

An architect specializing in preservation discusses how changing values affect architectural conservation.

# Excursions in the Cultural Landscape

by Michael McClelland

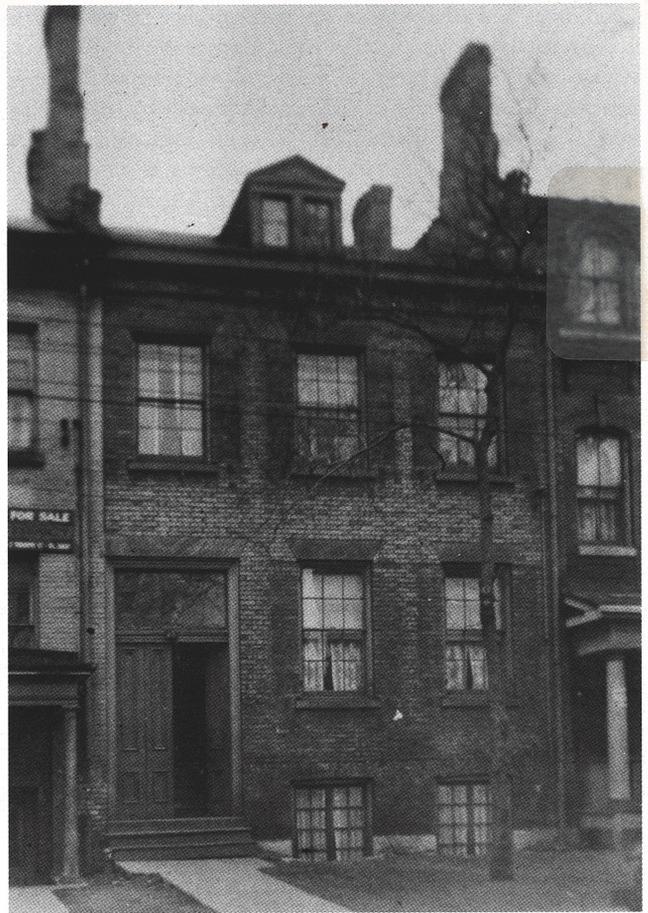
In architectural conservation it's not how much you do, it's how little you do. Minimal intervention has been a widely accepted principle in conservation for many years now. It's good for the historic building, but it's tough on the architect's ego. A second principle, that the work of the conservation architect should be reversible—in other words, easily removable in case the next generation finds your work to be flawed—only furthers the sense of humility. The idea that an architect might want his or her work to be almost unnoticeable seems an unnatural ambition given the current state of contemporary architectural discourse. But, as it involves sensitive interventions into culturally rich sites, architectural conservation provides an opportunity to ask some different questions about how we appreciate the work of architects and how we understand the potential for architectural practice.

Since the 1930s conservation architects have been signing on to international charters that establish some ground rules for how to approach historic buildings. While the principles are set in stone the actual methods for implementation aren't, and there is no indication that adopted principles make the task of conservation any easier. How do you undertake to make your every move reversible? Each project reveals that discretion, interpretation and decision-making all fall to the architect and the community within which he or she works, because it is only there that thorny issues about historical significance or cultural importance can be determined. It remains the architect's role to delve deeply into these issues, recognizing that architecture is not just about building construction, but also about the social construction of ideas about history, place and the environment.

The three small projects illustrated here demonstrate some of the change in vocabulary and emphasis that is integral to conservation. The first two projects involved upgrading municipal museums for barrier-free access. Working with an interdisciplinary team, it was proposed that museum access should focus on intellectual access first. How could what the museums had to offer be most fully experienced? The projects quickly shifted from a fixation on elevators that would irreparably damage the interiors of the buildings, to clearer site orientation, user-friendly visitor interpretation material, and opportunities for improved museum programming.

## William Lyon Mackenzie House

At Mackenzie House the exploration into accessibility started with visibility and ease of orientation. The historic home of the first mayor of Toronto, located on a downtown city block, was in the awkward position of having its main public entrance at the rear, behind the house, as the



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**Right, top to bottom: Mackenzie house in a photo taken in the 1930s; a view of the newly established pedestrian route; the signage refers to printing presses housed in the museum.**

**Client:** City of Toronto, Culture Division  
**Architect team:** Ian Panabaker, Michael McClelland, Martine Haferstrohe, Garth Norbraten  
**Structural:** Alan Zeegen Associates  
**Constructor:** The SteelWorks

historic front door led directly into the museum. Here the intervention reconfigured the side yard to create a mid-block pedestrian route, now well used, and erected a canopy to clearly mark the entrance. This new little piece of public open space has created a stronger awareness of the museum and strengthened its connections to its local community. The lettering on top of the new canopy makes reference to the operating nineteenth-century printing presses found in the museum.

