

THE BEST OF THE BEST

The ins and outs of historical designation

When I bought my house six years ago, the departing owner gave me a sheet with a photograph and some factual building information.

This sheet apparently had been compiled by the City, and was part of their "inventory" of historic buildings. I always found this inventory puzzling, and never heard anything more until last year, when the City unveiled its plan for aiding the preservation of historic buildings.

In December of 1993, the City held a meeting of historic building owners and released the results of "The Historic Resource Inventory" of Edmonton. The inventory consists of two lists of buildings, and a list of other significant sites (for example, the Low Level Bridge).

The "A" list - which the City considers the "Best of the Best" - are properties worthy of municipal historical designation. The "B" list properties are also worthy candidates for designation.

These lists were compiled with the help of consultants who made the choices using such criteria as architecture, historical significance, context (such as visual impact) and integrity (lack of alteration).

Of the more than 8,000 sites assessed, 118 sites made it to the "A" list (of which 22 are residential buildings) and 325 comprise the "B" list (which includes 217 residential buildings).

And, you may ask, to what extent is the Highlands represented?

Almost a quarter of the residences on the "A" list are Highlands homes: the Magrath Mansion, the Holgate Residence, the Owen Residence, the Ward Residence and the Chown Residence. (Boy, was I proud!!)

We also have the Highlands School and the Gibbard Block buildings on the "A" list. The Highlands homes that are on the "B" list are: Sheldon, Grierson, Morehouse, McLuhan, Ash and the Magrath Coach House. These lists are not closed.

The city can revise their list if further information is received, and owners can pursue a request to place their

homes on a list.

So what does this inventory mean? First and foremost, it is a public acknowledgement of what buildings are of historical significance in Edmonton. This may mean very little, since city council seems to be encouraging the demolition of the old Civic Block - which is on the "A" list - for a downtown concert hall.

If the old Civic Block does disappear, it suggests this process is a hypocritical one. The historic inventory affects all property owners EXCEPT the City of Edmonton.

City by-laws provide that if any building on the "A" list is to be demolished or altered inconsistent with its historical significance, the permit application must be brought to City Council, which can "designate" the building or site and prevent the proposed action.

This requirement of approving such permits by council does not exist for "B" list sites. Many of the owners of "A" list buildings were quite upset at this, but as most politicians and historic building supporters know, it is unlikely any building will be designated without the owner's consent. (Otherwise the city has to compensate for any loss of value.)

While this may be seen as an "infringement" of the rights of property owners, it does serve to (hopefully) help preserve what little we have left in this city. And at the very least, make owners publicly accountable for the destruction of our historic resources.

As part of the plan, the city will also provide a program - in the form of a tax break - to sites designated as municipal historic sites (and, yes, owners can apply for this designation).

Further, the city planning department has stated that they will provide owners with what ever assistance (of the non-financial kind) they can. I am not certain what this will consist of, but imagine it would include planning building alterations consistent with the historical nature of a building. Our own HHF Restoration Information Bank is also a wonderful resource.