

RESEARCH, EVALUATION & VISUAL RESOURCES

81 ISABELLA STREET

ATTACHMENT 3

In undertaking this research and evaluation, we recognize that the area now known as the City of Toronto is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples, and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit (1805), and the Williams Treaties (1923), signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.



Figure 3. The principal (north) elevations of 81 Isabella Street (Heritage Planning, 2025).

1. DESCRIPTION

81 ISABELLA STREET - The Merlan Apartments	
ADDRESS	81 Isabella Street (including entrance address at 83 Isabella Street)
WARD	Ward 13 - Toronto-Centre
NEIGHBOURHOOD/COMMUNITY	Church-Wellesley ¹
CONSTRUCTION DATE	1927
ORIGINAL USE	Multi-unit residential
CURRENT USE* (*This does not refer to permitted use(s) as defined by the Zoning By-law	Multi-unit residential
ARCHITECT/BUILDER/DESIGNER	Norman Alexander Armstrong

1 As defined by City of Toronto Neighbourhoods map and profiles

ADDITIONS/ALTERATIONS	See Section 3
LISTING DATE	December 17, 2024

2. ONTARIO REGULATION 9/06 CHECKLIST:

CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING CULTURAL HERITAGE VALUE OR INTEREST

The following checklist identifies the prescribed criteria met by the subject property at 81 Isabella Street (including entrance address 83 Isabella Street) for municipal designation under Part IV, Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act. There are a total of nine criteria under O. Reg 9/06. A property may be designated under Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act if the property meets two or more of the provincial criteria for determining whether it is of cultural heritage value or interest.

The evaluation table is marked "N/A" if the criterion is "not applicable" to the property or "✓" if it is applicable to the property.

81 ISABELLA STREET

1.	The property has design value or physical value because it is a rare, unique, representative or early example of a style, type, expression, material or construction method.	✓
2.	The property has design value or physical value because it displays a high degree of craftsmanship or artistic merit.	N/A
3.	The property has design value or physical value because it demonstrates a high degree of technical or scientific achievement.	N/A
4.	The property has historical value or associative value because it has direct associations with a theme, event, belief, person, activity, organization or institution that is significant to a community.	N/A
5.	The property has historical value or associative value because it yields, or has the potential to yield, information that contributes to an understanding of a community or culture.	✓
6.	The property has historical value or associative value because it demonstrates or reflects the work or ideas of an architect, artist, builder, designer or theorist who is significant to a community.	✓
7.	The property has contextual value because it is important in defining, maintaining or supporting the character of an area.	✓
8.	The property has contextual value because it is physically, functionally, visually or historically linked to its surroundings.	N/A
9.	The property has contextual value because it is a landmark.	N/A

3. RESEARCH

This section of the report describes the history, architecture, and context of the property. Visual resources related to the research are located in Section 4. Archival and contemporary sources for the research are found in Section 5 (List of Sources).

i. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The following section outlines the history and facts related to the property which are the basis for determining historical or associative value of Criteria 4, 5 or 6 according to O. Reg. 9/06 Criteria.

20th-Century Apartment House Development in Church-Wellesley Village area

By 1880, the entire area between Queen and Bloor Streets had largely been infilled with development, with residential streets, such as Isabella Street, lined with single-family houses in detached, semi-detached and row house forms. In the first few decades of the 20th-century, the area transitioned from an area of single-family residences - including some of the city's most substantial - to a zone still containing a concentration of nearly forty extant apartment houses between Bay, Bloor, Carlton, and Sherbourne Streets. Due to the area's close proximity to downtown, it was one of the first areas of the City redeveloped during the pre-First World War era into an area dominated by apartment buildings, especially east of Yonge Street.² The subject property at 81 Isabella Street, known as the Merlan Apartments, reflects this historic transition and development of the Church-Wellesley Village neighbourhood.

