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Madison Avenue, a Unique Toronto Street
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Madison Avenue is one of Toronto's most admired streets and has been recognized as a street of heritage importance since the mid 1970's when Toronto first started to undertake heritage protection. In a lecture delivered to architecture students at the University of Toronto in 1975 William Dendy commented that in his view "Madison is one of the finest residential streets in Toronto". In that lecture he pointed to the consistency of the style, particularly at the south end, to the consistent height and setback of the properties, to the relative proportion of the height of the buildings to the street width. Dendy noted that it was here that a unique Toronto style originated, a style that was subsequently named by Patricia McHugh "Annex style".

Madison was subdivided and sold by Simeon H. Janes, one of Toronto's most astute developers. Later, in 1897, Simeon H. Janes was one of the founding members of the Toronto Guild of Civic Art. Many of the architects who were commissioned to design houses on Madison were also members of the Guild.

Simeon Janes was no ordinary developer. American born, he maintained strong connections with his American roots. A frequent traveler to the U.S. and abroad, he sought inspiration from American developments. Madison Avenue is named after American President James Madison. A significant patron of arts and architects, Janes hired McKim Mead White alumnus A. Page Brown and the famous Olmsted Brothers to design Benvenuto, his own house and grounds. Alas, demolished by the City in 1931, Benvenuto was one of Toronto's most ambitious estates and houses. The stone walls survive along the edge of Avenue Road, and the gates have been moved to 40 Burton Road. The Olmsted plan is on display at the City of Toronto Archives at the moment.

Janes laid out two major parcels in the Annex, from Spadina Road to just east of Bedford. Other streets such as Huron, Bedford, St. George, Spadina and Lowther all share(d) the architectural wealth of Madison Avenue, but road widening and subsequent re-development on the other streets have left Madison as the best-preserved streetscape of the Janes' Annex.

Streets with the kind of consistent character found on Madison Avenue, particularly notable at the south end of the street, can be the result of a set of design codes and subsequent covenants set by the developer. No evidence of such codes exists for the Annex, even though the cultural sophistication of Janes suggests the possibility of such controls. What appears to be at work instead is a common culture that was developing among the Toronto's architects and builders.

The culture evolved through debate within emerging civic societies such as such as the Architect's Eighteen, The Toronto Guild of Architects, and the Toronto Guild of Civic Art, debates that were recorded in newspapers and journals such as the Canadian

Architect and Builder. We see those discussions expressed along the length of Madison Avenue. The first Annex style house, designed by E.J. Lennox for Lewis Lukes at no 37 started the trend, but the style evolves as other architects and builders make their contributions. Lost houses by Edmund Burke (no. 5) and W. R. Gregg (no. 8) also had an influence. Annex style dominates the street but there is also an Eden Smith Arts and Crafts house, a fine Edwardian apartment building by Langley and Langley, a clinker brick house by Hamilton Townsend at no 138, and a contribution from the famous firm of Carrere and Hastings. Edwardian style dominates the north end, which developed later. Much of the history is lost in the mist, but a walk up the street yields a glimpse into the lively architectural culture that was emerging at the time, perhaps an era of debate that hasn't been surpassed since.

Even though about half of the houses on the street had been placed on Toronto's Inventory of Heritage Property in the 1970's. Recent research confirmed the earlier visual assessment of architectural significance. In fact, almost every Toronto architect of note from the period of development is represented on Madison Avenue. Unfortunately because of gaps in building permit records, it was not possible to identify the architects of the very fine first few houses at the south end of the street. The following architects were identified:

Eustace G. Bird w/ Carrere and Hastings (no 161)
Edmund Burke (no. 5)
Chadwick & Beckett (no 64)
E.J. Lennox (no 37),
R. J. Edwards (no 131),
W.R. Gregg (no 8 demolished),
Robert Heath (nos 69, 71),
Gordon Helliwell (no 60)
Charles Langley (nos 93, 95, 97, and 99),
Frederick H. Herbert (nos 54, 78, 80, 82, 88, 109, 111, 145, 193)
Andrew L. Ogilvie (no 56)
Robert L. Ogilvie, (nos 124 -126)
A.J. Rattray (no 191),
Eden Smith (no 47).
William L. Symons, (no 140)
S. Hamilton Townsend, (no 138)

Catherine Nasmith Architect is the consultant for this HCD study, it has been a very interesting journey. You can receive a free subscription to the electronic newsletter by contacting Cathy at cnasmith@sympatico.ca.