

Toronto  
HERITAGE

## School's out

The roof leaks. The classrooms are too small. A renovation would be tricky and expensive. But Davisville P.S. is an architectural treasure, writes Alex Bozikovic, and the school board's decision to tear it down is a bad sign for Toronto's heritage

Alex Bozikovic



The structure which houses both Davisville Junior Public School and Spectrum Alternative Senior School will be replaced by a new building right next door. Fred Lum/The Globe and Mail

A spaceship landed on Millwood Road. That's how an imaginative child might see Davisville Public School: a pointy-winged product of a distant civilization that loves syncopated windows and hyperbolic paraboloids.

In fact, the North Toronto school is the product of a distant civilization: Ours, in 1962, when public buildings had real budgets and Toronto's school board believed its architecture should represent the value of public education.

Now, it's slated to be torn down.

The structure, which houses both Davisville Junior Public School and Spectrum Alternative Senior School, will be replaced by a new building right next door; the Toronto District School Board will tear down the old one when construction is finished in 2020, to make room for a schoolyard and driveway. For the affluent and fast-growing area, this is a victory. The current school is overcrowded. The new building will be larger, with a community centre and bigger schoolyard.

But there is also a loss for the city: an unnecessary demolition of a building that has economic and environmental value, and real cultural worth. "It's a treasure," says architect Carol Kleinfeldt, one of the leaders of an informal activist group that is agitating to save the building. "And this is the school board's own heritage."

If the building had been designated heritage by the city, "we would be having a very different conversation," says Catherine Nasmith of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario. But the school board's internal process ignored the building's heritage value and skipped past the city's heritage-preservation apparatus.



Advocates are pushing for the city to cancel plans to tear down the original Davisville Public School Junior building, which is currently overcrowded and outdated. Fred Lum/The Globe and Mail

Not far up Yonge Street, the sneaky but legal weekend demolition of a 1920s bank building recently prompted an uproar. At Davisville, the City of Toronto, thanks to the leadership of councillor Josh Matlow, has given the school board the freedom to disregard heritage that a developer could only dream of.

The story has implications far beyond the neighbourhood. The TDSB runs 584 schools, in nearly as many buildings, across the city. These are places of importance in the culture of Toronto, but what will their future be? As community assets, perhaps like the Artscape Youngplace facility in a former school near Queen Street West? Or as piles of rubble?

With enrolment far below its baby-boom heights, the financially strapped TDSB is under pressure from the province to close or consolidate its facilities, leaving aging buildings vulnerable.

And though the TDSB is funded by the government of Ontario, which oversees architectural heritage and has a strict heritage-review process for its own buildings, the board has no mandate to protect its buildings and has no strategy to do so.

At Davisville, Ms. Kleinfeldt and some colleagues, allied with Ms. Nasmith, argue that it would be possible to retain the building, as a private school or for other purposes, while also building classroom space and a community centre.

Why bother? Because Davisville is a fascinating building of real importance to the city. That was the assessment of city staff, who wrote a persuasive report last year, and the Toronto Preservation Board, which voted unanimously to recommend it for designation under the Ontario Heritage Act. "We believe, through research and evaluation, that it's exceptionally valuable," says Mary MacDonald, manager of Heritage Preservation Services at the city's planning department.

The school, though little-known, is a high point of school architecture in the postwar period in Canada. It was designed by the Toronto Board of Education's own architects under F.C. Etherington, and reflects high-quality construction and innovation. The design architect was the Manchester-born Peter Pennington, who brought a distinctive and very English brand of modernism to new schools while working for the board from 1957 to 1962.



Lord Lansdowne Public School, located at 33 Robert St. in downtown Toronto. Fred Lum/The Globe and Mail

“We hoped that by creating a school of unconventional shape,” Mr. Pennington wrote in *Canadian Art* magazine in 1962, “and using bright colours and appointments with a certain flair, that we might stimulate the children – and the school staff as well.” In that essay he was talking about Lord Lansdowne P.S., opened in 1961 near College and Spadina – a building where most of the classrooms are in an octagonal tower surrounded by angled steel stilts and capped by a rainbow-striped chimney stack.

This goes against the conventions of postwar school design – the rational, squared-off, brick-and-terrazzo boxes that formed so many young minds. And it was this radical thinking that drove the design of the Davisville/Spectrum building. It’s divided into four wings, each of them roughly square, and topped with roofs that slope in different directions like variously folded origami. It was created to house two schools, one of them the Metropolitan Toronto School for the Deaf. Each school got two small “houses,” as Ms. Nasmith puts it, “that were meant to divide the school into units that were smaller and friendlier to kids.”

