

House hunter's hunch will preserve early Cardinal creation

By Paula Simons, Edmonton Journal February 12, 2011 9:41 AM



The Grotski Residence, designed by Douglas Cardinal, was designed a municipal historic resource by Edmonton City Council in February 2011.

It's not often, when you set out house hunting, that you discover a lost treasure.

But Nan Schuurmans knew, the moment she walked into the rundown cedar one-storey on Capilano Crescent, she'd walked into something extraordinary. She looked at the steeply sloped chimney, the extraordinary undulating brick fireplace, and was reminded of the curved walls of St. Albert Place.

She asked the real estate agent, "Is this a Douglas Cardinal house?"

He didn't know what she was talking about. In fact, he had the odd little house with the river view listed for \$889,500 as a probable teardown.

Schuurmans knew right away she had to act quickly to save a unique piece of Edmonton architecture from the wreckers. But she's not only restoring the house she rescued. Last week, Edmonton city council agreed to her proposal to designate the home as a municipal historic resource. Cardinal's 1978 design is now an official heritage site -- the "youngest" one on the city's register of historic buildings.

"Douglas Cardinal designed the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa and the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.," Schuurmans says. "I've admired his work for years. He's an Albertan, and he should be honoured."

Cardinal is now based in Ottawa. But he's undoubtedly the most famous architect Alberta has ever produced. Drawing on his aboriginal roots, he's made an international name for himself with his organic, curvilinear designs.

He's best known for his institutional buildings, such as St. Mary's Church in Red Deer, the First Nations University in Regina, and of course Edmonton's own Telus World of Science. He only designed four homes, and the house Schuurmans bought was his last private commission.

Cardinal didn't build it from scratch. The original home was a simple 1,200-sq.-foot blue-clad bungalow, built in 1959, the typical Edmonton house you find all through postwar neighbourhoods like Capilano, Bonnie Doon, or Parkview. The house belonged to John Grotski, an Edmonton lawyer and developer, and his wife Helen. In 1978, the couple asked Cardinal to renovate their kitchen. What started off as a simple project grew and grew, as Cardinal added airy front and rear additions of glass and cedar that added 500 square feet to the house.

The walls of windows and the skylights filled the house with light, blurring the separation between interior and exterior. It feels cosy and intimate, yet wide open.

For Schuurmans, buying the house was the easy part. The bigger challenge was restoring a structure badly neglected over the years. Some of the cedar had rotted from water damage, or become infested by ants. And the soft brick that Cardinal used on the elaborate outdoor chimney and the front steps, the same brick he used on his St. Albert Place, had started to dissolve.

Schuurmans and her architect, David Murray, are gutting the house, and returning it to its former glory. It's an enormous job. Because city council has declared the building a historic resource, Schuurmans is entitled to receive \$75,000 in funding toward the work. But she estimates the exterior repairs alone will cost as much as \$200,000.

"It's nice to have the money. It's not nothing," she says. "But that's not the reason I did it. I do believe in the idea of designating houses to protect them."

Murray, a well-known local architect who specializes in heritage restorations, spent two years early in his career working with Douglas Cardinal, and knows the practical challenges his esthetic presents.

"His architecture was not particularly easy, and his work is somewhat difficult to preserve," says Murray.

"Douglas worked with a range of natural colours, with earth tones. He wanted it to feel like it grew out of the earth."

"The bricks are intended to look organic and natural, not pristinely installed. He drove the masons crazy, because he didn't want the bricks level or parallel. He wanted them all slightly askew, because of the shadows they created."

This isn't Schuurmans's first experience with a heritage home. An obstetrician and gynecologist, and the regional director of women's health for Alberta Health Services, Schuurmans used to live in Holgate House, a grand 1912 arts-and-crafts mansion on Ada Boulevard. In fact, you can see Holgate House right across the river from the Cardinal house.

The majestic mansion, with its Tudor-style detailing, is probably much closer to most people's ideas of what a heritage home should look like. The city's decision to grant designation to Cardinal's 1978 renovation is sure to outrage some, who expect heritage buildings to look as though they were transplanted from ye olde Europe.

But this is a modern North American city. It's vital that we also have the foresight and vision to protect important, original works of authentic Edmonton architecture that speak to our local history and esthetic evolution.

This city has some wonderful examples of modernist architecture, many of which are threatened by in-fill redevelopment. If we don't take steps to protect them now, we'll have no architectural heritage to share with the future.

As for Schuurmans, she can hardly wait until the renovations are complete, and she can move into her modern heritage home -- the house she's saved, not just for herself, but for our whole community.

"I think it's important that people know these things" she says. "That there are houses like this in Edmonton."

psimons@edmontonjournal.com

© Copyright (c) The Edmonton Journal