

Lessons from Davisville Junior School

Catherine Nasmith

While it is clear that the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), local parents, the school principal and Shelley Laskin, the local school Trustee have no interest in conserving Davisville Junior School, ACOToronto would love to change its future. We are at a critical juncture in the process. An RFP has been issued by the TDSB for an architect and the terms of reference assume that after the construction of the new school and community hub the current school will be demolished to make way for a playground. The existing school will continue to be occupied until the new one is complete.

The decision to demolish was made several years ago by the TDSB. At that point the building, in spite of its obvious architectural interest, had not been listed or designated. The current school was designed as a school for the deaf, with smaller than standard classrooms, yet has been used as a junior school with full programming for many years. Parents and teachers have been lobbying for another facility on the very large site near Yonge and Davisville and have explored several financing options, including developing a condo to pay for a new school. At the same time as the TDSB has been looking to replace the school, the City of Toronto has been working to incorporate a community hub, with swimming pool and other amenities. It was not until an article in the Toronto Star announcing provincial funding for a new school in early 2016 that the broader architectural community became aware that the existing building would not be part of the future.

Since then a group of prominent Toronto architects, Kim Storey, Carol Kleinfeldt, Roman Mychaelowycz, Louigi Ferrara, Monica Contreras as well as ACO Past President Lloyd Alter and I dubbed ourselves the Mod Squad and set out on a rather Don Quixote like mission to have other options considered. The quest was particularly poignant for Ms. Kleinfeldt who had worked for Peter Pennington later in his career. She spoke of him as a delightful, fun loving, exuberant designer and person.

It was clear when we started that the horse was heading out of the barn, but ACO has to at least try. There was a moment in the sun when the Toronto Preservation Board unanimously recommended that Council designate the property, but our hopes were dashed when the Preservation Board report was unanimously deferred indefinitely, by Toronto East York Community Council, ignoring the Mod Squad's alternative site plans options that allowed for repurposing of the existing building. By the time we had them ready for consideration, no one was interested in considering new ideas. We were unceremoniously dismissed.

Davisville Public School and Metro Toronto School for the Deaf, 1962, (43 Millwood Road) is one of a significant set of post-war schools built by the Toronto District School Board's in house team of Chief Architect F.C. Etherington and project architect Peter Pennington;

- Glen Ames Senior Public School, 1961 (18 Williamson Road),
- Lord Lansdowne Public School, 1961 (33 Robert Street), and
- Parkway Vocational School, 1963 (1 Danforth Avenue).

In Pennington's own words, "We attempted to take some of the ordinary elements of a school and make them extraordinary.' At a time when the future was a good place, newly graduated architects were strutting their stuff; breaking out in all directions with new materials, creating a new style that we now call modern expressionist. The style has its roots in the Festival of Britain, American and European examples. As I watched Robert Moffatt's presentation at the ACOToronto lecture series, I felt a surge of local pride realizing that what was built in Toronto is more interesting than all the precedents. Alas, colonized Torontonians tend to think that nothing important happens here, hence the stunning lack of consideration of this building in the TDSB's development plans.

At Davisville, the building is arranged into house like pavilions each with a more flamboyant plate concrete plate roof than the last. The budget was commensurate with the task of educating the post-war generation, similar to high quality office buildings of the day.

So how did such a fine building become the “most expensive to maintain” and a demolition candidate? Simply put, inadequate maintenance budgets combined with a provincial policy that favours new construction. At the core of the issue is that Ontario school boards are not required by the province to consider cultural value in their real estate decisions, nor does the province provide adequate funding to maintain its building stock. The Davisville Junior School is a victim of demolition by neglect, practiced wholesale by the TDSB because of poor provincial policy. It won't be long before other schools suffer the same fate.

The situation reminds me of myself as a kid walking my nice new shoes through mud puddles so I could get more nice new shoes. My mother quickly put a stop to that!

It is supremely ironic the not so subtle lessons the TDSB is teaching its students by example:

- new is better than old,
- why maintain when neglect gets you a new one,
- architecture has no cultural value worth conserving, and
- demolition and landfill are ok.

The same institution that insists on good environmental practices when it comes to school lunch bags is blind to putting whole buildings in the garbage. I was astounded to hear Angelos Bacopoulos, Associate Director, Facilities and Urban Sustainability, Toronto District School Board explain to Community Council that because the school had been poorly maintained for a number of years it was now impossible to repair; he was looking forward to the 25 maintenance free years a new building would offer. There is a lot wrong with this picture.

ACOToronto will continue to argue for an option that includes the existing building, and move ahead to try to get the rest of this mid-century school collection designated. In the bigger picture, ACO will continue our advocacy at Queen's Park for education policies that place emphasis on conserving financial, environmental and cultural resources.

For more information about the schools go to http://acotoronto.ca/show_building.php?BuildingID=9769,
http://acotoronto.ca/res_files/ACOTODavisville.pdf