

The House as Archive: Reimagining the Preservation of Spadina House

Erica Frail¹

¹Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, erica.brocco@mail.utoronto.ca

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which outdated perspectives surrounding historical properties, particularly those from the Victorian and Edwardian eras, negatively shape their preservation and conservation for the future. An examination of Spadina House in Toronto, Ontario provides a compelling case for the importance of viewing historical properties as theoretical archives in their own rights and thus deserving of proper care under the mandate of the *Ontario Heritage Act*.

Keywords: historical property, archive, Spadina House, preservation, Ontario Heritage Act

Nineteenth-century houses are rare architectural pearls in the tidal waves of Ontario's rapidly urbanized landscapes, often submerged in the muddy depths of dirty city streets and decaying farmlands. Sometimes they stand proudly, holding their grounds as the enchanted fortresses of yesteryears and their faded memories, shining forth their torches as beacons of hope for a return to simpler times. Often, they are the broken, weatherworn, forgotten corpses of once radiant homes that were very much alive with the lights of the warm bodies that inhabited their spaces. In twenty-first-century Ontario, there is no safe space for these houses, many of whose lights were dimmed and rooms emptied out long ago to create places for the modern monoliths that have replaced them. For those few that still stand, there is the looming threat of imminent demolition and death, as permanence gives way to the capitalist whims and fancies of today's transient, "throw-away" culture. There is much to mourn here.

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Frits Pannekoek an architectural historian reported in 2005 that 34% of properties in Canada built before 1914 had been demolished, a situation that was a “cause for alarm.” He also predicted that, within the next 30 years from that point, if heritage professionals and governments did not step in to protect Canada’s remaining properties, the country would lose another 30% of these houses (Pannekoek, 2009, p. 79). These are terrifying statistics, especially given the fact that it is now 2024, the half-way mark has been surpassed, and the issue is no longer just a storm looming on the horizon. To put these statistics into a more current perspective, Ontario Heritage Trust owns only 198 heritage properties, at least according to 2019 data (Ontario Heritage Trust, “An inventory of Ontario Heritage Trust-owned properties across Ontario,” 2019, pp. 1-7). When one considers the extensive geography of the province, this number is a genuine concern – one that signifies the potential existence of properties that have not yet received the protection of heritage designations, or worse, that have been demolished already. Raymond Biesinger and Alex Bozikovic document 305 fallen buildings from across Canada in their 2022 book, *305 Lost Buildings of Canada*, a deeply touching lament about the loss of “places that mattered” (Biesinger and Bozikovic, 2022, p. 10). Sadly, the authors reveal that their project could not possibly contain all the cases of lost properties in Canada. There are undoubtedly many more that have vanished in the past, and many more to come. This predicament demands the attention of heritage professionals in a way that is both immediate and intentional. It is no longer enough to leave these buildings in the wavering hands of historical chance.

As J.R. McConvey questions in his 2022 article from *The Walrus*, a poignant reflection about Canada’s lost architectural treasures, “Buildings are made to last. Should they be built to fall?” (McConvey, 2022). Why is it so easy for people to covet the new at the expense of the old? The Victorians and Edwardians who built these

spaces surely did not anticipate that their creations would crumble to the elements of time; their minds were rather fixated upon the quality of construction, beauty of craftsmanship, and pride in home ownership that would allow a house to transcend historical periods. McConvey states, “Architecture, unlike other arts, literally creates place, and so it shapes lives and memories around itself” (McConvey, 2022). These homes matter. Their brick and stone walls hold secrets and tell stories. But, who will be there to speak for them when their roofs are collapsing, windows are breaking, and halls are emptying of any lingering voices? Moreover, what will be the consequences of this historical erasure? When the last of these houses perishes, there will be no turning back or rewinding the hands of the historical clock; there will only be loss, unless those who are invested in their care start to switch the lenses of their perspectives.

