Cultural Heritage Landscape of Leaside
What is Leaside’s cultural heritage landscape and how did it evolve?

Leaside is a thriving midtown suburb of Toronto, Ontario, Canada situated just to the west and north of the Don River. Leaside’s distinctive cultural heritage landscape evolved from the overlaying of the following: the natural and pre-settlement landscape, the agricultural settlement landscape, the model town designed in 1912 by Frederick Todd, the ensuing residential development of the late 1920s to the 1950s, and its contemporary development.

Pre-settlement Landscape

The Leaside area was affected by a series of ancient Ice Ages, which covered the land with a succession of glaciers and large lakes. The last of the melting glaciers created a very large “Lake Ontario” called Lake Iroquois. The northern shore of Lake Iroquois ran along a line just north of present day Eglinton Avenue. Later the lake receded and the plateau-like Leaside lands emerged high and dry.

The Agricultural Settlement Landscape

The first survey of the Colonial settlement grid placed a series of large rectangular lots running east–west bounded by concession roads running north–south. The land lots of the future Leaside were owned and cultivated by a few farm families, interrupted only by small vernacular laneways connecting to Yonge Street. Three “stranded” farmhouses of early settlers (John Lea Jr., James Lea, and Thomas Elgie), which were originally located in relation to their farms, and to the lanes, today present as being misplaced on their current lots (which are based on Todd’s town plan).
Todd’s Designed Landscape

Eight years after the launch of the world’s first garden city at Letchworth, England, the Montreal landscape architect Frederick Gage Todd laid out the Town of Leaside – one of three model new towns laid out on garden city principles for the Canadian Northern Railway (the railway company’s other two model towns were Port Mann on the Fraser River near Vancouver and the Town of Mount Royal on the north side of Montreal’s famous mountain).

In 1912, the York Land Company, a land holding company for the Canadian Northern Railway, assembled 1,025 acres of farmland at Leaside Junction. Sale of house and industrial lots in the model new town was meant to pay for construction of a new Canadian Northern Railway terminal at Leaside Junction.

Todd and his client were influenced by many of the principles of the garden city movement: the acquisition of a large agricultural estate served by rail for development of a new town; the restriction of the size of the town to an area that would permit it to function as a self-contained community; the retention of the ownership of the land by a company or trust so as to maintain the principles on which the town was established; and the planning of the land and the development of roads, streets, sanitary services and recreation spaces so as to provide good conditions for both industrial and residential occupation.

Todd’s 1912 plan for Leaside was not perfectly realized, but many of the features he gave it survived the 15-year delay in the town’s residential development and are still present. The gently arcing streets and the diagonal course of McRae Drive and Millwood Road still distinguish the community. Todd’s small parks were eliminated – Heather Gardens exists in name only – but the Town Council compensated by buying up lots for three public parks. Trace Manes in South Leaside serves as the green centre of the community.
Cultural Heritage Landscape of Leaside Walking Tour

Walk
1. Housing Types I
2. Pocket Park I
3. Public civic space
4. Leaside origins
5. Housing Types II
6. Green Core
7. Boulevards
8. Talbot Apartments
9. Pocket Park II
10. Garden Court Apartments

Extended Walk
11. Crestview Apartments
12. Lea House (c.1909)
13. Former Leaside Municipal Building (1949)
   Former Perrem and Knight General Store (1922)

Credits: Map created by Kim Auchinachie, Connor Turnbull and Geoff Kettel ©2015.
The Developed Residential Landscape

Despite the clarity of the plan, the major part of Leaside’s residential development was initially delayed. Within the first five years the Canada Wire and Cable Company built factories in the industrial section to the east and built homes for their workers nearby. These homes, along with the settler farmhouses and barns, a grocery store and the train station were the earliest elements of the town. Other industry followed, but residential building was sporadic during the interwar years.

