

Statement of Cultural Heritage Value and Interest

The cultural heritage value and interest of the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood HCD is based on three factors. The District has historical value as the original footprint of the town of York, which was the seat of government for Upper Canada and which evolved into the City of Toronto and capital of Ontario. Secondly, the District has its own distinctive physical character, which includes its concentration of 19th century buildings. Thirdly, the District has contextual, social and community significance by virtue of its numerous institutions and landmarks, including the St. Lawrence Market and Hall, St. James' Cathedral and its numerous theatres.

The St. Lawrence Neighbourhood is a large mixed-use area to the east of Toronto's downtown core. Its southern border takes in both sides of Front Street East. Its eastern edge is defined by the western side of Parliament Street from Front Street East north to King Street East and includes the 51 Division police station at the northeast corner of that intersection; north of King Street East, the border takes in the west side of Berkeley Street. Adelaide Street forms the northern border of the District; both the north and south side of Adelaide Street are included with the exception of the northern properties at the east and west ends. The western boundary encompasses both sides of Victoria Street up to Front Street East, and then south again including the buildings on the east side of Yonge Street.

The area is also bordered by the St. Lawrence residential neighbourhood to the south, the Cabbagetown, the Garden District and St. James neighbourhoods to the north, Corktown to the northeast, the Financial District to the west, and the Union Station Heritage Conservation District to the southwest.

District Historical Value

The District encompasses the original 10 blocks of the town of York, the First Parliament Buildings site and the land parcels originally reserved for the church, the market, the gaol, and the courthouse. Its western half includes the St. Lawrence Market, St. Lawrence Hall, St. James' Cathedral and Park, the Gooderham Flatiron Building, Berczy Park, and numerous 19th century commercial warehouse buildings; its eastern half includes a number of historic industrial buildings, including a concentration of Consumers' Gas buildings.

The District has significant historical value, because in a very real sense, in terms of community activity, commerce and political events, the District may be characterized as the birthplace of the City of Toronto. Its historical value is further enhanced by the number of significant events that occurred within its boundaries. These include the survey of the original 10 blocks defining the town of York and the siting of the First Parliament buildings. It was in relation to this central core that measures were taken to establish the military reserve and the construction of Fort York to the west; the government reserve to the east; and the Walks and Gardens reserve along the shoreline. The City's first civic functions, including the market, city hall, police station, church, jail, courthouse, school, post office and meeting halls, were all built within the District.

The historical value of the District's original and evolving character remains legible in the extant buildings and urban fabric. The District's early development (1793 to 1849) encompassed the foundation of the town of York, its designation as the capital of Upper Canada in 1796, its initial growth period with the extension of the street pattern westward in 1797, its expansion southwards with the infilling of the water lots that extended into the harbour, and its incorporation into the City of Toronto in 1834. The development patterns established in that period are still legible today. They include the original street grid of the first 10 residential blocks and the continuous use of the church and market on their originally reserved lands. This early period also marked the gradual concentration of commercial warehouses in the western half, and industrial buildings in the eastern half as well as along the harbour to the south. The advent of the rail, the reconstruction following the fire of 1849, and the infilling of the water lots in the harbour initiated a period of intensification from 1850 to 1920. The District's rich history also signals its potential as an archaeologically significant area.

Many of the events that have marked the District's history link it to a wider historical framework and story. The rapid early expansion was the result of migration pressures from Loyalists leaving the newly independent United States in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The subsequent War of 1812 resulted in an American occupation of the town of York, the burning of the Parliament Buildings and the destruction of the Government House in Fort York, leading to the retaliatory attack on Washington and the burning of the White House. A more substantial, albeit accidental, fire in 1849 destroyed an extensive part of the centre of the neighbourhood, including the original church and market, which were subsequently rebuilt as the present day St. James' Cathedral and St. Lawrence Hall. A significant change to the urban fabric resulted from the advent of the rail in the 1850s, which along with the harbour growth, greatly increased economic trade and development. The City's relationship to the waterfront was inexorably altered as the harbour was subdivided into water lots and filled in. The initiative undertaken in the 1960s for the centenary of the Confederation resulted in the creation of the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts.