Development of the apartment building typology had been late to begin in Toronto with the first being constructed only in 1899, and just eight buildings completed by 1907.³ Comparatively, apartments were long established as a successful and prestigious housing form in the densely populated cities of Europe by the later part of the 1800s. In the United States, the first apartment houses were constructed in Boston in 1857 and in New York in 1869.⁴ In Chicago, in 1883 alone, more than 1100 apartment houses were constructed, and by 1900 there were three times as many apartment dwellings constructed compared to houses.⁵

The apartment buildings first constructed in Toronto and elsewhere in Canada after 1900 were initially targeted at the more affluent classes whose ability to pay higher rents would provide the greatest return on investment for this new housing model. Initially, there was some opposition to apartment buildings in Toronto because despite the affluent target market, apartments were perceived by some as perpetuating the impoverished situations of overcrowded tenement buildings.⁶ Concern was expressed for lack of privacy, noise, unsanitary conditions, the destruction of family life, increase in divorce, the fostering of idle housewives and the impact on children who would lose their freedom to play nosily indoors and have easy access to outdoor space.⁷ However, the City's well-travelled residents were aware of apartment buildings in sophisticated centres such as Paris, London, and New York, and their interest spearheaded the local appetite for this alternative housing form. This awareness, as well as the City's burgeoning population growth especially in the first decade of the 1900s, combined to

² E.R.A. Architecture

³ Dennis, Richard

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

make development of the City's early apartment houses an attractive development proposition.⁸

81 Isabella Street

The subject property was developed in 1927 by Merlan Apartments Ltd. Prior to 1927, the subject property had been a part of three lots of an 1871 subdivision plan created by W.B. Scarth, Esq (Figure 4). Scarth was the co-owner of the shipowners and timber merchants, Scarth Brothers. This subdivision plan was a portion of Block 5, part of former Park Lot 7, First Concession from the Bay. The northern 60 acres of Park Lot 7 were originally purchased from John McGill to John Elmsley in 1799. Elmsley divided the lands into several blocks between Wellesley and Bloor numbered 1 to 5.

The subdivision plan of Scarth, part of Block 5, consisted of eleven lots where six fronted Isabella Street and five fronted Church Street. There was also a laneway off Isabella Street. Residential construction started on the Isabella Street lots between 1873 and 1874, and by 1878 houses were constructed on all six lots. The 1889 fire insurance plan shows the former detached residential building at 87 Isabella Street was of wood construction and the remaining buildings were of brick construction (Figure 5). This wooden structure was replaced by a brick duplex building based on the 1913 fire insurance plan (Figure 6).

By the 1920s, this section of central Toronto was seeing rapid development with encroaching commercialization and the redevelopment of single-family residences into Toronto's most concentrated area of apartment houses. In 1927, *The Toronto Daily Star* indicated that the new Merlan Apartments will cost \$250,000 to build and included a drawing of the building (Figure 7).⁹ Of the six lots that fronted Isabella, lots 6, 7, and 8 contained the Merlan Apartments, and the buildings on lots 9, 10, and 11 survived until 1964 when a 13-storey apartment was constructed at 89 Isabella Street (Figure 8).

81 Isabella Street attracted mostly single residents given that the units were bachelor apartments. On the south side of the building, there are larger garden suites. The ground floor units are slightly below grade, which was constructed this way in part to maintain lower-scale buildings when initially introducing apartment buildings into areas populated with houses (Figure 9). By the mid-1900s, many area houses had become rentals, boarding houses and apartments attracting single people who would come to define the demographic make-up of the Church-Wellesley Village area. The property is located between two of Toronto's premier streets, Jarvis and Sherbourne Streets. What had been developed as an affluent suburban area saw an influx of middle and working class residents seeking accommodations to rent rather than to own in close proximity to downtown.

The variety of residents who lived at the Merlan Apartments included the working-class, teachers, and those involved with the arts such as Dr. Ethel Chapman and Phyllis Webb. Dr. Chapman (1888-1976) lived at the apartments from 1939 until 1974, she was a teacher and author. Phyllis Webb (1927-2021) lived at the Merlan Apartments

⁸ Dennis, Richard

⁹ "Above is a drawing by Armstrong....," *The Toronto Daily Star* (Toronto), September 30, 1927, ProQuest Historical Newspapers

between 1965 and 1967, she was a queer feminist poet and broadcaster, as well as an Officer of the Order of Canada and a recipient of the Governor General's Award. While she lived at the Merlan, her work *Naked Poems* was published in 1965, which was referred to by fellow poet Phil Hall as "the mother of the long poem in Canada".¹⁰ In 1965, Webb also created the CBC radio program "The Best Ideas You'll Hear Tonight" with William A. Young. The radio program still exists today as "Ideas", hosted by Nahlah Ayed.

