

# Developer's Position: Proposed Renovation of 205 Crichton

**Editor's Note:** The article has been submitted by Chris Straka, co-developer of 205 Crichton Street, and presents his rationale for and perspective on the proposed project. Chris and his family have been residents of Crichton Street since 2009, and he is the founding President of Vert Design, a local design/building company with special expertise in green building technology.

**By Chris Straka**

*"Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings."* (Jane Jacobs, writer and activist, 1916 - 2006)

**Neighbourhood Character**

New Edinburgh's history is defined by the constant changes that have allowed the community to evolve into a neighbourhood consistently identified as one of the most desirable places to live in Ottawa. Unlike the urban monocultures more common outside of the city's core, New Edinburgh is characterized by the human-scaled relationships between elements of the public realm and the architectural forms resultant from almost 150 years of development.

The intention of the *Ontario Heritage Act* Part 5 designation of New Edinburgh's Heritage Conservation District is to maintain the character of the neighbourhood. The applicable part of the *Ontario Heritage Act* is not intended to preserve individual buildings. (A Part 4 designation would do so.)

Proposed changes to individual buildings within the neighbourhood's historic core are evaluated in reference to the New Edinburgh Heritage Conservation District Plan (HCD). This document provides limited references to characteristic elements of the neighbourhood, including:

"A lively mix of building types dating from as early as the 1840s until the present... Building types range from... row houses, single family houses and doubles to small apartment buildings."

"The green, tree-lined character... typified the streets... street trees, laneways and large landscaped back yards... create a pleasant green atmosphere."

**Existing Building: Historical Context**

Since 1945, a brick bungalow has sat unfinished at the intersection of Crichton Street and Dufferin Road. Prior to that date, the property at 205 Crichton had been a vacant lot. Construction of the existing bungalow was undertaken by Leonard Boehmer, an Ottawa contractor and son of August Boehmer, a businessman of considerable importance in the early German and Lutheran

community.

The original architectural plans (circa 1945) call for a multi-unit residential building, including separate dwellings in the basement, and on the first and on the second floors, as well as a multi-story garage and breezeway, with basement below and covered balcony above. These plans were never completed owing to a lack of materials and labour created by the Second World War, and only three feet of the second floor was built before a flat roof was added and construction was terminated. In late 1997, the original flat roof over the building was replaced with a mansard-style roof.

An individual Statement of Cultural Heritage Value is not available for the property, (as it would be if the building was designated under Part 4 of the Ontario Heritage Act). Ottawa's Heritage Survey and Evaluation Form describes the building as an "average example" of post-war vernacular design that is "moderately compatible" with neighbouring heritage buildings and a "modest contributor to [the] heritage residential character of New Edinburgh".

Until recently, the property was owned by Hilda Boehmer, wife of Leonard Boehmer, who lived in the building for over 40 years. At the age of 101, Hilda now lives in the Garry J. Armstrong Centre on Porter's Island, within sight of her ancestral home. Her son Ted Mathesius and his wife Bev live in the home on the adjoining property at 201 Crichton Street. Since Chris and Timothy Straka purchased the property in 2011, the residential units in the bungalow have been operated as rental units.

Although the building has been maintained since its construction, elements of the structure and its mechanical systems have seriously deteriorated and are urgently in need of repair or replacement. The condition of the existing building limits its sustainability, both structurally and financially. Although both units are currently occupied, the building's carrying costs remain greater than the rental income. An analysis of market values and carrying costs demonstrates that the existing building is not worth improv-

ing without the opportunity to increase the number of dwelling units on the property from the existing two units to the three units originally intended in 1945.

**Design Intentions**

The Strakas' objective in their proposed renovation and addition to the structure is to fulfill the original intention for the site, while improving the building's compatibility with adjacent buildings and the heritage character of the neighbourhood.

In addition, the proposed project is designed to show that buildings within a heritage conservation district can be renovated and retrofitted to a standard comparable to new construction, without compromising the heritage character of the building or its neighbourhood. The proposed renovation and addition will demonstrate that ambitious green building certifications such as Passive House and LEED can be attained within a heritage conservation district.

**Potential Impacts and Mitigations**

The Strakas' project is intended to improve the historic character of New Edinburgh by:

- a) removing an existing roof form that is incongruent with the neighbourhood's architectural typology;
- b) adding a second story with flat roof and parapet typical of neighbourhood buildings, in keeping with the original architectural plans for the property;
- c) limiting the height of the addition to the height indicated by the original building's architectural plans;
- d) limiting the gross floor area of the addition to less than 30 percent of the floor area of the original building's architectural plans;
- e) continuing the neighbourhood tradition of rear yard additions clad in a less noble material (such as wood siding);
- f) subordinating the addition to the originally proposed building by setting the facade of the addition back from the existing building's facade;
- g) limiting the property's vehicular access to an existing asphalt driveway off River Lane;
- g) removing an existing garage door, asphalt driveway and asphalt parking space from the Dufferin Road streetscape that interrupts the established pattern of

front doors (opening onto covered porches, descending to walkways leading to sidewalks) throughout the neighbourhood;

- h) adding a front door, covered porch, walkway, street trees and ground cover to the Dufferin Road streetscape that echoes the established rhythm of the street; and,
- i) retaining the existing mature cedar hedge that screens the existing rear yard (also to be retained) from River Lane and Dufferin Road.

In a letter concerning the project, the President of Heritage Ottawa writes: "A curious and undoubtedly unique situation, indeed! Heritage Ottawa appreciates this innovative approach to enhancing the heritage qualities of a building, and respecting the Heritage Conservation District..."

The heritage permit application for the project required the preparation of a Cultural Heritage Impact Statement (CHIS) by an independent heritage professional. The



205 Crichton's northeast corner, proposed and current.

The proposed project can be viewed as a continuation of the small-scale intensification effort begun in 1945, contributing a contemporary interpretation of New Edinburgh's historic village character to today's urban fabric.

**Project Support and Opposition**

The proposed project has received support in principle from neighbours on adjoining and adjacent properties, as well as from the City of Ottawa's Heritage Planning staff.

CHIS for 205 Crichton was prepared by Mark Brandt, a registered professional architect, urbanist and conservation consultant with over 30 years of experience. After reviewing the proposed project in great detail, Mr. Brandt concluded that "it is clearly apparent that the proposed alterations to the existing building have significantly more positive impact than negative impact upon the spirit and letter of the New Edinburgh Heritage Conservation District."

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