside shell of this community is broken with multi-family complexes, the small jewel of the historical grouping cannot survive" (McNeill, 2016a). Christine Skene, spokeswoman for the *Save 514 Wellington* campaign, expressed similar opinions at later stages in the redevelopment of the site, saying to the *Free Press* that "our first request would be for it to stay single family. But if that absolutely can't happen, then we would consider... a three or four unit condo" (Thorpe, 2019). Despite the most recent design proposal standing less than seven feet taller than Gordon House and being of comparable height to nearby buildings, Skene complained to the *CBC* that "it will dwarf the surrounding buildings. It changes the character of the neighbourhood. It sets a dangerous precedent" (City of Winnipeg, 2023; Pursaga, 2023).

John Orlikow, the local Councillor, has characterized the developers' intentions as "a slap in the face to the neighbourhood" (MacLean, 2022). Still, fellow Councillor Janice Lukes acknowledges the tension elected officials negotiate. "Sometimes it is difficult," she recently said to the *Free Press*. "You want to be responsive to them (the neighbourhood)... but you have to make decisions for the city at the standing committee level, not for my constituents" (Cash, 2022). Denser residential development is a strategic priority of the City. *Complete Communities 2.0*, the city-wide secondary plan guiding growth, development, and land use in Winnipeg, commits the City

"Neighbourhoods like Crescentwood are fragile communities. When the outside shell of this community is broken with multi-family complexes, the small jewel of the historical grouping cannot survive."

- Nick Logan, area resident (MacNeill, 2016a)

to ambitious residential intensification targets and directs it to increase the population of established neighbourhoods like Crescentwood (which has declined by nearly 30 percent over the past 50 years) contributing to their revitalization (City of Winnipeg, 2019, 2022a).

The *Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada* describe character-defining elements as "the materials, forms, location, spatial configurations, uses and cultural associations or meanings that contribute to the heritage value of a historic place" (Canada's Historic Places, 2010). On the other hand, Kim Dovey, the author of *Urban Design Thinking*, defines character in more subjective terms, identifying it as the "feel or atmosphere of a place" (2016, p. 120).

Planning policy and objectives, like those in Winnipeg's HCD plans, usually consider character strictly in terms of the physical features that embody a neighbourhood's heritage values, but residents may see them as cover for enforcing social norms. Efforts to conserve neighbourhood character can "be complicit with the production and protection of social privilege" and the retreat into a closed sense of community (Dovey, 2016, p. 121). In this context, according to theorist and planner Gil Meslin, character may superficially speak to aesthetic and architectural concerns while being a euphemism for exclusion (Bozickovic et al.,

The term 'neighbourhood character' is a euphemism for something ugly... On the surface, it speaks about architecture and aesthetic concerns, but its substance is about who gets to live where and who, especially today, gets shut out.

- Bozikovic, 2019

2019); in substance, character may be about who is able to live in neighbourhoods like Crescentwood-Enderton Park and who is shut out. Denser, multi-family development is particularly threatening in this context, not only for the change to the urban form it may cause, but also for the influx of unfamiliar



Figure 3: Boundaries of the Crescentwood-Enderton Park Heritage Conservation District (HCD) (City of Winnipeg, 2022)

people it brings; possibly transient people lacking commitment to the neighbourhood's character. As a result, character is often evoked in defense of areas of cities susceptible to transformational change (Dovey, 2016).

4.0 Outcomes

Over the year that followed the demolition of Gordon House, Jeff Thompson engaged with the neighbourhood and other stakeholders over the redevelopment of 514 Wellington

Cres. In 2022, Thompson received a zoning variance allowing a multi-family dwelling on the site, which was appealed by neighbourhood residents (MacLean, 2022). However, a subsequent modified variance application was approved after appeal in early 2023. As of April 2023, Thompson's proposed redevelopment, an eight-unit four-story condominium building, appears set to proceed (Pursaga, 2023), barring an appeal to the Manitoba Municipal Board.

The *Save 514 Wellington* campaign was already pursuing the designation of their neighbourhood as a Heritage Conservation District (HCD) before the demolition of Gordon House. Since then, it has committed to designation as the only effective means to "provide full protection" for the rest of Crescentwood-Enderton Park (Kavanagh, 2019). Following the neighbourhood's nomination as an HCD in 2019 and the preparation and acceptance of an HCD study, the Standing Policy Committee on Property & Development, Heritage, and Downtown Development instructed the Public Service to develop an HCD plan in consultation with the neighbourhood residents. The committee recommended the HCD designation for Crescentwood-Enderton Park in 2022 and, with it, the approval of the corresponding HCD Plan, which establishes policies and design guidelines for preserving the neighbourhood's character-defining elements and heritage values. The Crescentwood-Enderton Park neighbourhood was nominated as an HCD due to its significant heritage value with a concentration of architecturally significant early-20th-century houses in a garden-like setting. HCD designation seeks to preserve and commemorate a neighbourhood's architectural heritage while providing guidance for its future development. The proposed HCD by-law, which includes the HCD plan as a schedule, designates Crescentwood-Enderton Park as an HCD within boundaries defined by Stafford