The focus of this paper surrounds the development of meaningful responses to these questions, and perhaps more aspiringly, a call to action. In particular, this paper examines the question of the ways in which the heritage preservation field might change with a different theoretical approach – one that embraces archival practices and policies in treating these heritage properties as “alternative archives” rather than as historical sites or museum spaces. Such a prescriptive approach would hypothetically require a different set of strategies in assessing their value, and in turn, their deservedness of proper preservation, including a tighter focus on historical provenance. Likewise, from the reverse perspective, a continuation of the same tired approaches will result in the ultimate compromise of the properties’ historical integrity. A close examination of the literature, and an exploration of the case of Spadina House Museum in Toronto, indeed, reveals that the time is ripe for a new pathway forward.

Theoretical Background

A shift of the perspectival frame must start with an adjustment of the theoretical lens. Perhaps the best foundation upon which to support an archival perspective surrounds the concept of heritage properties as archives in and of themselves. As

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such, the concern does not simply surround the artifacts or document-based records that might be buried inside the properties, which would presume a museological or conventional archival mindset. These types of historical relics are significant, to be sure; however, they could easily exist independently in museums or archival spaces. The focal point rather targets the buildings, themselves, and their exterior and interior details; their vibrant skins and sturdy bones; their architectures.

In this vein, the works of Samuel Burgum and Abigail De Kosnik are particularly helpful in offering starting points for archivists and other heritage professionals. De Kosnik argues in “Archival Styles: Universal, Community, Alternative Digital Preservation Projects” that it is important for archivists to break free from the traditional canon of archival materials. She states, “Alternative archives propose new canons, canons of new types of objects or objects that are ignored by traditional archives” (De Kosnik, 2016, p. 75). While her work explores digital and media materials as “rogue” archives, the argument can certainly extend to the tangible world of heritage properties. Burgum supports this perspective in “This City is an Archive: Squatting History and Urban Authority,” as he asserts that archives can assume a variety of forms, “from national collections, records offices, libraries and museums, to corporate archives, online depositories, and personal keepsakes. Even the city itself is an archive...” (Burgum, 2020, p. 504). This list includes traditional and non-traditional archival spaces; however, quite compellingly, Burgum also opens an interpretive space for elements of the physical world, which might previously have been viewed as repositories of archival materials, to exist independently as archive.

In the case of his article, Burgum explores the various complexities and intricacies of cities as archives; however, the implication can extend to the physical landmarks of city spaces. This is a new idea, as prior to the 1990s, archivists would

not entertain this line of thinking about archival materials and spaces. As Burgum notes, “Their narratives [were] contingent upon decisions around which objects are significant, which should be preserved, and which have been rejected” (Burgum, 2020, p. 504).

Paper-based records and a few select objects tended to receive the most attention in the field, rendering buildings, ironically objects, to fall to the periphery of archivists’ collective vision. Yet, as Burgum also declares in his article, “the concrete, brickwork, steel, and tarmac belies a history of design, blueprints, and layouts, authoritative decisions around the ‘proper’ use of this or that space” (Burgum, 2020, p. 506). Heritage buildings are as much a part of a city’s historic tapestry as other types of artifacts and records. In fact, they are arguably the most substantial landmarks of human history in urban, and even rural, settings, as their architectural and archeological blueprints leave lasting geographical scars and memory imprints on the land. They are receptacles that at once symbolize our historic presences and contain our life stories, and in this sense, they deserve archival treatment, not simply as historic museums or landmarks, but as archives.