When conditions for residential development became favourable, Leaside’s developed landscape grew rapidly, and was even sustained through the Great Depression. Almost all the houses and apartments in Leaside were erected between 1928 and 1953. Leaside’s comprehensive plan, its 25-year build-up and building restrictions imposed by the York Land Company created a harmonious collection of housing types.

The housing types included single, semi, double-semi (quadruplex), of one and two storeys and multi-family house forms of two and three storeys. Its architecture varied but utilized various Modern Classicism styles including Tudor and Georgian Revival and Art Moderne.

In addition to single-detached and semi-detached houses, three “garden” apartment complexes – two on Bayview Avenue within the town proper, and another along Leacrest Road just to the south of the town limits were developed; The Garden Court Apartments (1477 Bayview Avenue); the Kelvin Grove, Strathavon, and Glen-Leven, the three blocks forming the Talbot Apartments (1325-1365 Bayview Avenue), and Crestview Apartments (Leacrest/Mallory area).

 Appropriately suited to the town’s garden-city origins, the collection of garden apartment buildings were designed and sited around garden courtyards or forecourts. The garden apartments of the Leaside residential community represent the largest concentration of the housing type in Toronto.
Of these, the Garden Court Apartments, designed and constructed by Page and Steele in 1939-41 with landscape design by Dunington-Grubb and Stensson, are especially distinctive for their scale and design excellence. The Garden Court Apartments not only sit within the larger cultural heritage landscape of Leaside, but also are a significant planned cultural landscape in their own right.

Leaside's public buildings fitted well into the townscape of modest houses and apartments. Hanks & Irwin designed the town hall with adjoining fire station to be small in scale and plain in appearance, adorned with only a little late Art Deco decoration. Even the town's churches were modest. The church with the choicest location in town – Leaside United – is domestic in scale, rising modestly in its naturalistic setting.

Furthermore, the town's main shopping street on Bayview Avenue, developed in the late 1920s onward, is uniformly built with rows of unassuming, two-storey, brick commercial buildings built to the sidewalk. The architectural consistency on the east side of Bayview Avenue in Leaside is not found on the street's west side in the old City of Toronto.

The Contemporary Landscape

The trend in the contemporary period is the constant pressure for residential intensification, or rather “massification,” as the desired amount of floor area increases, but without necessarily any change in number of occupants. Upper-floor additions began appearing on one-storey bungalows by the late 1970s, but purchasers of Leaside properties are increasingly acquiring both bungalows and two-storey houses – built of double brick – to demolish them and build frame replacement houses that are too tall, have different profiles, and are clad with an assortment of veneers, which do not adhere to the Leaside character guidelines.

In 2003, the City of Toronto in consultation with the Leaside Character Preservation Advisory Committee published the Residential Character Preservation Guidelines for House Renovations, Additions and In-Fill Development in the Community of Leaside. These guidelines “provide design principles that are meant to assist members of the community – architects, designers and contractors, as well as city officials and staff, in gaining an understanding of what makes Leaside's natural and architectural attributes valuable and how to extend these attributes to new development.” Unfortunately the guidelines are just that; guidelines, which do not have legal authority.
What are the threats to Leaside’s Cultural Heritage Landscape?

Leaside is a highly desirable neighbourhood with easy access to downtown Toronto, good local shopping, a range of community facilities and places of worship, and a large stock of well-built single-detached houses, semi-detached homes and small-scale apartment buildings.

However, these attributes, plus the lack of effective planning controls, are resulting in the erosion of the cultural heritage landscape of Leaside through reckless demolition and insensitive alteration.

A proposed Leaside Heritage Conservation District, allowing for the control of demolitions and infill development, would appear to hold the most promise for the cultural heritage landscape of Leaside to evolve in a planned and consistent manner, rather than be destroyed by incremental and random changes.

Once at the forefront of town planning in Canada, Leaside remains the liveable community envisioned by Todd. The curvilinear streets, consistent residential facades, neighbourhood parks, and picturesque street tree canopy represent a cultural landscape that is balanced, spacious yet human scale – ideal for walking, biking, and for living.