

Heritage Property Report

York Wilson House  
41 Alcina Avenue

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# TORONTO HISTORICAL BOARD

## Heritage Property Report

### Basic Building Data:

Address: 41 Alcina Avenue (south side of Alcina Avenue, between Bathurst Street and Wychwood Avenue)

Ward: 14

Current Name: York Wilson House

Historical Name: York Wilson House

Construction Date: 1955

Architect: John B. Layng

Contractor/Builder: not found

Additions/Alterations: glazed single-storey sunporch added to south wall; glazed porch added to entrance on west wall

Original Owners: R. York Wilson, artist, and Lela M. Wilson

Original Use: residential (detached house)

Current Use\*: residential (detached house)

Heritage Category: Landmark Heritage Property (Category A)

Recording Date: June 1997

Recorder: HPD:KA

\* this does not refer to permitted use(s) as defined in the Zoning By-law

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

### 1. R. York Wilson, artist

The Toronto-born artist, Ronald York Wilson (1907-1984), received formal training in art at the Central Technical School where his instructors included muralist Frederick Challener and stained glass artist Peter Haworth. He continued night school classes at the Ontario College of Art while working at Brigdens Limited, one of Toronto's largest commercial art studios, where artist Charles Comfort was on staff. He next joined Sampson Matthews Limited, whose staff included Frank Carmichael of the Group of Seven. When York Wilson left Sampson Matthews at age 19, his employer provided a letter of recommendation which stated: "To whom it may concern: I would not hesitate to recommend this man and his work to anyone in the world whatsoever". York Wilson worked for two commercial studios in Detroit from 1927 to 1930. Returning to Toronto, he and designer Wesley Flinn formed a short-lived partnership. York Wilson freelanced as one of Toronto's leading commercial illustrators in the 1930s, working primarily for advertising agencies. He rented studio space in the New Wellington Building on Wellington Street West where up and coming Toronto artists, including Jack Bush and Walter Yarwood, also retained studios.

In 1931, the first public exhibitions of York Wilson's paintings were held at the Montreal Museum and the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario). During the decade, he experimented with different themes in oils and watercolours, moving from landscapes and character studies to burlesque scenes. After completing his first large-scale oil painting, "Burlesque No. 2", York Wilson was invited to display his work as part of the Canadian Group of Painters' show at the New York World's Fair in 1939. The following year, his first mural was commissioned by Lord Thomson of Fleet for the Northern Broadcasting and Publishing Limited Building in Timmins, Ontario.

After 1943, York Wilson divided his time between commercial illustration and his own compositions. The first full-scale showing of York Wilson's work occurred in 1944 when he participated in a two-man show with fellow artist Jack Bush. His first solo exhibition was held in 1948. The next year, York Wilson turned to painting full-time.

York Wilson travelled internationally to further his artistic development, visiting the Arctic, West Indies, Far East, Africa and Europe, where he resided in Paris from 1959 to 1964. During extended periods spent in Mexico, he was influenced by the monumental Mexican wall paintings. Beginning in the 1950s and continuing into the 1970s, he moved from figurative compositions to those increasingly abstract in form and colour. His work, "Margaritones", represented Canada at the Carnegie International Biennial Exhibition in Pittsburgh in 1952. York Wilson began a series of collages in the early 1960s and, by the end of the decade, devised paintings and tapestries with hard-edged geometric designs and a limited palette. Among his numerous international exhibitions, his work was shown in Calcutta in 1978, along with that of Jean Arp and Frank Stella.

In Canada, York Wilson is best known as one of the most prolific Modern mural painters, executing more than a dozen murals between 1940 and 1970. His two-panel mural in the Imperial Oil Building on St. Clair Avenue West was completed in 1954 as the largest mural in Canada. His most famous work is the "Seven Lively Arts", a 100-foot-long panel unveiled with the opening of the O'Keefe Centre (now the Hummingbird Centre for the Performing Arts) in 1960. His mural studies are the subject of an exhibition at Carleton University, Ottawa, in 1997.

York Wilson exhibited regularly with the Canadian Group of Painters from 1939 until the group disbanded. He was elected to the membership of the Ontario Society of Artists in 1942, becoming president in 1946. An associate member of the Royal Canadian Academy in 1945, York Wilson was also an active member of the Arts and Letters Club of Toronto. Following his death in 1984, a bust of York Wilson, sculpted by Canadian artist Cleeve Horne, was unveiled in the Arts and Letters Club.