Architect for 81 Isabella Street: Norman Alexander Armstrong

The architect Norman Alexander Armstrong (1882-1957) designed the Merlan Apartments at 81 Isabella Street. Armstrong was born in Queenston, Ontario and trained with Toronto architect J.W. Siddall between 1902 and 1904. Shortly thereafter, Armstrong relocated to the United States and then returned to Toronto in 1919 and started the N.A. Armstrong Company Ltd. His practice worked on apartment buildings, commercial and retail operations, and residences. 81 Isabella Street was one of his first apartment designs. In Toronto, Armstrong also designed the Mayfair Apartments (1928), the Haddon Hall Apartments (1928), and the St. Edmunds Apartments (1929-1930). During the 1950s Armstrong passed on his practice to his son William G. Armstrong.

There are three Part IV designated buildings designed by Armstrong in Toronto: the Savarin Tavern (1929), the Singer Sewer Company (1938), and the International Harvester Building (1940). In Oakville, there are two Part IV designated buildings designed by Armstrong including a residence for Gordon E. Perdue (1940), and a residence for Ms. William Merry (1948). In addition to the buildings that have been recognized in Toronto and Oakville, Armstrong's body of work also included other properties recognized under the Ontario Heritage Act in Oshawa, Brampton, Brantford, and London.

ii. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The following section provides an architectural description and analysis related to the property which will establish the basis for determining design or physical value of Criteria 1, 2 or 3 according to O. Reg. 9/06 Criteria.

81 Isabella Street (1927)

The property at 81 Isabella Street comprises a two-storey apartment building with raised basement designed in a Period Revival architectural style with Edwardian influences, which has been clad in brick with limestone accents (Figure 3). Dating to 1927, the building features a "U"-plan with a flat roof. The building contains a partially sunk ground floor and a basement. The principal (north) elevations front onto Isabella Street with a small setback from the sidewalk and is located in between an open grassed area to the east and a laneway to the west. The principal (north) elevations are symmetrically arranged and contain two wings. The building's "U"-plan features two symmetrical wings that face the street and frame a small courtyard space. This "U"-shaped plan was a

¹⁰ E.R.A.

deliberate design decision to ensure that maximum daylight and air circulation were provided for all units. The street-facing elevations have more ornate design features than the other elevations of the building (Figure 10).

Norman Alexander Armstrong designed the building in the Period Revival architectural style with Edwardian influences, and most of the key features of this design are visible on the building's principal (north) elevations, which is arranged into three symmetrical vertical bays on each wing. The Period Revival style with Edwardian influences was popular in Toronto in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially with the emergence of apartment buildings in Ontario. The style displays a classical vocabulary employed in both massing and detailing. Classical components appear most decorated at window and door openings. Classical elements include bold cornices, subtle masonry embellishments, parapet roofs, red brick, terracotta, or stone accents.

Characteristic of the style, the building's main façades are symmetrically arranged containing two wings detailed with ornamented window and door openings. The principal (north) elevations of the wings have a dignified rusticated base, which follows with rugg brick, a quoined section located at the first and second storeys, then topped by a cornice and brick parapet (Figures 11 and 12). Archival photography shows that the cornice and brick parapet have been over-clad (Figures 13, 14, and 15). Other defining classical elements include the twin main entrance doorway surrounds with their pilasters and entablatures, a limestone belt course that separates the ground floor from the upper levels, and limestone block quoining defining the outer perimeter of the twin principal (north) elevations. The front doors are framed by stone surrounds with classical detailing that includes an entablature containing "The Merlan" text adorned directly above with dentils and a deep cornice (Figure 16). The window surrounds are also framed by limestone, featuring key jambs, bracketed sills, and bold lintels that contain a cornice. A limestone belt course that separates the ground floor from the upper levels, and limestone block quoining defining the outer perimeter of the twin principal (north) elevations.

iii. CONTEXT

The following section provides contextual information and analysis related to the property which is the basis for determining contextual value of Criteria 7, 8 or 9 according to O. Reg. 9/06 Criteria.

The City of Toronto Property Data Map attached (Attachment 2) shows the site of the subject property at 81 Isabella Street. The property is situated on the south side of Isabella Street between Church Street and Jarvis Street (Figures 1 and 2).

