Religious to Domestic

Toronto’s architectural history illustrates its growth from a small garrison town at the time of its foundation in 1793 to its present state as Canada’s most populous city. In the recent past, the city has seen a decline in its practicing Christian population and consequently many of the city’s churches are no longer in use. Given the scarcity of available land for development in the downtown core, the most common treatment for these churches is conversion to residential needs.

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Domestic to Religious

Conversely, many non-Christian populations are experiencing growth and are in need of spaces to use for religious purposes. Rather than building anew in an already congested city or appropriating vacant former church spaces, these communities are beginning to occupy residential buildings and adapting them to suit their needs.

This former private residence has been a centre of Zen Buddhism since 1985. Located in a wealthy Toronto neighborhood, this former Arts & Crafts house is well-suited to the needs of a Buddhist community. The large, open spaces are used for meditation halls and to house shrines, while the upper-level bedrooms act as dormitories.

Toronto Zen Buddhist Centre
33 High Park Gardens

This former private residence was designed by the Toronto firm of Langley and Burke in 1888. A heritage building, this former church and conjoining Sunday school are in the process of being redeveloped into four luxury multi-level freehold homes.

The former College Street Baptist Church was designed by the Toronto firm of Langley and Burke in 1888. A heritage building, this former church and conjoining Sunday school are in the process of being redeveloped into four luxury multi-level freehold homes.

This former private residence is now home to a Sikh community. Built in the early 19th century and located in an upper-middle class neighbourhood, this former house provides Toronto’s downtown Sikh community with Kundalini Yoga studio space and accommodations for residents and guests.

Guru Ram Das Ashram, 348 Palmerston Boulevard

The future of religious heritage in Toronto

Given Canada’s colonial origins, it is not surprising that our conception of what constitutes religious heritage is based on a Euro-Christian model. Now that our demographic is changing, a new vision of the built environment and the designation of religious heritage must be reassessed. Canadian heritage agencies often recognize former church buildings as still having expository value as religious heritage sites, while houses adapted for religious purposes remain largely ignored in this regard. We must now consider broadening our definition of what defines architectural heritage to include a broader spectrum of places of worship.