Ms. Nasmith is allied with the group of critics, who half-jokingly call themselves “the Mod Squad,” who have come together to defend the building. Along with Ms. Kleinfeldt and her partner Roman Mychajlowycz, they include architect Kim Storey, green-building advocate Lloyd Alter, marketer and blogger Robert Moffatt and George Brown College instructors Luigi Ferrara and Monica Contreras. They stepped forward at the end of 2015 when they got wind of the building’s impending demolition and have tried to engage with the school board in an effort that has so far gotten absolutely nowhere.

When asked about their criticisms, local school trustee Shelley Laskin is audibly frustrated. They got involved late, she argues, after a school-board consultation process in the neighbourhood was well-advanced – though that process never consulted city heritage staff or heritage architects. Further, their arguments are “completely unrealistic,” Ms. Laskin says. “We knew from the get-go that the school, in order to increase capacity, had to be rebuilt.”

Ms. Laskin and board staff argue that the provincial Ministry of Education won’t pay for a rebuild. The existing school would need a complete refit in order to meet current guidelines. The gym is on the second floor, meaning a new combined school and city gym will be difficult to achieve. And the former Metro Toronto School for the Deaf classrooms are too small to meet current requirements, requiring a major renovation. “The cost would far exceed a new build,” Ms. Laskin says, “and that’s why the province is giving us money for a new build. Those are the realities we live by.”

Ironically, the province has a rigorous process of evaluating heritage for its own buildings. Yet when it comes to schools, “the province leaves decisions about school closures and construction to local boards,” spokeswoman Heather Irwin explained by e-mail, “[and] will consider additional funding for projects if there are unique costs, such as

retaining heritage-designated features.” She noted that in the case of Davisville, the TDSB only applied for a replacement school.



Lord Lansdowne Public School. Fred Lum/The Globe and Mail

But that does not mean a full restoration or renovation. “In general,” board spokesman Ryan Bird says, “the ministry tends to favour a complete rebuild of a school over a project of extensive renovations, in order to have more control over construction costs and to lower operating costs in the long run.” Witness the case of Nelson Mandela Park Public School, where the board retrofitted a 1917 building in a complex project that went far late and over budget – and which prompted Queen’s Park to temporarily freeze funding for TDSB capital projects. “In the end,” Mr. Bird says, “it is simply not possible, given the extent of our backlog and our capital needs, that the province would provide millions of dollars above what is necessary to rebuild a new school.”

There’s no question that renovation is generally more expensive than new construction. The Ministry of Education is providing \$14.9-million for the new school, which will make for a mean building. The architects, Snyder, are experienced, though not distinguished as designers. Will the new building be great? “I think,” Ms. Laskin says, “it will be the absolute best we can do.”

In this context, the critics ask: What if the original building could be renovated and reused – even leased out to generate a financial return? What if its craft and personality could be revamped or find a new purpose? Ms. Kleinfeldt and Mr. Mychajlowycz, whose architecture firm KMA specializes in courthouses and fire halls, argue that this is entirely possible. “We’ve done a lot of studies for various public clients about whether a particular facility is capable of taking a renovation, or they’re past that point,” Ms. Kleinfeldt says. “This particular building is not even close. It’s in very good shape.” This is where the cultural value of a building comes up against a technical assessment of its condition and potential. Both can be highly debatable.

Last May, when the preservation board recommended the building be designated, local city councillor Josh Matlow led votes at Toronto East York Community Council and City Council to defer that staff report – indefinitely stalling preservation efforts and in effect dooming the building. Mr. Matlow, who calls himself “an ardent defender of heritage,” argues that he was trying to make sure the board didn’t miss an opportunity for provincial funding “and wind up with nothing.” And, he says, “I understood from the school board that the building is in terrible condition.”

The details get technical; in short, everyone agrees that the school badly needs updates, but there's profound disagreement on the idea that the building must be junked. And that, to the Mod Squad, is the problem. Rather than protect the building and ask the school board to deal with the heritage aspects, the city accepted the board's assessment that this was impossible. And with the TDSB, "from the beginning, there was an assumption that the building was of no cultural value," Ms. Nasmith says.

Meanwhile, parents see the school through the lens of decades of poor maintenance.



Davisville Junior Public School. Fred Lum/The Globe and Mail

"Among the things that are hard to love," Davisville P.S. parents' council member Chris Thompson says, "the roof is somewhat falling apart ... my daughter was on the third floor this year, and they had buckets on the floor in her classroom because the roof was leaking through into the classroom." According to Ms. Laskin, this is because of the unusual roof shape: "The building is impossible to roof."

To anyone familiar with heritage-preservation debates, especially around modern buildings, this will elicit a grim smile. The issue is absolutely typical, especially for buildings that are around 50 years old: They are beginning to crumble, especially if they haven't been well-maintained, but they're not old enough to fit many people's idea of what is historic.

And in this case people's minds are made up. "It's harder to change a plan when it's fixed," Ms. MacDonald says. "Understanding heritage value from the beginning means you can make certain choices and ask for forgiveness on certain requirements."