The Church-Wellesley Village contains a significant number of early 20th-century apartment houses leading to a distinct and notable concentration of nearly forty such buildings between Bay, Bloor, Carlton, and Sherbourne Streets (Figure 17).¹¹ The majority of these apartments, generally six storeys or less in height, were developed in the 1920s and early 1930s. On Isabella Street, in between Church and Shelbourne Streets, the Merlan Apartments is joined by two other historic apartment buildings which

¹¹ E.R.A.

contribute to the concentration of early 20th-century apartment buildings in the Church-Wellesley Village area: the 1917 Aughisto Apartments at 72 Isabella Street, and the 1926 Isabella Arms Apartments at 96 Isabella Street.

Nearby buildings designated under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act include: the semi-detached house at 90-92 Isabella Street (c.1888), the Manhattan Apartments at 628 Church Street (1909), and the Gloucester Mansions (1911) at 596 Church Street.

4. VISUAL RESOURCES

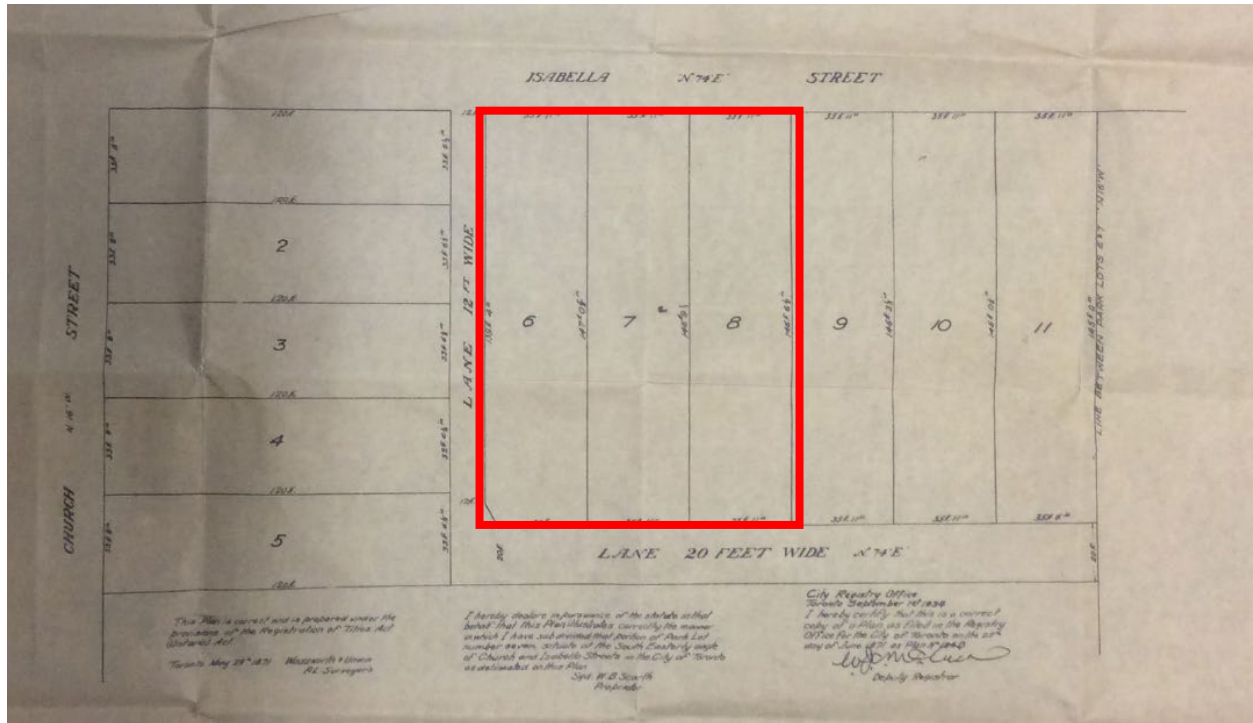


Figure 4. 1871 Subdivision Plan D106, which shows eleven lots, six fronting Isabella Street and five fronting Church Street (Land Registry of Ontario). Approximate location of the subject property is outlined in red (annotated by Heritage Planning).



Figure 5. Excerpt of 1889 Fire Insurance Plan, which shows houses constructed on all six lots on Isabella Street. 87 Isabella Street was constructed in wood and the remaining buildings were of brick construction (University of Toronto). Approximate location of the subject property is outline in red (annotated by Heritage Planning). Note that the buildings shown in this image are those that pre-date the extant buildings today.

