

# Modernism preserved in a Canadian Tire gas bar



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Mississauga's got **Googie**. More specifically, the Canadian Tire gas bar at 1212 Southdown Rd., which, thanks to the efforts of a few aficionados, has retained and restored its swooping, retro-futuristic, concrete canopy over the gas pumps.

"It's a landmark in the community," says architect Alex Temporale, principal of Oakville-based ATA Architect Inc., who was asked to prepare a heritage report in 2008 that would ultimately get the winged canopy the respect it deserves. "It was innovative for its time in terms of the technology, it was obviously different than everybody else in the market, and it was part of an era where everyone was optimistic about the future."

The wing was the thing, you see, that got Canadian Tire noticed. Just as the little Joy Oil "castles" had stood out to the contemplative, putt-putting motorists of the 1930s, when A.J. Billes decided to fully expand into the gas-pumping business in the mid-1960s (their first gas bar had opened in 1958), he turned to designer-contractor Bob McClintock to come up with something that would catch the



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distracted eye of suburbanites piloting sleek, chromed chariots along the new, wider thoroughfares.

Using California's **Googie** 'building-as-billboard' approach (named for the striking, space age coffee shops and bowling alleys built during the 1950s and 60s) Mr. McClintock delivered, in 1968, a design that became ubiquitous with the brand. In all, Mr. McClintock built 30 swoopy wings – some big Spruce Gooses, others more in line with a Cessna – in towns and cities across Ontario.

The first four (Clarkson's Southdown Road location was number three) used a "post-tensioned" method: after long steel cables were pulled taut, they were capped, and then the concrete was poured over them. After drying, a few more feet of concrete was added to each end to cover the caps and bring the

crest to full taper. After a time, Mr. McClintock switched to a pre-cast system and, for the final few canopies, to steel. In most cases, the underside of the canopy was lit with evenly spaced fluorescent tubes, creating a sort of glowing spaceship effect; in the heritage report, Mr. Temporale writes that these "define the shape, give added detail and when illuminated helps to float the mass of the concrete canopy above the pumps," adding that in many "science fiction movies, it is the lighting that signals the presence of the hovering space craft."

So very futuristic. However, by the 1990s, these wings were viewed as anchors preventing full convenience store expansion. Most had chipped paint or cracks in the concrete, and the fluorescent tubes, which were notorious for failing due to

water penetration, were long gone. Southdown was certainly showing its age by 2008. Photographs in the heritage report show not only peeling paint, but a few vehicle impact scars as well, and a jumble of accoutrements that interrupted the purity of the original design: hanging from the canopy's splayed columns and from the roof were large square light fixtures, and various metal signs and vinyl banners had been applied willy-nilly over the years.

In a word, it was a mess. So, when Canadian Tire applied to expand that location, it was lucky the City of Mississauga saw past this and recommended they first get a heritage report done on the canopy. Canadian Tire, in turn, was wise to select Mr. Temporale, a member of the Canadian Association of Heritage Professionals and a veteran of heritage assessments, to pen the study. Mr. Temporale took the reins and contacted Mr. McClintock, who had better records – and recollections – than had been found in the filing cabinets at Canadian Tire head office.

"He was delighted," says Mr. Temporale. "Think about it, nobody other than the boss paid any attention, and now somebody, many years later, is saying it's worthy of heritage designation and it should be retained."

Scoring highly in categories that asked if it was "rare" or "an early example of a construction method," the canopy also placed well in "artistic merit" and as a structure that's "historically linked to its surroundings." It

scored highest in the "is it a landmark" category, of course, because to most Mississauga residents it most certainly is. Because of this, the canopy was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act in January 2011, and was fully restored later that year. This included the removal of unnecessary signage, fixtures and wiring, and the installation of new LED strips that mimic the old fluorescent lights (one of Mr. Temporale's recommendations). Even the new, larger convenience store seems to defer to the canopy: It's a simple, understated black-and-white box, quite unlike the hulking, candy-striped buildings Canadian Tire usually erects.

Because of this outcome, ATA entered the report into a competition hosted by the heritage association: "We thought it was an interesting project because it was modern. And it wasn't a building – it was a structure. And so often modern buildings come down – let alone a modern structure – so to retain this, we thought, was both a positive thing that the city did and Canadian Tire did, and we thought it should get some acknowledgment," finishes Mr. Temporale.

They won an Award of Merit.

So who's got **Googie** now?

Fans of Modernism note: Monday Nov. 11 from 6:30-8:30 p.m. the Design Exchange's "Sons of Architecture" series is presenting a talk by Dion Neutra, son of world famous Modernist Richard Neutra. Dion Neutra has been running his father's practice since 1970. Tickets are only \$10 (234 Bay St., Toronto).