### Colborne Lodge

At Colborne Lodge, an 1830s cottage in Toronto's High Park, intellectual accessibility started with archaeology and the potential of the site. Archaeologists confirmed the original layout of the picturesque garden walks, and archaeobotanical samples were taken as the initial steps towards restoring the Lodge's original 19th century landscape design. While the building had been a museum since the 1920s, its surrounding landscape had remained discordantly similar to any pleasant 1950s suburban park. The emphasis on reinterpreting the Regency landscape plan has improved the public visibility of the house and given clarity to its siting and its relation to the much larger park. Emphasis on the exterior has taken some of the wear and tear off the rather fragile cottage interior and has allowed its museological interests to spill out beyond the confines of the building. The full restoration of the plantings will be approached slowly and the tending of the garden will rest with local volunteers.

Both the Colborne Lodge and Mackenzie House sites were provided with interpretative panels mounted near the entrance to the property, which explained to passers-by what the property was and what they could expect to see inside—the first step in orienting the visitor and potentially the first step in a self-guided tour.

### Chiefswood

At Chiefswood, a national historic site which was the former home of the native poet Pauline Johnson, more complex interventions were required. The 1850s building is of plank-on-plank construction, each plank laid flat but staggered from the one below to allow for the keying of exterior stucco and interior plaster. The new museum use required that the building be supplied with a new heating system. A minimal intervention was proposed in the form of a reduced gradient approach to stabilize relative humidity within the building and protect the building envelope, and also ensure that sensitive artifacts could still be displayed in their original context. Remember there is still no insulation or vapour barrier and there's an exterior stucco finish that had already failed. The reduced gradient approach alters interior temperatures through a monitoring system that follows seasonal changes outside and minimizes the vapour pressure across the building envelope. It's high technology mimicking traditional low-tech conditions to ensure that deterioration of the original building fabric will not occur because of the new mechanical system.

At Chiefswood a cultural landscape intervention was also proposed, again to reestablish connections between the building and the site. The building had historically formed a bridge between two cultures—the English culture of Pauline's mother, and the native culture of her father, Chief George Johnson—but previous restorations of the house had only stressed the English characteristics of the architecture, complete with manicured lawn. The original kitchen wing, a vernacular structure once common in the Six Nations, had been removed as part of an overzealous attempt to restore the purer architectural form of the building. The work of repairing the material of the house led to the current work which now includes restoring the historic landscape and reconstructing the kitchen wing as the link from house to garden. Allowing the landscape to return has required the rather drastic measure of burning the meadow, three years in a row, to eliminate the ubi-



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**Above, top to bottom: a historic photo with architect/owner John Howard at Colborne Lodge; the restored historic gardens; a view of the house front as it appears today.**

**Client:** City of Toronto, Culture Division  
**Architect team:** Michael McClelland, Mark Archibald, J. Jeffrey Keays  
**Garden historian:** Pleasance Crawford  
**Archaeologist:** John Triggs, Historic Horizons Inc.  
**Constructor:** Loc-Pave Construction, High Park Volunteers

quitous Kentucky bluegrass, but these simple initiatives have started to reinstate some of the delicate balance and meaning this culturally complex site holds within its community.

### Collaborative conservation efforts

Each project shows a collaborative blurring of disciplines, as much



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**Top:** an archival photo of Chiefswood, showing the original kitchen wing prior to its demolition. **Above:** restoration of the plank-on-plank wall construction. **Above right:** the restored meadow.

**Client:** Chiefswood Museum Board/Parks Canada  
**Architect team:** Ian Panabaker, Edwin Rowse, Nancy Byrtus, Martine Haferstrohe, Elizabeth Vandertuin  
**Garden historian:** Mark Laird  
**Archaeologist:** John Triggs, Historic Horizons Inc.  
**Landscape Architects:** Parks Canada, Heritage Conservation Branch  
**House Restoration:** Maxim Group (exterior); Robertson Restoration (interior)  
**Landscape Restoration:** Ken Parkes, Sweet Grass Gardens, Six Nations; Ministry of Natural Resources; Friends of the Environment; Archaeological Field School Volunteers; Chiefswood Museum Volunteers

archaeology as architecture, as much horticulture as landscape or urban design. They are also active investigations that address what we regard as significant and historic, and this is a discussion about cultural values that involves not only the profession but also a much larger segment of the public. It involves communities as well as professionals. Conservation architecture looks at exploring the contingent nature of architectural history, sifting through issues of authenticity, the artifact, and the

inevitable erosion of materials. It may be removed from many of the concerns of mainstream practice, but its explorations are gradually demonstrating strong methodologies for design within already rich built environments and new roles for the architect as facilitator, moderator and coordinator in the cultural realm. **ca**

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