Street, the lane between Grosvenor and Yale avenues, the Assiniboine River, and the property of St. Mary's Academy (see *Figure 3*), and provides protections for all properties within these boundaries. The heritage permit process provided with the proposed by-law regulates modifications, demolitions, and new development in the neighbourhood, in accordance with the HCD plan (City of Winnipeg, 2022d).

5.0 Lessons learned

This case-in-point suggests several lessons that may be drawn from the case study of 514 Wellington Cres. The demolition of Gordon House and opposition by neighbourhood residents to the multi-family redevelopment of the site represent an absence of appropriate policy tools; both to protect Winnipeg's architectural heritage and to enable intensified redevelopment that is sensitive to existing heritage values in established communities. Coverage by the media suggests that they play an under-acknowledged role in Winnipeg's planning processes, elevating outspoken viewpoints that may subsequently inform the decisions of elected officials in opposition to the City of Winnipeg's strategic priorities.

The media are meaningful actors in the planning process, informing and influencing the public on issues ranging from property development to municipal planning policy and possibly exerting indirect influence on the municipal government through the resulting concerns raised by constituents. Their role in informing a knowledgeable public is necessary and beneficial so long as it remains fair and appropriately balanced. The media's role becomes more ambiguous when it contributes to the polarization of opinion regarding planning issues and amplifies problematic viewpoints that associate a desire to maintain neighbourhood character with resistance to multi-family development. When news outlets fail to

clearly distinguish between 'character' as the materials, forms, etc. that contribute to heritage value (as in the HCD plan) and 'character' as an exclusionary term evoked in resistance to denser neighbourhoods (as sometimes used by neighbourhood residents), they potentially undermine the City's intentions and objectives. Media may negatively influence the planning process if their audiences then relay fears about loss of character to elected officials, potentially altering Councillors' attitudes towards intensified development.

The *Crescentwood-Enderton Park Heritage Conservation District (HCD) Plan* presents a neutral and objective definition of character. This definition, however, does not address the word's varied understandings and implications in current planning discourse. Doing so would help clarify the plan's intentions and signify openness to neighbourhood change (e.g., greater density, multi-family conversion) that respects character-defining features and heritage values. The HCD plan does not regulate land use or density and it acknowledges the possibility that Crescentwood-Enderton Park may accommodate multi-family development, as permitted by the city's *Small Scale and Low-Rise Residential Development Guidelines for Mature Communities*. However, the plan may be perceived as tacitly resistant to greater density or changes in land use with its stated objective "to encourage the establishment of land uses and associated built forms that individually would be in keeping with the district and cumulatively would not have detrimental impacts on the district's character" (City of Winnipeg, 2022b, p. 24), especially considering the established tendency of neighbourhood residents to evoke 'character' in opposition to multi-family uses. In light of the City's residential intensification targets articulated in *OurWinnipeg 2045* and *Complete Communities 2.0*, HCD plans should emphasize the compatibility of character and

heritage value with increased density and multi-family development. Doing so would support the City's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of improved social equity and environmental resilience, as well as efforts toward carbon neutrality and energy-efficiency, which depend on more efficient land use (City of Winnipeg, 2022c, 2022a).

In *Complete Communities 2.0*, the City encourages the adaptive re-use of existing buildings "where possible and where sensitive to neighbourhood context... to reduce waste and energy use associated with demolition" (City of Winnipeg, 2022a, p. 43). The adaptive re-use of heritage buildings is also promoted by the HCD plan for Crescentwood-Enderton Park, which supports "the ongoing use and adaptive reuse of existing building stock and infrastructure as a means to achieve broader civic goals of economic development, sustainability, and neighbourhood planning" (City of Winnipeg, 2022b). The plan's requirement of heritage permits for redevelopment within the district provides a robust incentive for building re-use and a barrier to less sustainable redevelopment, including demolition. In the absence of HCD designation, however, expanding the City's policy 'toolkit' with an adaptive re-use policy would incentivize the protection of structurally sound buildings capable of rehabilitation. If it had existed when Thompson was seeking a permit to demolish 514 Wellington Cres., an adaptive re-use by-law might have encouraged him to pursue a development alternative that retained Gordon House, or at least prevented demolition from proceeding. The City should adopt an adaptive re-use by-law to more actively integrate considerations of environmental resilience into redevelopment, including in neighbourhoods not protected by an HCD plan. Such a by-law could promote building re-uses that increase density, supporting *Complete Communities 2.0*'s residential infill targets and *OurWinnipeg 2045* SDG of environmental resiliency,

seeking carbon neutrality through embodied carbon reduction and improved energy efficiency (City of Winnipeg, 2022c, 2022a).

