

TORONTO STAFF REPORT

November 9, 2004

To: Toronto Preservation Board
Toronto and East York Community Council

From: Joe Halstead, Commissioner Economic Development, Culture and Tourism

Subject: 14 Blevins Place (Dickinson Tower) - Inclusion on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties
Toronto Centre-Rosedale - Ward 28

Purpose:

This report recommends that the property at 14 Blevins Place (Dickinson Tower) be included on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties.

Financial Implications and Impact Statement:

There are no financial implications resulting from the adoption of this report.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that:

- (1) City Council include the property at 14 Blevins Place (Dickinson Tower) on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties; and
- (2) the appropriate City Officials be authorized and directed to take the necessary action to give effect thereto.

Background:

Over the next 15 years, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation proposes to redevelop Regent Park North and South by demolishing the existing buildings and replacing them with new rent-g geared-to-income housing and additional market housing as well as some non-residential space. The proposed plan would reintroduce much of the original street pattern. The rebuilt community would be modelled on the St. Lawrence neighbourhood.

As part of the consultative process staff was made aware of the proposal to demolish all the existing buildings on the site. Staff proposed that one of the low-rise, red brick buildings characteristic of North Regent Park and one of the high-rise apartment buildings in South Regent Park be preserved and adaptively reused so that the use of the property as a public housing project for over 50 years would be commemorated. The property owners, Toronto Community Housing Corporation, have agreed to the reuse of a high-rise building, which is the subject of this report, but are of the opinion that none of the low-rise buildings in Regent Park North could have a role in the proposed redevelopment. They suggested remembering these building through interpretive landscaping and displays. There was also little support for the retention of one of the low-rise buildings expressed in the public consultations process.

Comments:

A summary of the development of Regent Park follows:

At one time a part of Cabbagetown, the area that is now known as Regent Park, was predominantly occupied by Irish immigrants. In the late 1920's and early 1930's the living conditions here were in rapid decline and the area was labelled 'Toronto's worst slum'.

In the early 1930's, Lieutenant Governor Herbert Bruce voiced concerns about the conditions of residential neighbourhoods in Toronto in a written report known as the Bruce Report. The report suggested that most of Toronto's downtown residential areas (south of College/Carlton, from Dovercourt to the Don River), be torn down and rebuilt. Embracing modernist theories of Le Corbusier, it provided examples of ideal residential areas with apartment blocks situated within a park-like setting. The report rejected the existing urban fabric, recommending that the City start from scratch. The slums of Cabbagetown were to be a starting point in the rebuilding of Toronto's residential areas however, due to the Depression of the 1930's, development was delayed.

Following much discussion regarding the need for affordable housing, the Citizens Housing and Planning Association was formed in 1944. The association's goal was to implement the Bruce Report and to redevelop the area now known as Regent Park. In 1946, the existing housing and factories were demolished, providing a clean slate for new development.

Regent Park North, (bounded by Gerrard, River, Dundas and Parliament Streets), was designed by architect John Hoare and was constructed between 1947 and 1954. With the exception of a few townhouses, the housing took on the form of 3 and 6 storey buildings, made of red brick. The repetitive building shape has been referred to as a cruciform. Hoare's plan followed the aspirations of the Bruce Report in that the buildings were set within a 'park-like' setting. The housing was situated around the perimeter of blocks, leaving central large open spaces, intended for children to play within. Vehicular and pedestrian routes were separated and parking lots were located near the perimeter of the site in order to minimize the impact of automobiles. The

lack of through roads enabled children to get to school easily and safely. In 1949, the first residents moved in to Regent Park North.

Initially, Regent Park North was considered a success. With 900 families on a waiting list for housing in Regent Park North, it was decided that the demands for more housing would be met with a new development to the south. Construction of Regent Park South, (bounded by Dundas, River, Shuter and Parliament Streets), commenced in the late 1950's. Adopting the same modernist principles, the new housing would be built within a park-like setting, with minimal vehicular access. The residential buildings took on the form of townhouses (again designed by John Hoare) and five, fourteen storey highrises, designed by architect Peter Dickinson, then with Page + Steele. At the time, these structures were regarded as a major advancement in public housing. John Sewell described the highrises as "innovative, replicating ideas Le Corbusier had used in Unite d'habitation in Marseilles." (Sewell, John. *The Shape of the City: Toronto Struggles with Modern Planning*, p110).

The decline of Regent Park has often been blamed on the inadequacies of its modernist design. A great deal of research has been conducted in hope of defining the 'problem' of Regent Park. Regardless of its failures, the Regent Park experience has important messages for us in planning and social reform, which should not be forgotten.

Reasons for Listing:

The property at 14 Blevins Place (Dickinson Tower) is recommended for inclusion on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties for its cultural heritage value and interest.

Located in Regent Park South, 14 Blevins Place (Dickinson Tower) is one of five high-rise buildings. Designed by the important Toronto architect Peter Dickinson, then with Page + Steele Architects, the project won the Massey Medal for Architecture. Dickinson's design featured two-storey apartments that separated the bedrooms from the living space and enabled units to front onto both sides of the building. The heritage attributes are found on the exterior walls and roof. Standing 14 storeys tall, the building is made of red brick with a flat roof. The pattern of the fenestration is a significant feature. Windows divide the façade into twelve vertical sections, and clusters of 10-12 windows are grouped within these sections. Originally, balconies were incorporated into the facade. The elevator shaft can be seen in the centre of the façade on either side of the building. The ground floor tenants on the west side of the building have private gardens, which have been enclosed by a wooden fence.

Conclusions:

It is recommended that City Council include the property at 14 Blevins Place (Dickinson Tower) on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties.

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Joe Halstead
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List of Attachments:

Attachment No.: 1 – Location Map (14 Blevins Place)
Attachment No.: 2A – Photographs (14 Blevins Place)
Attachment No.: 2B – Photographs (14 Blevins Place)