

If these walls could talk, they'd tell a historic tale; Wellesley Ave. house a mystery, despite heritage plaque

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Illustrations: Little is known about 7 Wellesley, a place listed as historically significant. Susan Pigg/Toronto Star

The Toronto Historical Board plaque is the first hint to would-be buyers that 7 Wellesley Ave. is every bit as special as its \$775,000 price tag.

And it is.

This classic Cabbagetown Victorian is a historic home without a history.

It's among a sizable inventory of old houses the City of Toronto knows almost nothing about because they were listed as historic homes and issued historic plaques decades ago when standards were relatively lax.

There was no test. If you had a new four-storey apartment building you could get a plaque, at least in theory, as long as you were in a historic district.

"We were quite happy that people would treasure their buildings sufficiently to want a plaque," recalls lawyer **George Rust-D'Eye**, a renowned Cabbagetown historian and former volunteer member of the Toronto Historical Board.

The brass plaques, which grace thousands of properties across Toronto, were especially hot commodities during the 1970s in Cabbagetown, where 7 Wellesley Ave. still stands proudly.

In fact, half its 20 Victorian neighbours have one.

They are points of pride for homeowners on this picturesque cul-de-sac that runs north off Wellesley St. E.

"There's a bit of quiet boasting," says one longtime resident. "It tells visitors that these homes have been around for a long time."

But that's about all it tells you. The only official history of the house is that it was built in 1887 and added to the city's inventory of heritage properties in 1975. If anything, the plaque is simply a sign of the times.

"In the 1970s, we were coming out of a period of reaction against old things," says **Rust-D'Eye**. "So much of Toronto was demolished in the 1960s. In those days, it wasn't the 'in thing' to like old buildings."

Whole blocks had already been razed to make way for St. James Town - densely packed highrise towers that, to this day, overshadow Cabbagetown, once the rough-and-tumble home to thousands of poor British

and Irish immigrants.

By the early 1970s, concern was mounting among reform politicians and concerned locals such as Rust-D'Eye, then solicitor for the former Metro level of government, that Toronto's past would be bulldozed into oblivion.

So in 1973 the city created a historic inventory, aimed at protecting old properties from demolition. It required that any proposed exterior renovations and additions be reviewed by the historical board.

The precise history of each property became unimportant in the rush to get old properties listed.

"We were delighted when someone walked in and said, 'I have an old house. I'd like to have a plaque for it.' The standards were not that high," says Rust-D'Eye.

They are now. Since 2005, there are rigorous conditions for historic designation under Ontario's Heritage Act, based on architectural value, associative value (whether it was home to a significant person or piece of Toronto history), and contextual value (how it contributes to the historic streetscape.)

"We do intense research into who owned it, who built it, what were all the changes over time, what was the city like at that time and how did it fit into city development overall," says Mary MacDonald of the Toronto planning department's Heritage Preservation Services.

The efforts work, says Rust-D'Eye.

"We certainly scared off a lot of fly-by-night developers who wanted to tear down old buildings and put up 40-storey highrise towers."

Since then, chronicling the history of old homes has fallen to volunteers, like the Cabbagetown Preservation Association, whose members have combed through land registry and Toronto's archives.

It's why the only clue to 7 Wellesley's past comes from a single paragraph in a book, Cabbagetown: The Story of a Victorian Neighbourhood.

It wasn't history that set 7 Wellesley apart as the thinking of its builder, Frank Armstrong, who crafted all but two of the Wellesley Ave. houses in 1887 using prefabricated details that were just then becoming available. These included stone lintels,

stained-glass windows and gables.

MacDonald says detailed information exists for most of the 8,000 properties now on Toronto's inventory. But individual listings have become less important in areas like Cabbagetown where whole streets have since been designated as "heritage conservation districts."

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