For instance: The new Davisville school will have about two acres (0.8 hectares) of open space for its 700-odd students – something near the 2.5 acres (one hectare) that ministry guidelines suggest. Is it realistic to assume that amount of space in central Toronto, just as you would in Milton or Timmins? It will include 16,000 square feet of parking lot, drop-off and service area. The school's footprint is also larger than in a 2012 proposal for the same site. In short, the plan is full of all sorts of flab that a motivated architect could chop away.

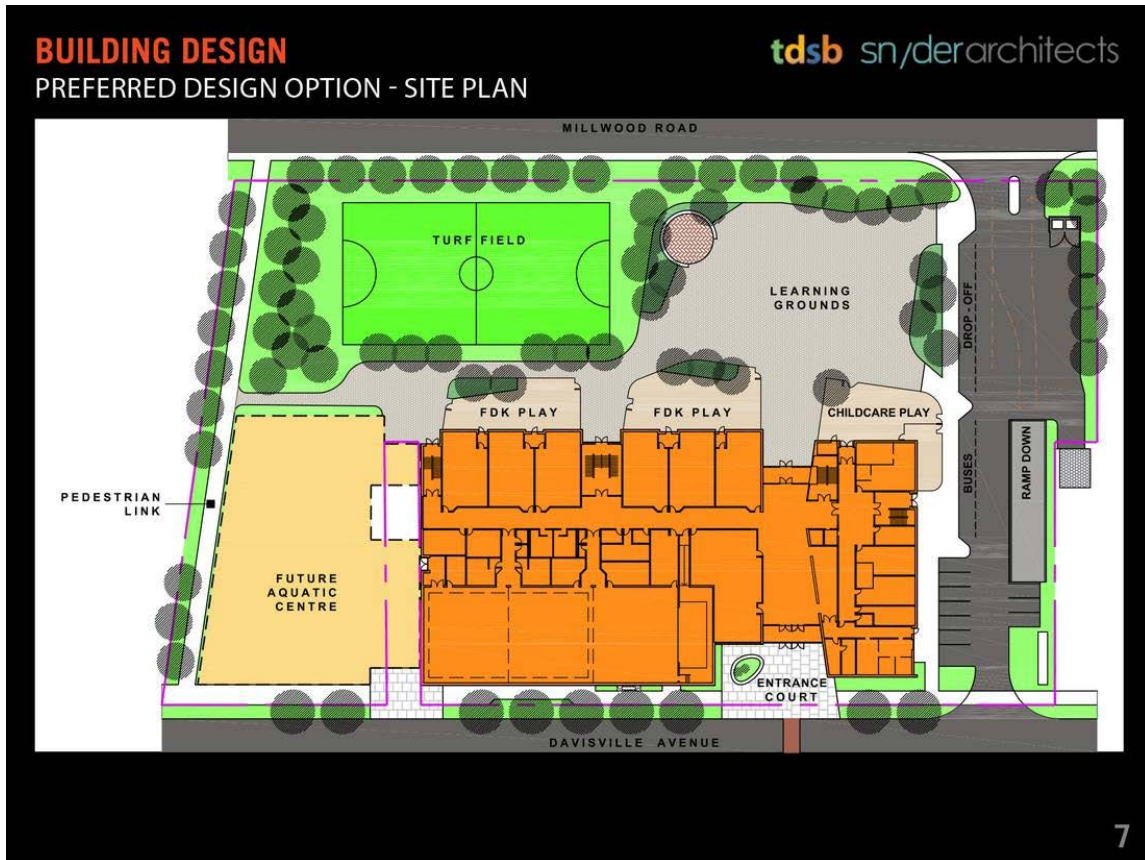
Two schemes, drawn pro bono by Kleinfeldt Mychajlowycz suggest how the school and community centre might be added to the site while retaining much of the existing building.

"The plans..., while provocative, are not representative of what is actually needed by the TDSB and its city partner on the Davisville/Spectrum property," Ms. Laskin says.

But the discussion shouldn't end there. The Ministry of Education's formulas shouldn't shape the future of the city. Instead, the board and heritage architects should look at those

500 buildings as community assets, and not just obstacles. If a public agency won't try to preserve its built heritage, who will? And what will we save, if not a spacecraft from the sixties?

THE PROPOSALS



The school board's plan designed by Snyder Architects, keeps the existing building in place while a new school is constructed and leaves room for a future public aquatic centre. The old school would then be demolished.



Alternative plans (above and below photos) by Kleinfeldt Mychajlowycz Architects would keep most of the existing building – demolishing the easternmost wing, which was a 1966 addition – while adding the new school and aquatic centre. The tradeoffs: slightly less open space for the school and a much smaller driveway and dropoff zone than the 16,000 square feet proposed by the school board.



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