

# There goes the neighbourhood?

What to do when old meets new by Lisa Van de Ven

**DIANE DICKIN AND** Joe Dachuk are used to having people stop to check out their home. After all, the contemporary L-shaped house at the corner of Ledbury Street and Fairlawn Avenue — designed by architect Richard Librach — is a lot different than the 1950s-style home with the expansive picket fence that once sat on the site.

"We didn't have limitations on ideas," Dickin said. "We wanted to do something that would show off the lot."

With the help of Librach — who grew up in the neighbourhood — the couple settled on their house design. While it may stand out in the older neighbourhood around it, Librach said that its wood, brick and stucco exterior was actually designed to fit in with other homes in the community.

"The neighbourhood consists of primarily bungalows from the '50s, which were clad in stone, wood siding and stucco," he said. "The materiality of the house is ... just a re-examination or reinterpretation of that palette of materials."

For Librach, the house on Ledbury is a modern response to what already exists in the neighbourhood. For others — it's simply out of place.

In fact, arguments on architectural consistency are occurring in neighbourhoods across Toronto, between homeowners who want something different and those who want their community to have a consistent feel. The question being asked is this: Should neighbours have any say in the house you build on your own lot?

If you listen to Elise Kalles, one of Canada's top real estate agents, they should. The vice president of Harvey Kalles Real Estate said that having a house next door that stands out from the neighbourhood

— whether it be different by design, or a monster home that overshadows the rest — can have a detrimental effect on your own resale price, especially where lot sizes are small and houses sit close to one another.

"It has an effect if it's right next door to you and if you're in Rosedale and a lot of the houses are Victorian or Georgian," she said.

"I find if the lot is large enough and you're not overwhelmed by it and it's in good taste [then it's okay]."

While Dickin and Dachuk haven't found that house prices in their

consistent housing style.

"People like the area, in part, because of the community feel it has — the character and architecture of the homes is part of that community," said Brian Athey, president of the Leaside Property Owners' Association (LPOA), of his own Leaside neighbourhood.

In fall 2003, the LPOA developed Residential Character & Preservation Guidelines, looking to give residents a set of architectural suggestions that covered such things as the building materials they use, setbacks and landscaping.

Without any regulatory authority behind them though, Athey says the guidelines haven't proven all that useful. Now the association is looking for a stronger set of rules to replace them. Their councillor, Ward 26's Jane Pitfield, has requested that a heritage conservation study be done. If successful, that could lead to creating a heritage conservation district, a city designation that would require any significant exterior house changes be approved by Heritage Preservation Services, a division of Toronto's planning department.

Already, 10 neighbourhoods throughout the city are designated heritage conservation districts, with two more in the proposal stage. The east Annex, for example, has been designated as such for more than a decade, and according to resident Robert Brown, it has done much to maintain design stability in the area and even improve house prices.

"The fact that you can't make



Architect Richard Librach designed this controversial modern home at Ledbury and Fairlawn

major changes to the exterior of your property — the visible exterior of your property — empirical evidence tends to support that it actually increases its value," he said.

South Rosedale is another, newer heritage conservation district, having achieved designation in 2003. Many of the homes here were developed in the 1880s and 1890s, said David Townley, president of the South Rosedale Ratepayers' Association.

"There is a consensus that felt that the style of houses and the way they sit on the property were something worth preserving," he said.

But preserving the character of a neighbourhood and making sure every house looks alike aren't the same, says architect Andre D'Elia of Superkül Inc. D'Elia designed a contemporary house at 108 Crescent Rd., within South Rosedale. While no existing homes were torn down to build it, the house almost failed to receive the

necessary approvals it needed to be built. Like Librach's Ledbury Street design, though, D'Elia said that 108 Crescent Rd. takes the context of the neighbourhood into consideration, integrating, for example, the same red brick popular throughout the area.

"We knew we wanted to do a modern house, as did the client, but we wanted something that would definitely fit into the neighbourhood," D'Elia said.

"We took cues from the adjacent houses."

While D'Elia believes that context — including the size of the lot and the attributes of the homes around it — should be considered when designing any house, he also thinks that standing out is not necessarily a bad thing, if done in the right way. In many neighbourhoods, he added, people are just afraid that anything different is bound to be bad.

"I think houses like this will actually increase the value of the neighbourhood," he said.