The District is also associated with the founding fathers of the City and with some of its most prominent citizens. These have included John Graves Simcoe, the first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada; Peter Russell, the Administrator of Upper Canada; Lieutenant Governor Peter Hunter; William Berczy; William Lyon MacKenzie; William and George Gooderham and James Worts.

District Physical Character

The District's cultural heritage value and interest also stems from its high concentration of 19th and early 20th century buildings. At the time of the HCD Study and this Plan's development, the District contained 45 buildings that were listed in the City of Toronto's Heritage Register, 65 buildings that were designated under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act, and 4 National Historic Sites. Although more recent development approvals are sometimes larger in scale, the predominant scale of the heritage buildings in the District consists of one to four storey buildings interspersed with five to ten storey buildings, with streetwall heights not exceeding the width of the right-of-way. This generates a sense of visual continuity within the District, arising from the continuous street elevations of buildings built to their lot lines with shared party walls; as well as the relationship of the resulting streetwall to the overall street widths.

Two historical building typologies exemplify the District's overall physical character and historical evolution. The commercial warehouses have a tripartite design with a storefront base, above which sit two to three storeys with regular window bays and either an expressed cornice or a mansard roof. The finer grain of this typology is expressed as a single lot, either in individual buildings or in vertical bays of wider buildings, which in turn correspond to the storefront widths. The frame and entablature of these storefronts create a strong, continuous horizontal datum line. By contrast, the industrial buildings are characterized by a large footprint, a more uniform elevation with repetitive bays of windows, and little porosity at street level.

Other architectural characteristics include the predominant use of brick, which is often polychromed; the use of stone for more prominent buildings; the decorative detailing of the brick and stonework; the ornamentation of storefronts and cast iron work; and the proportions of the windows.

More recent building typologies within the District include five to ten storey buildings with gradual step-backs, as well as towers on base buildings. These can be found throughout the Neighbourhood, but do not contribute to the cultural heritage value of the District. Similarly, there are some, more recent existing or approved but not yet constructed buildings within the District with heights significantly taller on base buildings as high as five to ten storeys. To date, the numbers of such buildings have not impacted the District's physical character; however such buildings do not contribute to the cultural heritage value of the District and there is potential for an overabundance of the tall building built form to undermine the physical character of the District.

Two elements of the District's physical character stand out as representative of its cultural heritage value and interest. One element arises from the number of structures that are unique and architecturally significant within the City. Examples include the Gooderham Building, Alumnae Theatre, and St. James Cathedral. Such important landmark structures help define the character and identity of the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood. In addition to such buildings, the overall physical texture and built form of the structures within the District results in a historic enclave within the City in proximity and in contrast to the intensity and the built form of nearby areas such as the City's Financial District.

District Social and Community Significance

The District's historic value, together with its physical character as described above, establish a contextual framework for the District's social and community significance. This cultural heritage value and interest operates both locally and on a much broader scale. Local neighbourhood character is a key component of life in the City of Toronto. In this regard the contextual framework of the District creates a strong sense of place and community. This social value is evident in the strong community activism and neighbourhood pride that characterizes the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood.

In addition, on a broader scale the District serves as an identifiable City landmark. The "Old Town" contains numerous institutions that continue to attract visitors to the District to enjoy its attractions and participate in its ambience from across the City and beyond. Examples of institutions anchoring the broader cultural heritage value and interest and of the District and reinforcing its social value to the community at large include St. Lawrence Hall and the north and south markets, which have since their inception been focal points for civic activities. The theatre clusters at the eastern and western edges reinforce and sustain cultural activities. St. James Cathedral, as the home of the Diocese of Toronto and the Anglican Church of Canada, is a historic religious anchor located within the District. Berzcy Park, St. James Park, Courthouse Square and the Sculpture Garden, together with David Crombie Park immediately to the south of the District, provide important green spaces.