In alignment with the revolutionary theories of Burgum and De Kosnik, many heritage professionals and historians are starting to call for a different approach to the treatment of heritage buildings. One such example comes from Melinda Milligan, a historian and heritage professional, who brings into focus the current existential crises of historic properties in the face of a lack of archival treatment. In “Buildings as History: the Place of Collective Memory in the Study of Historic Preservation,” (2007) she discusses the typical perspectives of building preservationists that heritage properties have cultural, educational, economic, historical, and environmental value; however, she diverges from these figures on one important point – the right of these buildings to exist at all. She argues that the historic built environment has “the inherent right...to continue to exist in an authentic state, which has often been neglected in analyses of historic preservation” (Milligan, 2007, p. 105). This theoretical position, while seemingly anthropomorphizing heritage structures, recognizes the importance of preserving them in their original

states, as much as possible, and in turn, honouring their rights to existence in their various communities. In short, this is the *archival* theory of provenance – a distinctly archival treatment that calls for the respect of a structure's past, including its original physical state, unmarred by human hands in their potentially harmful renovation and demolition initiatives. This means the absence of remodeling and removal in the life of the structure.

In relation to this aspect of the theory, Kate Clark, a heritage professional working in Great Britain, contends that a close study of a building's provenance involves components of archeological, architectural, and historical research. In "Informed Conservation: The Place of Research and Documentation in Preservation," she argues, "Although these ideas might seem obvious, good documentation and research are relatively rare in heritage practice" (Clark, 2010, p. 5). Heritage professionals might look at documentation surrounding previous owners or the history of the land, but they often overlook the actual physical markings of the buildings in question. She explains that this dynamic is particularly problematic because there are distinct differences between the narratives stemming from physical evidence and those emerging from written sources. She states, "Whilst the documents might talk about individuals, land ownership, money, and relationships, the physical evidence told of the ordinary people, about decisions, patterns of continuity and change, mistakes and successes" (Clark, 2010, p. 5). In other words, the properties have their own scars, which archivists and heritage professionals must read and interpret as they strive to protect and preserve them.

A Case for Spadina House

The dynamic of powerful physical evidence is highly evident in the case of Spadina House, a heritage property whose walls, ceilings, roofs, and exteriors live to tell the colourful tales of its past and those of its inhabitants. This home, located adjacent to Casa Loma in Toronto, quite fortunately has its heritage designation, as

per the *Ontario Heritage Act*. Spadina House earned its designation on March 31, 1976 on the grounds of being “significant architecturally as one of the most important examples of the changing patterns of nineteenth century interior design in the City of Toronto” and that it includes a “porte cochère” (Ontario Heritage Trust, “Public Notice of Passing By- Law, By-Law #124-76”). This property clearly has something special to offer the public as a gemstone of architectural and interior design, at least from the perspectives of heritage professionals and the Ontario government. Its official recognition signifies that it has met the criteria of Ontario Heritage Trust, and is thus eligible for financial support in terms of its care and management. As most heritage professionals acknowledge, this is the first step on the preservation ladder. Sadly, as this case reveals, it is only one of many steps on this ever-ascending journey upward.

Spadina House is a truly magical archive, both inside and outside. As Ontario Heritage Trust describes the building in its by-law notice, it is a true Victorian and Edwardian prize, with its pristine Italianate exterior façade, and its blend of interior styles ranging from the Rococo Revival of the 1860s and 1870s to the Art Nouveau at the turn of the twentieth century (Ontario Heritage Trust, “Public Notice of Passing By-Law, By-Law #124-76”). It is the surviving product of many generations of change, as evidenced in Figures 1 and 2 (see supplementary material for figures). Dr. William Baldwin started his own estate in 1818 on the then 80 acres of land. Tragically, the 1818 estate burned to the ground (Parks Canada, “Spadina National Historic Site,” 2022). Its foundational remnants remain in the basement of the property, haunting visitors with reminders of an even earlier structural history, as evidenced in Figures 3-6. Indeed, it is a miracle that this foundation, with its darkened walls, crumbling ceilings, dusty dirt floors, intact windows panes, lonely fireplace, and rusty iron furnace grate, still lives to tell the story of its former owners and unfortunate demise—a house of sorts inside a house. Archaeologists have also discovered artifacts as part of their work in the basement, including broken kitchenware, bottles, and animal bones, amongst other items. These are now stored safely in display cases for visitors to examine as remnants of a much different historical period, as shown in Figures 7 and 8.

