

ARCHITECTURE

Saving suburbia, one freaky building at a time

**DAVE LeBLANC**
THE ARCHITOURIST

daveleblanc@globeandmail.com

I don't for a second think that people decide where to shop, eat or bring their dry cleaning based on architecture. Sure, when buying a home, we consider how it presents itself to the street and how interior spaces make us feel, but school districts and access to transit are just as important.

Really, I get it. How else to explain our acceptance of enormous stucco boxes – both homes and stores – as the norm?

The funny thing is, we live in an extremely design-savvy age: Think of how many sexy toasters or Umbra picture frames are available. Yet this sagaciousness has not trickled up to the places we buy them (the hot pink Umbra store at 165 John St. excluded, of course) ... at least not in suburbia, anyway. But before I get all James Howard Kunstler and start preaching new urbanism, I must tell you that I adore suburban architecture – just not the recent kind.

The last time society gave the design world a great big bear hug was during the postwar period. I wasn't there, but my guess is that people were so relieved after emerging from the dark, dou-

ble-whammy cave of Depression and war that design was a welcome distraction.

But it wasn't only about Danish teak tables or snazzy finned automobiles. Buildings, too, were things to get excited about, particularly suburban ones. Mundane commissions for grocery stores or restaurants were often given to start-up architecture firms. Sometimes, these young-buck architects would partner with equally young hotshot engineers toying with new space age materials and processes. The result: designs that soared ... literally.

Toronto City Council has finally taken notice. In January, it was widely reported that the Metro grocery store at Parkway Mall, formerly Grand Union (Ellesmere and Victoria Park; identified as a "Googie" in November, 2004, by this author), was successfully listed on the city's inventory of heritage properties. A visual landmark for its curvilinear parabola roofline, the 1958 building is also an engineering marvel – the graceful wood arches that hold up that roof were the largest assembled in Canada at the time. The architects, Bregman + Hamann, would go on to work with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe on his iconic Toronto-Dominion Centre in the mid-1960s.

With that in mind, I'd like to bring a few more of Scarborough's atomic age buildings to the attention of city council. The LCBO outlet at 510 Brimley Rd., south of Eglinton, could help NASA launch satellites into orbit.



A single mushroom-shaped column holds a circular roof aloft to form a crown at the Bond Academy, a building constructed in 1961. DAVE LeBLANC

Although I've always believed "heritage" to be a flexible term, convincing the public won't be easy. Many think that if something isn't 75 to 100 years old, it shouldn't make the cut. If it's suburban, what good is it?

The long end of its asymmetrical "butterfly" roof sweeps upward at an angle so extreme it's a rocket ramp of a landmark (too bad the interior drop ceiling conceals this). Opened in December, 1959, and virtually unchanged on the exterior, it's also a rarity: I can count on one hand the number of zoomy butterflies I've found in this city (painter R. York Wilson's historically designated 1955 home by architect John Layng on Alcina Avenue comes to mind). While the LCBO can't identify the architect responsible, I'll volunteer to research it

should the city ask.

Another equally majestic space is the "servery" portion of the former Midland Avenue Collegiate Institute at 720 Midland Ave., now Bond Academy. A single mushroom-shaped column holds a circular, folded plate roof aloft to form an enormous crown that's particularly beautiful lit up at twilight. It was built in 1961 as part of the original school, and the architecture firm of Craig Madill Abram and Ingleson would also design the Don Mills library – with its roof of multiple interlocking dia-

monds – that same year.

There are others. Irving Grossman's iconic roof for the Cedarbrae library – which reminds me of the "hats" on architect George Robb's 1963 Valhalla Inn – may be all that remains of the original 1966 building after extensive renovations by Makrimichalos Cugini Architects are completed next year.

Surprisingly, a check of the heritage inventory confirms that John Andrews's internationally celebrated concrete masterpiece, Scarborough College, is not listed and neither are the original 1974 steel-frame pavilions at the Toronto Zoo, designed by a multi-firm partnership that included Ron Thom. Not only should these have been listed years ago, they should be designated, which offers even greater protection.

Although I've always believed "heritage" to be a flexible term, convincing the public won't be easy.

Many think that if something isn't 75 to 100 years old, it shouldn't make the cut. If it's suburban, what good is it?

Well, despite a rich farming history going back about 200 years, most of Scarborough was built in the mid-20th century, when architects were thinking about new technologies, processes, shapes and even about science splitting the atom or building ships to take us to the moon. In short, they were thinking of the future, and that future is now our past.

It's up to us to preserve it for future generations.