

Report: The Study of a Modern Heritage District

**Lashia Jones, Kristina Leaning, Nicole McKernan,
Natalie Whidden, and Katherine Charbonneau,
MA Candidates, School of Canadian Studies, Carleton University
2011**

Introduction

Every year, first year students from Carleton University's Heritage Conservation Program undertake a class project to explore heritage conservation in practice. This year, heritage conservation students worked closely with City of Ottawa heritage planning staff to conduct a preliminary district study of the Briarcliffe section of Rothwell Heights, a mid-century modernist subdivision. While this study has not been completed in any official capacity, the experience has offered students insight into the types of challenges faced by heritage professionals in the field, as well as practical experience engaging with heritage planners, community members and others involved in the conservation process. This report will provide a brief overview of Briarcliffe's history, architecture and planning context, as well as early thoughts on the district's significant features and possible options for its conservation.

Briarcliffe's History and Early Development

The history of Briarcliffe provides insight into some forward-thinking approaches taken towards community development in the post-war period; it is a fascinating example of a community taking development into its own hands and creating a landscape which maintains a unique relationship between the built environment and the natural world. The development sits on the former Lot 20 Concession One of Gloucester, near the intersection of Blair and Montreal Roads. Gloucester Township was first settled in the early 1800s. By the early 20th century it was divided into 20 twenty-five acre parcels, fronting on Blair Road. The Kindle Family purchased one of these 20 acre parcels in the early

1900s and used it as a summer home, naming it Briarcliffe.

The parcel was sold in 1959 to a cooperative partnership interested in developing the land for residential use. In honour of the former owners, the names Kindle and Briarcliffe were retained for the subdivision development. The members of this new cooperative had a very distinct goal in planning their subdivision; well-designed houses at an affordable price in a naturally forested area.

The partnership, residents and architects of the neighbourhood were strongly influenced by Modernism. To realize their vision, the partnership drafted a covenant, restricting the design, materials and massing of the residences with the goal of creating a unified streetscape.

Many of the houses were designed by well-known architects of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Walter Sreier, Paul Schoeler, Brian Barkham, M. Stankiewicz and James Strutt. A number of these architects were involved with influential and well-known Modern projects, such as the Katimavik pyramid at Expo '67, around the same time the houses for Briarcliffe were being designed. Several other houses in the neighbourhood were based on designs from the CMHC Small House Design series, and reflected the increase in suburban residential construction in the post-war era.

The neighbourhood's desirability at the time of construction lay in its contemporary design and natural surroundings but also in its proximity to the National Research Council (NRC). Many of the neighbourhood's original residents worked at the NRC and enjoyed a short walk to work.

While Briarcliffe's appearance and development is indeed rare in Ottawa, it was not the only example of its kind. Fairhaven Way, southwest of Briarcliffe, was also developed by a housing cooperative and was based on Modern design.

Topography

In conducting this preliminary study, it became evident that the natural environment has played a key role in Briarcliffe's development. The area's unique and natural topography and vegetation have been vital to the appeal of the neighbourhood for many residents. Briarcliffe's characteristically large lots and visual buffers between public and private space provide residents with a sense of seclusion and of being surrounded by nature. The limiting of municipal services and their restriction to along the streetscape has created an edge-city landscape. Furthermore, the district's design has provided homeowners with a passive sustainable lifestyle through elements such as:

- The conservation and preservation of natural vegetation;
- The use of private local well-water resources;
- The passive use of solar radiation through the design and placement of many of the houses;
- The high percentage of permeable and semi-permeable surfaces for rainwater infiltration.

The nearby Kindle Court Park has also been an integral educational and recreational resource for Briarcliffe residents as well as for the wider Ottawa community. This carefully managed natural landscape showcases an exceptionally diverse representation of wildflowers and old-growth mixed forest.

Community Vision

The impact of each of these detailed design elements, both man-made and natural, on the Briarcliffe residents was apparent during informal consultations conducted while preparing the preliminary study.

Many community members are strongly attached to both the district's architecture and the natural environment. Many district studies do not include input from residents: in this case, however, interviews with original and new residents provided very valuable information to be included in the preliminary study.

Seven homeowners from Kindle Court and Briarcliffe Drive were interviewed. These interviews presented an opportunity to understand the community's vision of Briarcliffe's community, both past and present, and its expectations of designation. In compiling the results, an overarching community vision was apparent:

- Residents enjoyed Briarcliffe's natural landscape.
- Residents saw an advantage to living in what feels like a rural community within an urban centre.
- Residents noted how the modestly sized homes allow the landscape to take precedence.
- Residents described the community as a walker's paradise.

These consultations provided a better sense of what Briarcliffe residents feel is special about their neighbourhood in comparison to the results of archival and field research.

Key Features

Discussion of possible significant elements of the Briarcliffe district in preparation for a first draft of the preliminary study is ongoing. Potentially significant elements include:

- Briarcliffe as a unique example of community centred development;
- Briarcliffe as a collection of houses of similar modest size, built in the same period, inspired by Modern design principles, with similar house to lot ratios, and constructed using a limited palette of materials;

- Houses designed by well-known architects or built using CHMC small house designs. The fact that they are relatively unaltered is an additional consideration;
- The minimal intervention philosophy in the construction of the built landscape;
- Streetscapes characterised by houses set widely apart, set back from the road and nestled amongst the trees;
- Briarcliffe as an early example of the integration of environmental conservation with suburban design.

Current and Future Challenges

In undertaking this research and developing a preliminary statement of significance some interesting challenges have arisen, which relate not only to Briarcliffe itself, but to the designation process and the conservation of Modern architecture as a whole. Some of these challenges include:

- Developing guidelines that not only conserve the physical landscape of Briarcliffe, but retain the early (and continuing) practices of sustainable living and the integration of the environment into living spaces;
- Acknowledging the public's perception of Modern architecture. Modern architecture has perhaps not reached the stage where it is widely appreciated, and it is uncertain how this could impact Briarcliffe's designation or future conservation. This is particularly important as many of the existing houses are over 50 years old and may need conservation work in the future;
- Deciding whether or not taking a cultural landscape approach would allow further integration of residents' perspectives into the preliminary district study.