York Wilson is identified as the most important Modern Canadian mural designer. He is also known as one of Canada's finest abstract painters and for introducing new media for paintings and murals. His paintings and collages are found in private collections and public galleries in Canada and abroad. Paul Duval, writing in *York Wilson* (Ottawa: Wallach Galleries, 1978, 157), commented "for more than 50 years, York Wilson has contributed, to an ever increasing degree, to the annals of contemporary art. He has witnessed, and been part of, many historical changes that have shaped Canadian painting. His role has been greater than is yet generally recognized. The future...will place him among the pre-eminent national artists of his era".

## 2. York Wilson House, 41 Alcina Avenue

In the early 1950s, York Wilson and his wife, Lela Miller Wilson, commissioned Toronto architect John B. Layng to design a house and studio on Alcina Avenue. The artist worked closely with the architect as architectural drawings were prepared in the fall of 1954 and the spring of 1955.

After working in the office of Toronto architect Mackenzie Waters, John Layng evidently joined the staff of John B. Parkin, who established a private practice in 1947. A decade later, John B. Parkin formed a partnership with fellow architect John C. Parkin (no relation). John B. Parkin Associates, offering architectural, landscape and interior design with engineering services, emerged as one of the leading architectural firms in Toronto during the post-World War II era. With John C. Parkin as partner-in-charge of design, the firm established European Modernism in the city, beginning in 1954 with the Ontario Association of Architects (OAA) Building at 50 Park Road (included on the *City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties* and designated under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act).

Layng's design for the York Wilson House incorporated the asymmetrical composition, long linear roof, broad expanses of glass with smaller window openings placed according to interior arrangement, and lack of ornament identified with Modernist design. His work shows the influence of the contemporary West Coast residential architecture of the Vancouver School, where architectural design was related to the practical concerns of climate, materials and technology. The C. E. (Ned) Pratt House, completed about 1946 in West Vancouver by the firm of Thompson, Berwick and Pratt, incorporates an open plan with radiant heating, expanses of glass on the north and south facades, and a detached carport separated from the residence by a walkway, elements that are present in Layng's design for 41 Alcina Avenue.

### ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

The York Wilson House is set back from Alcina Avenue behind a carport -- identified as a pergola on the architect's original drawings -- using post-and-beam construction. From the carport, a flagstone walkway leads to the side entrance of the house.

The York Wilson House features a two-storey split-level plan with brick, wood and glass construction. The structure is covered by a butterfly or inverted gable roof with a brick chimney

on the south slope. At the apex of the roof, a clerestory window provides light to the interior service areas of the house.

On the north elevation facing Alcina Avenue, the wall is almost fully glazed with continuous full-height windows in wood frames, lighting the artist's studio within. The south (rear) wall, rising two stories, has two tiers of continuous window openings set in wood frames. At the east end of the lower floor, a door provides access to the terrace. The terrace is now enclosed by a single-storey glass sunroom which was not part of the original design of the house.

The main entrance to the house is placed on the west (side) wall, where the slab door was designed by York Wilson as a mural using silicon and fibre glass. The door is flanked by a glazed sidelight and oversized two-part transom which light the hall inside. The entrance is currently protected by a glazed porch, which was a later addition. On the south (right) side of the door, a vertical window opening has a two-part window with a panelled apron below and a glazed transom above. On the east wall, a specially designed door, measuring over two feet wide, allows large works of art to be transported to and from the studio. This wall has a secondary entrance leading to the ground-floor kitchen, and two small window openings with sliding sash windows.

On the interior, the entrance opens into a long hallway which runs east and west across the centre of the house, separating the two-storey artist's studio in the north section from the two-storey living areas in the south. The high walls in the hallway serve as a gallery for works of art. The hallway extends to the east end of the house where, at the south (right) side, an open staircase leads down to the service areas and up to the second floor. The staircase, which narrows where it descends to the lower storey, has steel railings and birch wood bannisters.

Inside the entrance door, to the right (south), a balcony in the upper storey allows light and visual access to the master bedroom. Below the balcony, a set of stairs with flagstone steps leads down to the combination living and dining rooms. This living area extends across the south end of the lower floor. The north wall is brick and contains a fireplace and a cantilevered stone hearth. The floors in this area and the main hallway are covered by flagstone flooring with radiant heating coils.

Off the north (left) side of the hallway, a door leads into the two-storey studio. A set of stairs leads down to the lower level, set below grade. The north wall is glazed in the upper storey, and the remaining blank walls provide storage areas and allow the display of large works of art.