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In 1866, Toronto financier, president of Consumers Gas, and founder and first president of Dominion Bank, James Austin, purchased the land and built a new estate directly atop the old 1818 foundation. His son, Albert, inherited the property in 1897, after which he conducted extensive renovations to the property under the direction of

W.C. Vaux Chadwich and Eustace G. Bird from American firm Carrère & Hastings (Parks Canada, “Spadina National Historic Site,” 2022). The property then transformed from a Victorian to an Edwardian estate of 55 rooms – the stunning structure that passersby admire today on Spadina Avenue at the brow of Davenport Hill. Parks Canada describes the residence as:

[c]lad in buff brick with dark green trim and a grey mansard roof, the distinctive elements of Spadina include its double-height bay windows, numerous dormers, the balustraded south terrace, and the elaborate iron and glass porte-cochère on its west side. The house is roughly symmetrical about its long, north-south central hallway, but is irregular in the disposition of windows, doorways, and rooms within the plan. Its lively exterior composition reveals a different elevation design on each of the four sides of the house (Parks Canada, “Spadina National Historic Site,” 2022).

In short, the composition of the house provides rich evidence of its architectural changes over the years. With that said, the house has not changed beyond Albert Austin’s renovation project, which ended between 1912 and 1913 (DeLory, 2023). In this sense, it is frozen in time as an intact archive.

Anna Kathleen Thompson, the last living heir to and resident of the property,

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officially transferred the house to the City of Toronto in 1978, including the acreage, house, greenhouse (circa 1913), two-storey garage and chauffeur's residence (circa 1909), gardener's cottage (circa 1850), and furnishings (circa 1860-1940) (Canada West, 2009). Quite fascinatingly, a tour through the house reveals interiors that stand in the present as they existed in the past, as evidenced in Figures 9-12.

Visitors are genuinely transported back in time throughout every nook and cranny of the house, easily conjuring images of the Austins roaming the hallowed halls, or the earlier Baldwins haunting the partially intact basement foundations. It is truly a sight to behold for any visitor. This experience is in many ways possible because of the property's protected status. Working with the city and the government of Ontario in a joint ownership venture, the house opened as a museum in 1984, upon which time archeologists, archivists, historians, and architects started to excavate and restore the space to its current state (DeLory, 2023). The city and province provided funding for this work, which enabled the heritage professionals in question to begin the extensive, and certainly expensive, process of learning about, excavating, and most importantly, protecting and preserving the house and its exterior buildings.

It might be tempting to celebrate this moment of governmental generosity, as maintaining the proper condition of heritage properties is crucial for their present survival and future sustainability. Indeed, the *Ontario Heritage Act* very clearly states that "the Minister is responsible for the administration of this Act and may determine policies, priorities and programs for the conservation, protection, and preservation of the heritage of Ontario" (Ontario Heritage Act c. O.18, s. 2). The government is responsible for heritage properties, and in particular, where their conservation, protection, and preservation are concerned. Further to this point about the Minister, the *Ontario Heritage Act* stipulates that the Ontario Heritage Trust, a board of 12 members, must strive to "preserve, maintain, reconstruct, restore, and manage property of historical, architectural, archaeological, recreational, aesthetic, natural and scenic interest" (Ontario Heritage Act, c. O.18, s. 7). Once again, there is a

clearly defined legal requirement for the members of Ontario Heritage Trust to be good stewards of the historic properties in their care. Essentially, if a heritage property receives a provincial designation, it is entitled, not only to its existence, as Milligen would argue, but also to its ongoing preservation and protection, as without proper treatment, such a property will fall into disrepair and inevitable decline. In the event that a heritage property devolves into this state, the government is then at fault in terms of failing to abide by the tenets of the *Ontario Heritage Act*.