References

- Bozиков, A. (2019, June 14). The term 'neighbourhood character' is a euphemism for something ugly. *The Globe and Mail*. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-term-neighbourhood-character-is-a-euphemism-for-something-ugly/>
- Bozиков, A., Case, C., Lorinc, J., & Vaughan, A. (2019). *House Divided: How the Missing Middle Will Solve Toronto's Housing Crisis*. Coach House Books. <https://web-s-ebSCOhost-com.uml.idm.oclc.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=37176194-20ab-4d75-89e3-34d551e7bf00%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWVhc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=2087873&db=e000xna>
- Canada's Historic Places. (2010). *Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada*. <https://www.historicplaces.ca/media/18072/81468-parks-s+g-eng-web2.pdf>
- Cash, M. (2022, January 19). Wellington Crescent condo project moves forward. *Winnipeg Free Press*. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/business/2022/01/19/wellington-crescent-condo-project-moves-forward>
- City of Winnipeg. (2019). *2016 Census: City of Winnipeg Neighbourhood Profile*. Census Information. <https://legacy.winnipeg.ca/census/2016/>
- City of Winnipeg. (2022a). *Complete Communities 2.0*. <https://legacy.winnipeg.ca/interhom/cityhall/ourwinnipeg/Documents/Complete-Communities-Direction-Strategy-2.0.pdf>
- City of Winnipeg. (2022b). (Draft) *Crescentwood-Enderton Park Heritage Conservation District Plan*. <https://clkapps.winnipeg.ca/DMIS/ViewDoc.asp?DocId=22791&SectionId=668796&InitUrl=>
- City of Winnipeg. (2022c). *OurWinnipeg 2045 Development Plan*. <https://legacy.winnipeg.ca/interhom/cityhall/ourwinnipeg/Documents/Our-Winnipeg-2045.pdf>
- City of Winnipeg. (2022d, December 14). *Crescentwood-Enderton Park Heritage Conservation District Plan—Historical Buildings and Resources Committee Regular Meeting Minutes*. Decision Making Information System. <https://clkapps.winnipeg.ca/DMIS/ViewDoc.asp?DocId=22791&SectionId=668796&InitUrl=>
- City of Winnipeg. (2023, January 5). *Variance – 514 Wellington Crescent. City Centre Community Committee regular meeting minutes (adopted)*. Decision Making Information System. <https://clkapps.winnipeg.ca/DMIS/ViewDoc.asp?DocId=22993&SectionId=671216&InitUrl=/DMIS/Documents/cc/2023/m22993>
- Dovey, K. (2016). *Urban design thinking: A conceptual toolkit*. Bloomsbury Academic. <https://www-bloomsburyarchitecturelibrary-com.uml.idm.oclc.org/encyclopedia?docid=b-9781474228503>
- Durrani, T. (2020, November 25). Historic Wellington Crescent home demolished. *Winnipeg Free Press*. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2020/11/25/demolition-begins-on-historic-home>
- Kavanagh, S. (2019, September 12). City appeal to decide fate of cavernous, gutted Wellington Crescent mansion. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/514-wellington-heritage-conservation-city-winnipeg-demolition-1.5280188>

MacLean, C. (2022, January 11). City of Winnipeg committee rejects proposal to build condo complex on Wellington site. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/514-wellington-crescent-condo-development-rejected-1.6311632>

Manitoba Historical Society (MHS). (2020). *Historic Sites of Manitoba: Gordon House (514 Wellington Crescent, Winnipeg)*. <https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/sites/gordonhouse.shtml>

McNeill, M. (2016a, September 29). Neighbours fear for mansion's fate—Homeowners want to prevent Wellington Crescent home's demolition. *Winnipeg Free Press*. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2016/09/29/neighbours-fear-for-mansions-fate>

McNeill, M. (2016b, October 1). 'House is at the end of its cycle': Developer—Businessman defends proposal to bulldoze old mansion. *Winnipeg Free Press*. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/business/2016/10/01/house-is-at-the-end-of-its-cycle-developer>

Peterson Projects. (2009). *514 Wellington Crescent—James T. Gordon House*.

Pursaga, J. (2023, February 15). Wellington Crescent condos get green light. *Winnipeg Free Press*. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2023/02/15/wellington-crescent-condos-get-green-light>

Thorpe, R. (2019, June 10). Neighbours protest possible demolition of historic mansion. *Winnipeg Free Press*. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2019/06/04/neighbors-protest-possible-demolition-of-historic-mansion>