The interiors included in the "Reasons for Designation" are illustrated in the attached photographs (Attachment III; the photographs are not part of the designating by-law). The service areas, along the east wall and in the core of the building (furnace room and kitchen on the lower floor, and bathroom and storage area on the upper floor) are not included in the "Reasons for Designation". The two bedrooms along the south end of the upper floor, which are separated by a wall divider with closets, are excluded from the "Reasons", apart from the balcony in the master bedroom described above.

#### CONTEXT:

The York Wilson House is located on the south side of Alcina Avenue, between Bathurst Street and Wychwood Avenue. The land for York Wilson's house was severed from the neighbouring property on the west, identified as 45 Alcina Avenue. The latter site, containing the Michael Chapman House (dated 1910), is part of the Wychwood Park Heritage Conservation District, designated under Part V of the Ontario Heritage Act in 1985. Wychwood Park was established by

Alterations to a Designated Heritage Property – 41 Alcina Avenue

landscape painter Marmaduke Matthews and his neighbours as a residential community inspired, in part, by an artists colony in the Catskills near Onteora, New York. Wychwood Park developed in three distinct phases, beginning in the late 19th century and continuing into the mid 20th century. When the boundaries of the Heritage Conservation District were established, the property at 41 Alcina Avenue was not included.

East and north of the York Wilson House, the neighbouring properties on Alcina Avenue contain late 19th and early 20th century house form buildings. With its setback from Alcina Avenue and unique appearance, the York Wilson House is a landmark on the street and in the area.

#### SUMMARY:

The York Wilson House at 41 Alcina Avenue is historically significant as the last residence of the important Canadian artist and his family. York Wilson enjoyed a successful career as a commercial artist while pursuing his interest in painting. After turning to painting full-time in 1949, he moved from figurative to abstract compositions and experimented with different media. Through his extensive travels and exhibitions, York Wilson became an artist of international repute. In Canada, he is perhaps best known for his series of murals, among them the “Seven Lively Arts” designed for the O’Keefe Centre in Toronto. York Wilson’s work is represented in public galleries and private collections in Canada and throughout the world.

The York Wilson House is architecturally important as an outstanding example of Modernist architecture in Toronto. Custom-designed for the artist, the house combines a split-level plan with a butterfly roof and innovative techniques, such as the radiant heating system. Located adjacent to the Wychwood Park Heritage Conservation District, the York Wilson House is an individual landmark in the area.

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Kathryn Anderson  
June 1997

## Short Statement of Reasons for Designation

### York Wilson House 41 Alcina Avenue

The property at 41 Alcina Avenue is designated for architectural and historical reasons. The house was completed in 1955 according to the designs of Toronto architect, John B. Layng, who worked closely with his client, artist R. York Wilson. The design incorporated a studio and living quarters for the artist and his family. York Wilson (1907-1984) was one of Canada's pre-eminent abstract artists, whose works were exhibited internationally and are represented in private and public collections in Canada and abroad. He is recognized as the most important Modern Canadian mural designer, executing over a dozen murals, including the "Seven Lively Arts" in the lobby of the O'Keefe Centre (now the Hummingbird Centre for the Performing Arts).

The York Wilson House is an important example of post-World War II residential design in Toronto, displaying elements drawn from Modernist architecture. The custom-built design contains living space and an artist's studio in a unique split-level plan covered by a butterfly or inverted gable roof. The exterior brick walls mix broad expanses of windows on the north and south elevations with smaller openings on the side walls and in the clerestory. The main entrance door, placed on the west wall, was designed by York Wilson. The interior is organized into an artist's studio (north) and living quarters (south) divided by a hallway. At the west end of the hall, an open stairway, with a balcony above, leads down to the living areas. A secondary staircase, linking service areas on two levels, is found at the east end of the hall. In the south part of the house, the first-floor combination living and dining room has a brick (north) wall with a fireplace and a cantilevered stone hearth. Opposite, a continuous glass wall (south) faces the garden. Flagstone floors in the hall and living-dining room contain radiant heating coils. In the north section of the building, a two-storey artist's studio has a special door on the east wall for the removal of large paintings.

The York Wilson House is located on the south side of Alcina Avenue, midway between Bathurst Street and Wychwood Avenue and adjacent to the Wychwood Park Heritage Conservation District. As the custom-designed residence and studio of the important Canadian artist, York Wilson, the house is a significant example of post-World War II Modernist architecture, and an individual neighbourhood landmark.