

245 Sylvan Avenue

Project Description

Context

The property is located in Rockcliffe Park - a historic village northeast of downtown Ottawa and bordering the Ottawa River.

Rockcliffe Park was developed in the 1860s by landowner Thomas Keefer based on the vision to offer generous plots of land in a park-like setting, and homes built in the Picturesque tradition.

Today, the key urban design features of the original plan still remain as the key characteristics, including the preservation of the natural landscape with roads lined with mature trees and curving around a varied topography, the rocky outcroppings along the river bank, McKay Lake and the pond, combined with the generous landscaping and mature trees of individual properties. Rockcliffe Park is a provincially protected Heritage Conservation District (HCD) with its dedicated Heritage Conservation District Plan (HCDP), pursuant to the Ontario Heritage Act.

Former local resident, architect and planner Humphrey Carver (1902-1995), described the distinct characteristics of about a dozen different parts of Rockcliffe Park. The five “Lansdowne zone” properties on the hillside of the dogwalk (formerly Lansdowne Road) are unique as they are on top of the ridge that runs parallel to the dogwalk.

History

The Heritage Evaluation Form of the City of Ottawa describes the architecture of the house:

"This residence is a two and one-half storey residence clad in fieldstone on the lower portions and stucco finishes with half-timbering above and decorative wood windows. It consists of a masonry foundation supporting masonry and wood frame walls. It is capped by a gambrel roof and features multiple towers, including a three-storey Italianate corner tower on the façade overlooking the water on the north side, and a two-storey tower on the south side. The simple design features of the southern elevation indicate how this was the original rear of the building: the entrance door and porch is small, the front gambrel roof transitions to a mansard roof with dormers and half-dormers, the windows are smaller, and the fieldstone base rises higher on the façade ... There is a garage situated on the south portion of the property. It is a simple wood frame building with a front gabled roof ... This early Rockcliffe residence provides an interesting variation on the Arts and Crafts tradition and is a rare example of fieldstone construction in the Village."

The house was likely completed in 1910 or 1911, following the purchase of the site by Dr. Peter Mellon in 1909. The freestanding garage was added at a later date.

The exterior and interior of the house remain largely intact, although several architectural features have been lost or replaced, notably the modern front porch replacement, the back entrance porch addition, and replacement of various windows.

There is no available record of the architect or builder who might have designed the house. It is therefore not possible to look at the house as part of larger body of work of the architect or

designer. However, the house is clearly of its time and place, and it is interesting to consider the architecture in the context of other homes that were built in the early 20th century in Ontario and the northeastern United States.

The tripartite arrangement of rusticated base, half-timbered upper floor and elaborate roof geometries for the top floor is typical for some Arts & Crafts homes. These structures aim to root the architecture into nature with their honest use of finishes and expression of the structure. The Arts & Crafts movement had an underlying romantic notion of the home as a sheltering and warm enclosure, and looked to northern European precedents and a medieval tradition of building. The architect or builder was likely familiar with some of the great camps of the Adirondacks, such as Camp Intermission, Stonehurst or Blair Eyrie. Equally, the Massey Goulding Estate in Toronto might have also served as a point of reference.

This heavy and rustic architectural style was likely deemed by the designer as an appropriate design response to building a representative home in Rockcliffe Park - a neighbourhood that was, and is, about building homes into a forest, into nature.

However, this particular site not only relates to the forest, but is also about the commanding views from the ridge towards the sky, McKay lake and land beyond.

It appears that the architect or builder felt that another stylistic element should be added to take advantage of these conditions, and an Italianate tower was added in the northwestern corner of the structure. This tower features rounded corners, three arches (reduced to drainage openings for the open "belvedere" room at the top), and a flat projecting roof.

The eclectic combination of northern European stylistic elements with features of a Tuscan hill villa - with its roots in the architecture of Roman antiquity - has led to a unique architectural expression.

Concept

The design of the new project extends the house with sensitivity to its heritage character, and gently embeds the new construction into the surrounding landscape. The project is comprised of:

- The Pavilion, an extension to the east,
- The Glass Link, connecting old and new
- The Cave, a basement space tucked into the steep hillside.
- The careful renovation of the historic home and reinstatement of missing original features.
- An integrated landscaping concept.

The Pavilion

The pavilion integrates the garage towards Sylvan, living room space toward the lake on the ground floor and small study space on the upper floor.

The existing garage (not part of the original 1910/11 construction) is not a defining heritage attribute of the property, and is proposed to be replaced with a new garage that is integrated into the new pavilion. The narrow frontage of the existing single car garage is respected with a new tandem garage that can accommodate two cars behind each other in order to minimise the width of the garage front. This operational compromise allows for a better streetscape elevation and hierarchical response to the original house.

A wooden tambour single car garage door that slides open and retracts into the garage space. A high quality and minimal solution that is integral to the architecture and does not dominate the street facade. The new garage does not extend further towards the road than the existing garage, and in keeping with the proximity of accessory structures in relation to the Sylvan Avenue and Fairview Avenue.

A linear pavilion concept sheltered by a "floating" copper roof with soft, rounded edges that echo the Italianate tower to provide an architectural counterpoint on the other side of the property.

A composition of architectural elements comprised of lightweight, horizontal copper roofs and heavy, vertical fieldstone walls blend into the trees and surrounding landscape. The volumes, proportions, datum lines and finishes continue the language of the existing home whilst adding a clearly distinguishable complementary extension in dialogue with the historic home.

The Glass Link

The pavilion is separated from the existing building by a glass link that allows views through the building and accommodates the new entrance. The glass link visually frames the original house, and presents narrower facades to the street and lake.

The Cave

The basement space built into the hillside is an interpretation of the "grotto" as a traditional landscaping feature in European gardens. The solidity and heaviness of the space is expressed with solid balustrade walls that flank the cave. The views towards the house from the lake are largely unimpeded with an open balustrade on top of the cave providing a minimal intervention. The cave is expressed as part of the landscaping, not the architecture, yet is considered as part of a balanced composition with the main building. The steep hillside and landscaping will largely obscure views onto the cave from the dog walk.

Historic Conservation and Reinstatement of original features

An important aspect of the project is the repair and conservation of historic features including careful and essential structural repairs to the roof, basement and stone facade which. This renovation will be used as an opportunity to remove elements which are not original and unsympathetic to the historic architecture. This includes the asphalt shingle roof which will be replaced with a natural copper roof, and the 1970s northern porch which removed the tapered fieldstone pillars. Together with faithful decorative repairs to the render facade, wooden elements and windows, the house will be closely resemble the original condition.

Landscaping

Existing landscape features such as the rockery path or perimeter trees will be preserved (with the exception of one tree) to maintain the sheltering charming and sheltering aspect of the established landscaping.

The central zone of the site is currently a lawn, and this expanse disrupts the continuity of soft landscaping of the properties on the lake ridge. New shrubs and trees will be planted to fill in this gap and offer greater continuity. Natural flagstone paths will connect Sylvan Ave with the dock on the lake.