The Spadina House Dilemma

Spadina House is in a state of physical disrepair, demonstrating a requirement for greater attention to proper archival preservation. Unfortunately, at this point on the preservation ladder, the flow of monetary resources has started to channel in directions that do not necessarily connect with Spadina House and its needs as a heritage property. In the summer of 2021, the federal, provincial, and municipal governments announced their decision to invest \$2.9 million to further “revitalize” the historic site (Government of Ontario, 2021). This is definitely a significant investment; however, it is important to consider the direction of the funds, as it indicates the priorities of the three levels of government. As it happens, this latest funding initiative surrounded: making the exterior pathways leading from the street to the museum entrances more accessible, as per the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*; weatherproofing and restoring the existing exterior windows and doors; and improving the garage interior to create a rental space, including new flooring, lighting, a kitchenette, and a complete remodeling of the second floor and its staircase and washrooms” (Government of Ontario, 2021). The weatherproofing work is undoubtedly necessary for the care of the property, especially given the variability of Ontario’s weather patterns and climate conditions. However, how did accessibility or the creation of a rental space connect with the

actual conservation, preservation, or protection of Spadina House, itself, as per the *Ontario Heritage Act*? It seems that the three governments were only interested in the financial potential of the property, and of course, catering to visitors, and not its right to the receipt of proper archival treatment, and herein lies the problem at hand.

The Ontario Heritage Board members are not archivists, nor are they heritage professionals, and nowhere in the legislation does it appear that they need to be as a requirement for their positions. This means that these decision-makers only see Spadina House from a one-dimensional perspective. In reality, true heritage professionals and archivists can conduct a thorough examination of the space and find many areas that desperately need immediate attention from both provenance and preservation standpoints. For example, a stroll through the front entrance reveals a peeling leather wallpaper that is original to the house, and not an historical reproduction, as seen in Figure 13.

The wallpaper and walls are also in dismal shape on the third floor of the house, with water and mold marks staining their once bright surfaces, and cracks that flow, like veins, through the rooms, as evidenced in Figures 14-16. Once white ceilings reveal evidence of water damage and black mold—a danger, not just to the house, but those who work inside it, as seen in Figures 17 and 18. The wooden floorboards are terribly scuffed, and in some places, falling out of place completely, as evidenced in Figure 19. The window panes and trim are starting to peel, with the real potential for rot in the near future, as shown in Figures 20 and 21. Outside of the building, it is clear that the woodwork needs better care, as wooden staircases, porches, window frames, and decorative features are starting to shed their paint skins and warp. Even areas of the brickwork are starting to show signs of weather weariness, with white paint that is peeling apart in patches, as illustrated in Figures 22-26. The governments' \$2.9 million could clearly have touched many areas of the property, well beyond accessibility points and rental schemes.

A discussion about the financial position of Spadina House, with a tour guide and Museum Studies student at the University of Toronto, revealed that governmental funds are not currently flowing freely through the space. She indicated that the

government does the bare minimum to meet the needs of Spadina House, leaving the museum staff to rely on public donations and space rental fees to fund the care of the building. While the museum staff offers many tours throughout the week, admission is now free, further limiting the scope of income for the property (Tour Guide, 2023). The cost of the preservation initiatives listed above would surely outweigh the sparse financial resources of the museum, especially given the inflated cost of building materials, architectural expertise, and appropriate technicians. Even \$2.9 million has a limit in terms of the breadth of its reach around a heritage property of substantial size.

This financial predicament has forced museum staff to place preservation initiatives to the backburner, and according to the tour guide, archivists and museum curators do not work regularly in the space. Apparently these heritage professionals are shared between other historic properties in Toronto, and the annual funding is distributed likewise between them (Tour Guide, 2023). This means that the property is mostly in the hands of tour guides, who might be unqualified to fulfill the work of trained archivists. With few resources and even fewer heritage professionals, Spadina House is not in a position to exist in its best shape for the future, from either a preservation or provenance standpoint.

