

Ioana Teodorescu

PhD candidate, McGill University, Montreal

Ignoring Heritage and Environment, or How Valuable are Postwar Houses?

Houses, our everyday life cocoons, are mostly taken for granted. It is only when centuries have winded over that they become grounds for material culture talk: that gives them historical weight and makes whatever traces remain, worthy of preservation. Usually, old houses are not praised for the ecological quality of their privies, their non-insulated (yet breathing) walls or the natural economy behind their resources.

Except for the vernacular affiliation, the Canadian small houses of postwar design don't seem to fit any points of the above description. They're not old enough to be considered heritage. Despite asbestos roofs and plastic Tupperware, they promoted amenities that we cannot do without: full bathrooms, reliable appliances and open space. I argue that these houses *are* heritage and that their environment should be discussed in terms of historical continuity and common sense rather than strictly related to our current (limited) use of the term as conserving ecological balance.

My study is centred on catalogue designs published by Central (now Canada) Mortgage and Housing Corporation during 1947-1972. These plans were gathered from architects across the country, checked against the latest residential standards of the time and sold to the general public at a very reasonable price. CMHC produced about 20 such catalogues, which included plans and elevations for bungalows, one-and-a-half storey, two storey and split-levels. Unaware of it, ordinary Canadians decided what was kept in, from one edition to the next: plans which sold well stayed, while all the others were replaced by newer trends in home design.

Historical continuity was also manifested outside the catalogues' printed environment. The houses which resulted were a combination of ideals and realities: although CMHC put much effort into convincing buyers that working drawings should be carefully observed, the plans were modified according to regional practices and/or personal options. They are of such variety that it is impossible to discuss them individually. Generally, these stories are about growth, endurance and maintenance over half a century, they touch upon encouragement and nourishment when raising a family and they are adequate representations of a certain historical period – all of which are different meanings of the word “sustainable”.

As a case study, Rothwell Heights in Ottawa is a perfect example of the nowadays attitude towards replacement, not within catalogue pages but on physical landscaped sites. However sturdy and accommodating (a three-bedroom house used to host a family of six), the postwar houses in this community are nowadays gradually and silently flattened beyond their modern horizontality. Their newer counterparts have double glazed windows and efficient heating systems, but they've inversed the ratios: six bedrooms for three people and plastic trees inside instead of natural ones on the (now inexistent) lawn. Speaking about heritage and environment conservation, are we addressing the right issues here?

This paper refrains from advocating postwar houses as heritage to the point of perfect conservation. Rather, it aims to be a lesson about what real sustainability is in a world fighting to save - paradoxically - more touchable utopian values. It argues against considering the environment strictly for what can be done in terms of what is seen, but how we should address today life-styles from a historical perspective based on continuity. As such, it measures the success of better living not only by the financial possibilities of action, but by the relationships between people and their immediate milieu.