

The Bloorview Macmillan Centre: A Recent Landscape Rediscovered

Corporate or institutional memory can be surprisingly short. As a result, the present-day stewards of modern landscapes may be completely unaware of their origins and significance.

In Toronto a recent case in point involves the Bloorview Macmillan Centre (opened in 1961 as the Ontario Centre for Crippled Children) at 350 Rumsey Road. In early 2001 the Centre, through its planning consultants, applied to the City of Toronto for permission to replace the two sprawling original buildings with a taller, more compact structure better suited to present and future needs, and to displace most of its landscape, designed in 1959 and constructed in 1962, with an immense parking lot.

Unfortunately, the Toronto Historical Board had neither listed nor designated the buildings and the landscape. Fortunately, however, people in the City's Heritage Preservation Services recognized the possible importance of the landscape and requested that a heritage impact statement be submitted. The architects for the project retained Unterman McPhail Associates, Heritage Resource Management Consultants, in association with Pleasance Kaufman Crawford, Landscape Design Historian, to prepare the statement.

Our work, carried out this past spring and early summer, included researching the history of the area and the site; identifying trees and a drive remaining from a previous (1930s estate) landscape; compiling information on the architectural and landscape architectural firms retained by the Centre in 1958; comparing original plans and early photographs with existing conditions; and tracing the provenance of several pieces of sculpture. For our research, we used the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa and here in Toronto the Archives of Ontario, the City of Toronto Archives, the Garden Club of Toronto Archives, and the Centre's own archives. Only in the National and the Garden Club collections, however, did we find landscape drawings.

The landscape architect retained in 1958 was J. Austin Floyd (1910-1981). A native Canadian who received his MLA from Harvard in 1946, Floyd was highly regarded by his peers (who elected him a Fellow of the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects in 1973), his clients, and the contractors with whom he worked. Three years after Floyd's death the curator of an exhibition of his drawings, held at the National Archives, described him as "the most important landscape architect to practice in Canada during the 1950s and 1960s"; cited his landscape for the Centre as "among his most notable achievements"; and displayed four of his drawings for that project.

Floyd's "Enchanted Gardens" as the areas around the residential and educational wings of the Centre were known for many years were the first playgrounds in Canada designed specifically for disabled children; and they included what was arguably the first "adventure playground" in this country. These "gardens" were a gift to the Centre from The Garden Club of Toronto, whose members raised all the money for their construction

and also purchased two bronze garden sculptures: a work commissioned from the noted Canadian sculptor Jacobine Jones; and a piece by the American sculptor Rachel M. Hawks.

Although most of the original play structures and equipment had been removed by 1978, Floyd's tree and shrub plantings, his extensive system of accessible pathways, and his modernistic landforms remain largely intact today. His "adventure playground" area is now part of the "Spiral Garden": a highly successful integrative summer program run by the Centre. The two bronzes have survived, albeit in considerably altered settings.

When our "statement" backed by a comprehensive report was nearing completion, we submitted a draft of its executive summary, conclusions, and recommendations to our clients, who shared it with key people at the Centre. Somewhat to our amazement, no one in the present administration had heard of the Enchanted Gardens or J. Austin Floyd. No one knew the extent of The Garden Club's involvement or the importance of the bronze sculptures. No one realized that a recent landscape might deserve respect. No one anticipated our conclusion that the proposed redevelopment would indeed have an impact on a valuable heritage resource.

But things soon began to turn around. With the approval of their clients, the architects reconfigured and relocated the proposed building to preserve a significant portion of the Enchanted Gardens and a greater number of historic trees, and the landscape architects modified their plans accordingly. Contact with the Garden Club was to be reestablished and the bronzes were to be conserved. No approvals have yet been granted by the City and no demolition or new construction has yet taken place, but the prognosis for this example of modern landscape architecture seems far better now than it did just a few months ago.

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