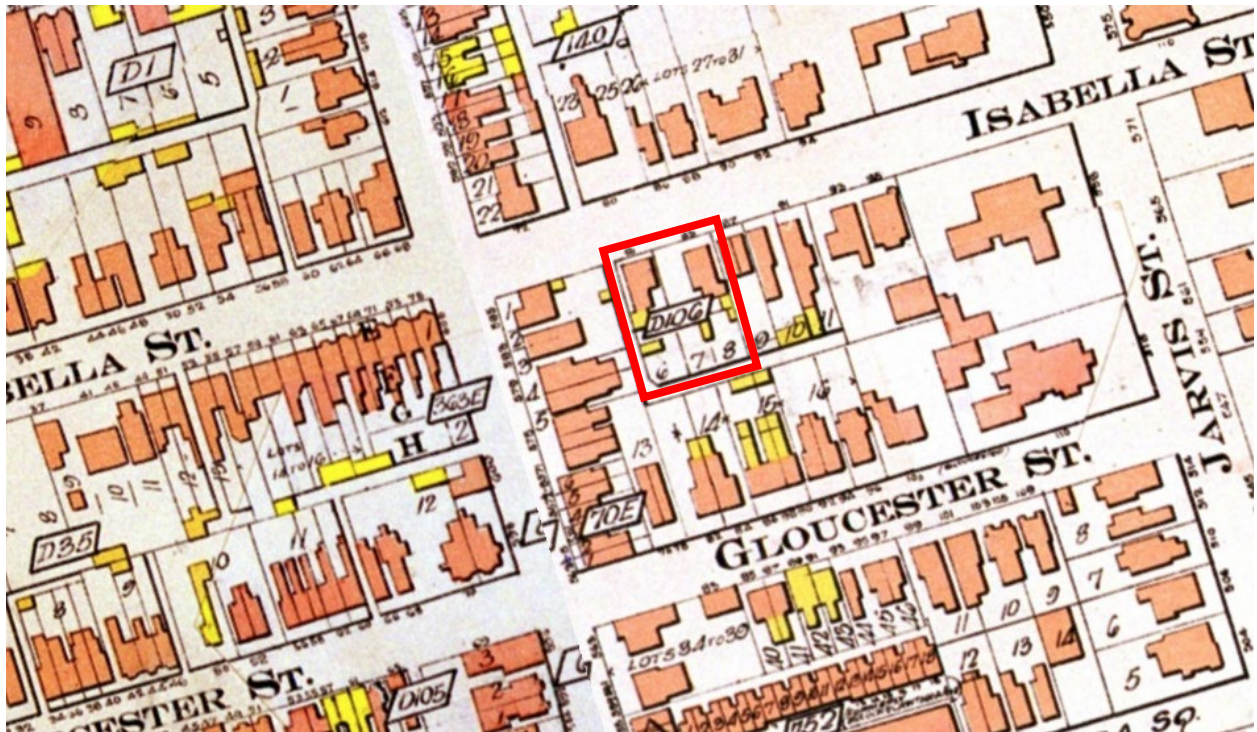


Figure 6. Excerpt 1913 Fire Insurance Plan, which shows the houses constructed on Isabella Street on all six lots, however 87 Isabella Street is now constructed in brick, matching the other late 19th-century houses (University of Toronto). Approximate location of subject property outlined in red (annotated by Heritage Planning). Note that the buildings shown in this image are those that pre-date the extant buildings today.



Figure 7. 1927 drawing of the Merlan Apartments (Toronto Daily Star).



Figure 8. Historic aerial photo from 1965, which shows the introduction of high-rise buildings adjacent to the subject property (City of Toronto). Approximate location of the subject property is outlined in red (annotated by Heritage Planning).

