Municipal Designation in Ottawa: Past, Present and Future

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Introduction

The City of Ottawa has a rich and diverse historic fabric which contributes to local, provincial and national identities. As with any capital city, its history is reflected in the building stock. Having worked for the City of Ottawa for twenty years, heritage planner Sally Coutts presented a history of designation in Ottawa. The presentation highlights how designation has changed, and how it has not changed, over the last two decades. In the second half of the presentation, heritage planner Leslie Collins used local examples to highlight the benefits of designation, as well as some of the misconceptions surrounding designation as a tool for planning and development in Ottawa. Collins also offers insight into how we can make designation work better at the local level.

History of Designation

Similar to many Ontario communities, concern about heritage protection gained momentum in Ottawa in the 1960s. The movement was a reactive response to an increasing number of heritage buildings that were being demolished and replaced with high-rise development. The Mayor’s Committee for Heritage was established in 1972, following the demolition of the Rideau Street Convent. A group of advocates, the Committee recommended that heritage must be considered with all local planning projects, that the municipality should have heritage experts on staff, and that a citizens’ advisory committee on heritage issues should be established.

Ottawa’s heritage program was officially established when the first Ontario Heritage Act (OHA) was enacted in 1975. Since then, the City has designated 16 Heritage Conservation Districts (HCD)- including 3500 buildings- across the City under Part V of the OHA, in addition to 308 Part IV building designations. Both Part IV and Part V properties are identified with heritage plaques. Heritage grants are awarded annually to encourage the conservation and maintenance of these properties.

How has Designation Changed?

In 2005, amendments to the Ontario Heritage Act were passed. These changes had significant implications as to how designation was to be carried out in Ottawa. The changes meant that:

- Designation was now permanent
- Part IV designation includes a ‘Statement of Cultural Heritage Value or Interest’ to reflect a values-based approach
- Statements now include a list of heritage attributes that link to the heritage value
- Part IV criteria now include Ontario Regulation 09/06
- HCD Plans are required for all HCDs

Figure 1: Statement of Reason for 336 Daly Avenue

Whereas a Statement of Reason tends to be a short and concise overview (Figure 1), the Statement of Cultural Heritage Value allows for more detail and a
better understanding of the ascribed heritage values for each property (Figure 2).

The heritage attributes go a step further and identify the specific aspects of the building which contribute to its cultural heritage value (Figure 3).

For city staff that work directly with heritage properties, the new OHA provided many important benefits. Having clear statements and identified attributes means planners, the public, and the property owners understand what is of value and the specific elements that must be protected in the event of a proposed alteration. Secondly, demolition can be refused—rather than simply delayed—by City Council because the property is designated. Lastly, the HCD guidelines can be enforced.

In addition to the revised OHA, other legislative changes have affected the municipal system of designation. The Provincial Policy Statement, which governs land use planning and development at the provincial level, now features a stronger policy framework for heritage; it requires that new developments have regard for cultural heritage resources. At the local level, Ottawa’s Official Plan has also incorporated stronger and more detailed heritage policies. In conjunction with changes to public perception, these policy changes have resulted in a growing awareness of heritage issues.

**Case Study: Byward Market HCD**

The first case study is the famous Byward Market found in the downtown core of Ottawa. The Byward Market HCD was established in 1991 in response to the increased demolition in the area. As the HCD was established prior to the 2005 changes to the OHA (and therefore no HCD plan had been created), a set of guidelines were developed that city staff used to help guide new development on vacant land or in instances where the expansion of existing buildings of limited value were proposed. Having guidelines in place meant that a minimum form of design control could be realized (Figure 4). By 2011, most of the vacant land in the Byward Market had been developed, and the area is now an excellent example of a mature HCD where the initial goals of the designation were met.

The Byward Market HCD guidelines encourage stylistic distinction between old and new, yet look to ensure that designs are complementary to the historic character of the area. As we continue to see the fields of land-use planning and heritage planning grow closer in their objectives, we will see better designs and better planning of heritage resources.
One of the best examples of sensitive development in Ottawa is the Dalhousie Infill Project. City staff was very pleased with the results, as the project design was sensitive to the character of the HCD and surrounding architecture, while still ensuring that the modern design fulfilled the desires and needs of the developer (Figure 5).

The final example is 3856 Logger’s Way. The building is a typical 19th century stone farmhouse, associated with Captain John Fraser, a Member of Parliament and veteran of the War of 1812. A new addition was constructed in 2011 that allowed for increased functionality by expanding the space, while preserving the original structure for future generations (Figure 6). Since an OHA designation was in place at the time of proposed changes, it ensured a design review process was followed to protect the character-defining elements associated with the historic house. As an additional benefit to designation, the owners were able to apply for a heritage grant to assist with the massive project.

Additional Success Stories

There are numerous other success stories in Ottawa. Two such examples are the Glebe and Old Ottawa South Community Centres. Both buildings were adapted in 1977-78 for use as community centres. Plans were put forth to close both these centres in 1996 in order to build one new facility that would serve both communities. The community outcry was so great that it resulted in the designation of both buildings and ensured their continued use as community hubs. Today they remain vibrant spaces and a community hub of activity as the city continues to renovate and adapt them for ongoing needs.

How has Designation Failed?

Designation is often a misunderstood term and with it comes many public misconceptions. It is often associated with only elite architecture. In many cases the public perception is that only “old” buildings that are associated with prominent people can be designated. The public often feels that different types of buildings, structures, and even landscapes are not worthy of protection. This becomes challenging when seeking to advocate for a more holistic values-based approach to designation.

Opponents of Designation

Designation has a bad reputation overall. Often the public feels that:

- Designation is detrimental to individual property rights
- The buildings will be frozen in time
- There will be a lengthy bureaucratic process anytime they want to alter their property
- It requires owners to open private property to the public

Proponents of Designation

Those who support designation see it as a useful tool for conservation. Designation is frequently sought as a means to an end. Designation cannot and should not freeze property to make it undevelopable or unchangeable but rather should:

- Be used as a tool to prevent unsympathetic development or infill in established neighborhoods
- Help regulate the use of a building
**The Future of Designation**

The field of heritage conservation strongly advocates for the implementation of a broader definition of what is considered heritage. The City of Ottawa continues to designate resources that have cultural heritage value but it is now looking at different types of heritage. The definition has grown to include landscapes, monuments, trees, recent heritage, cemeteries and so on. As development pressure increases within city limits, designation becomes more controversial. Long-term success will be tied to:

- Ongoing educational efforts, such as the Heritage Planning Primer Course, Bricks and Mortar (which is a Heritage Planning Newsletter), and the Ottawa Architectural Conservation Awards
- Public Outreach
- Stronger Statements of Cultural Heritage Value that link the attributes of a place to its heritage value
- Continued integration of heritage interest into the land use planning process
- Updating older HCD designations with stronger plans

In the end, designation will continue to play a prominent role in the City of Ottawa. As planners continue to work with land use planning they seek to find a balance between conserving our cultural heritage and allowing for natural growth, change and development. The public will play a vital role in the outcome, which is why it is so public education is of critical importance to ensure that local property owners and the community understand what designation is, and how it can be effective.