

ACO panel April 25, 2016: Is this the city we want?

- What is the role of conservation in today's rapidly changing Toronto? Cultural, Environmental? Social? (Mary MacDonald)

From my perspective, conservation is about so much more than architecture, despite the fact that much of my daily work deals with the tangible (at least on the surface). What we choose to build, what we choose to demolish and what we choose to save tells us a lot about dominant human values: social, cultural, environmental, economic and political. Buildings and landscapes embody these values and reveal information about the people who designed them, the people who inhabit them and the geographic, cultural or historic moments or movements that inspired them. Our built environment tells stories. It reveals and illustrates our many histories, both the illustrious and the otherwise invisible.

The provincial criteria for determining cultural heritage value (or interest) tellingly uses the language of value: design value, historic value and contextual value. Key to indentifying value or values in my experience has been delicately discerning what might be of value to whom, and why. Among all the various criteria, a single word is repeated: significant to a community, contributes to an understanding of a community or culture, demonstrates or reflects the ideas of someone significant to a community... and so on. Communities determine value. Communities inhabit areas and surroundings. Values and communities change over time, and value is not always shared, but there is stability in continuity, in evolution, and not in outright destruction. There is value in contributing to a community.

If we accept that the needs and preoccupations of human communities inspire and reflect both our inner and our outer worlds, the city I want is one where landowners and developers and planners assume equal responsibility for uncovering value; for

determining what is important to local communities and the community at large; for understanding what matters to communities before the lot is purchased and the plans are drawn. Stop waiting for the heritage ambush or the heritage ambulance to catch you out. It isn't just the job of government to identify and regulate—it is up to all of us to care about what matters to someone else, to self-regulate.

Due diligence is more than just checking the heritage register for a listing and crossing your fingers that no one will care or notice when you apply to demolish an unlisted property. Due diligence is attending to the possibility that value exists in ways you never imagined, and then imagining it. And, when you do find a suitable place to build an expression of your own time, think hard about the human values you want your new building to express and land it gently and respectfully among its elders.