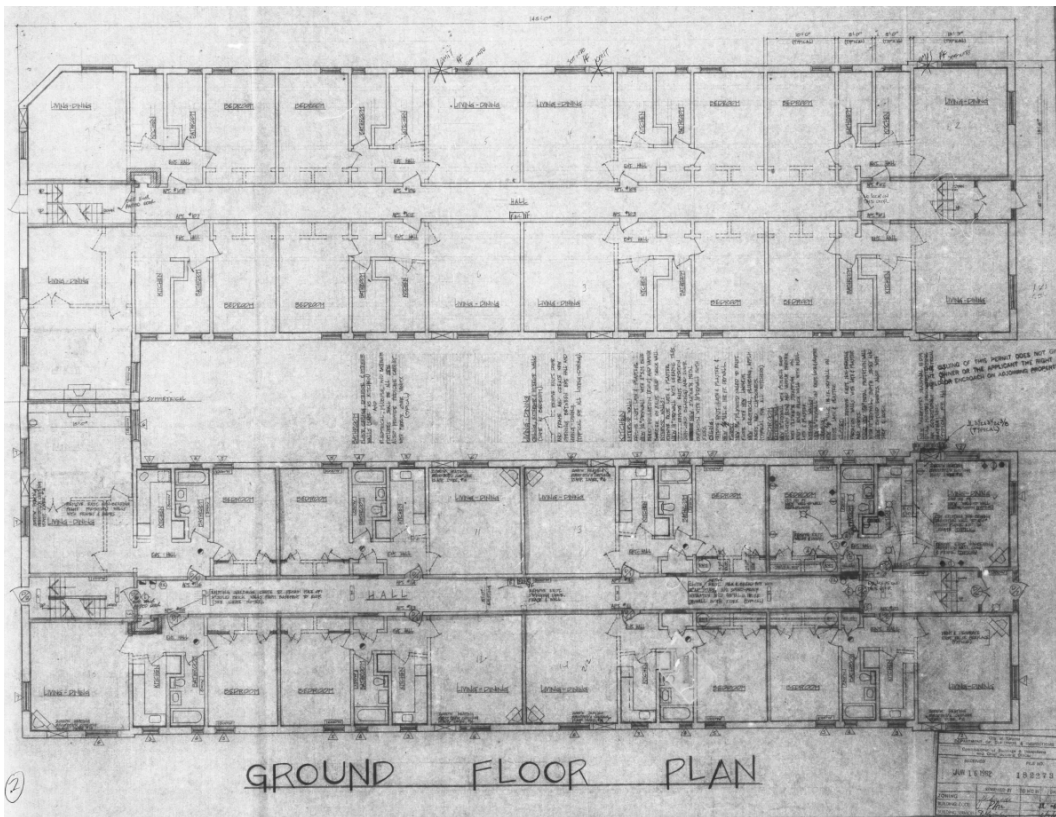


Figure 9. 1982 Ground Floor Plan of 81 Isabella Street, which shows the layouts of the bachelor-sized apartment units. To the right of the plan, slightly larger garden suite units face the south side of the building (City of Toronto Building Records).



Figure 10. Isabella Street, looking west towards the east elevation of 81 Isabella Street. The street-facing elevation of the subject property is designed more ornately than the other elevations of the building (Heritage Planning, 2025).



Figure 11. View of the eastern wing street-facing elevation at 81 Isabella Street (Heritage Planning, 2025).



Figure 12. View of the western wing street-facing elevation at 81 Isabella Street (Heritage Planning, 2025).



Figure 13. 1978 view of the eastern wing street-facing elevation at 81 Isabella Street, the cornice and brick parapet are visible (CTA).



Figure 14. 1978 photograph of the western wing street-facing elevation at 81 Isabella Street, the cornice and brick parapet are visible (CTA).



Figure 15. 1992 photograph of 81 Isabella Street, cornice and brick parapet have been over-clad (CTA).



Figure 16. View of eastern wing entrance (Heritage Planning, 2025).