Interestingly, the lack of archival preservation strategies in terms of missing governmental knowledge about the work, and in turn missing funding, has created another problem for Spadina House. The heritage property is so stretched for capital that its staff need to compromise its historical integrity, or provenance, in the interest of acquiring a more substantial financial pool of resources. The tour guide revealed that the space is often rented to outside parties, including a recent Diwali celebration, for which furniture and artifacts were removed to accommodate guests (Tour Guide, 2023). Should the house and its contents be disrupted in this way, if the goal of archival practice is to protect the material in its original state as much as

possible? There is a strong potential for both property and artifact damage in hosting these types of events, and in the case of a heritage property like Spadina House, any losses would be irrecoverable and irreplaceable. Yet, the government conservators do not acknowledge this reality. Ironically, the more foot-traffic in Spadina House, the more worn-down the property becomes over time, and the more it needs special archival care. More substantial government funding would enable the museum to bring its focus back to the important work of preservation, rather than event planning, in the interest of maintaining the site's historical provenance and right to exist as an archive.

Conclusion

An examination of the Spadina House Museum case exposes the dangers of treating heritage properties as historical landmarks, event spaces, and tourist attractions, rather than as archives that deserve the same prudent care that documents and objects receive in their designated spaces. Heritage properties might be larger than the average piece of archival material, but they are records and archives, nonetheless. The physical evidence is proof positive that a lack of funding produces a lack of archival focus and care, which in turn produces property deterioration. While some Ontario citizens might argue that the government has more pressing financial priorities at this time, the fact remains that these properties fall under the protection of the *Ontario Heritage Act*, which must demand a degree of adherence, cost aside. In Great Britain, the *National Heritage Act* maintains clear regulations surrounding the treatment of heritage properties, including harsher penalties for violations. Indeed, Heritage England has published a full document outlining potential punishments for heritage violations, entitled *Guidance for Sentencers: Heritage Crimes* (Heritage England, 2015). This might serve as a powerful example for the federal, provincial, and territorial governments here in Canada, as no such document, beyond municipal permit guides, appears to exist. In the case of Spadina House, a switch of perspectival lens and legal strategies has the potential to create powerful change for the archive, including better funding, the

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hiring of full-time archivists on staff, and archival preservation initiatives and conservation strategies that have teeth in their bite. Ultimately, embracing the property as an archive will allow the space to live authentically in its temporally frozen state, uncompromised by capitalist ventures and cheap government policies.

Clearly, Spadina House is only one of many cases in the province of Ontario, and this is a much wider issue. There are many other heritage properties, both urban and rural, that are silently screaming for help from heritage professionals; they cry out to be seen, acknowledged as archives, spoken and written about, and more than anything, to be treasured. The Ontario landscape is riddled with these tattered pieces of string from a worn-out historical tapestry. Some of them are holding onto their last fragile threads in the face of environmental degradation and at the greedy hands of construction companies looking to bulldoze the past. The issue is not simply one of preservation and provenance, but also one of housing sustainability for the future, socio-cultural heritage and identity, and the historical legacy of what Ontario and Canada used to be in the nineteenth century. Future studies are needed in these areas, too, as they are significant components of the argument in favour of protecting heritage properties as archives. Archivist Carl Elefante declares quite wisely in his “Changing World, Evolving Value,” that historic preservation is “founded on the proposition that society, culture, and the economy are stronger when the chaotic diversity of humanity’s legacy informs the present and is left intact for future generations” (Elefante, 2017, p. 9). Just like the layered levels of Spadina House, the historic properties scattered throughout Ontario’s urban and rural landscapes connect the dots of the past, marking in vivid colours the trails of long-lost ancestors, and blazing a pathway for future people to follow. Architectural change is inevitable. Buildings rise, but they do not always have to fall.

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