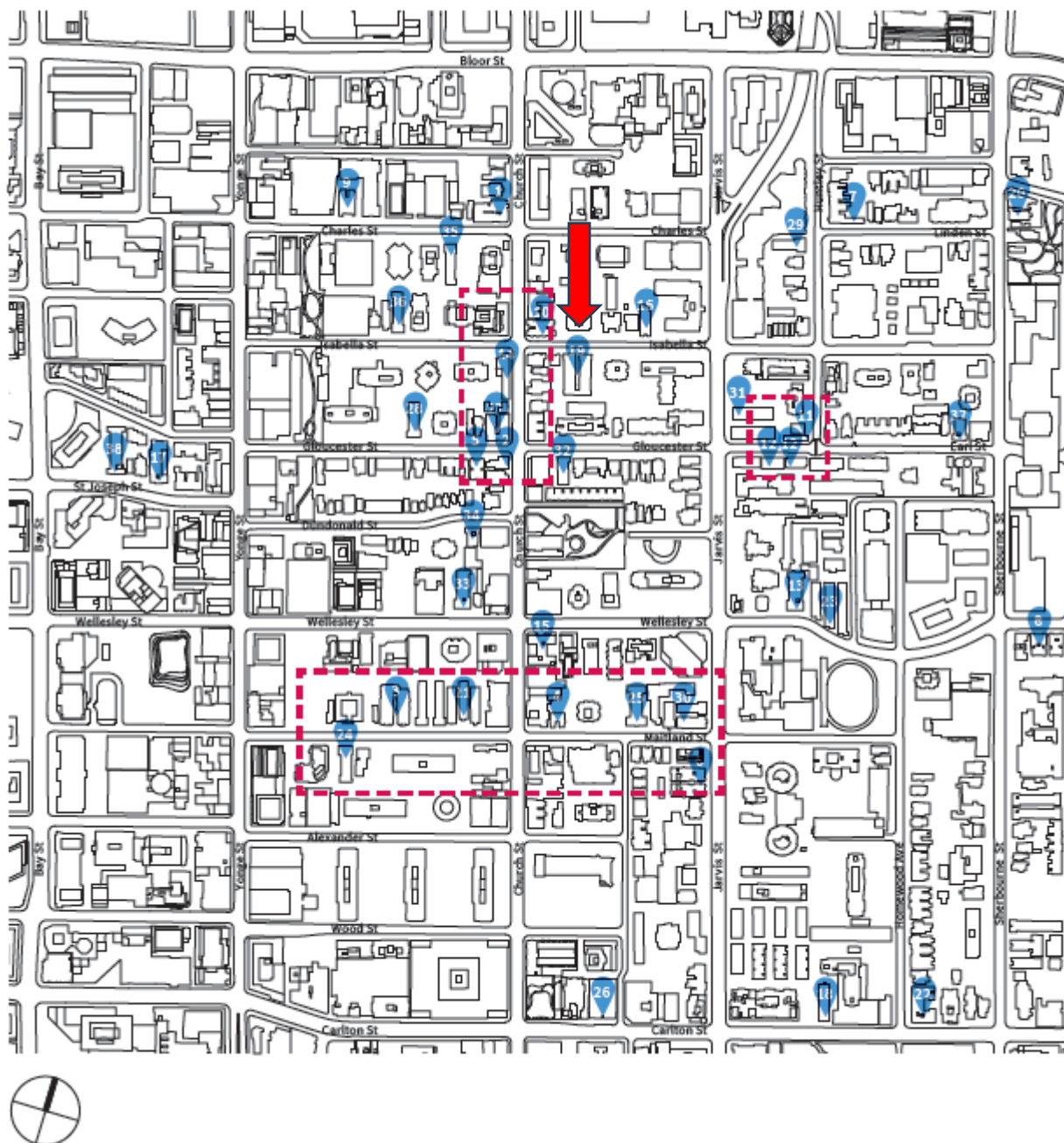


Figure 17. 81 Isabella Street (identified by red arrow) in context of other pre-Second World War apartment buildings in the Church-Wellesley Village area (annotated figure from "Toronto Building Typology Study: Church-Wellesley Village: The Pre-War Apartment Building", E.R.A. Architecture, 2018).

5. LIST OF SOURCES

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

- Aerial Map, City of Toronto Archives, 1965.
- City of Toronto Archives [CTA], Atlas of the City of Toronto and Suburbs (Goad, Charles), 1903, 1913, 1924, 1934
- City of Toronto Archives, Photographic Collection.
- City of Toronto Building Records
- Land Registry Office Records
- Might's Greater Toronto City Directories, 1873-1999
- Toronto Public Library [TPL], Photographic Collection
- Toronto Public Library - Proquest newspapers
- University of Toronto - Fire Insurance Plans, 1880, 1889, 1909

SECONDARY SOURCES

- Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada [Introduction | Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada](#)
- Canadian Encyclopedia. Phyllis Webb. (website)
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/phyllis-webb>
- Dennis, Richard, "*Toronto's First Apartment-House Boom: An Historical Geography, 1900-1920*", 1989
- E.R.A. Architecture, "*Toronto Building Typology Study: Church-Wellesley Village The Pre-War Apartment Building*", 2018
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<http://oldtorontomaps.blogspot.ca/p/index-of-maps.html>