

Wrecking ball hovers over Art Deco landmark

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It's a superb Art Deco house in Oak Bay that everyone -- even the owners -- agrees should be saved.

But that may be the only common ground left after two years of arguing over subdivision approval, replotting property lines, and a failed heritage-designation effort by the municipality.

A demolition permit now threatens the house, even with its five-star rating from the Canadian Art Deco Society, considered the "highest possible reason for retention under any circumstances."

The curves and thick plaster make the flat-roofed house resemble a cruise ship. For years a strip of blue neon has outlined the overhanging flat eaves, and the house numbers light up in pink neon.

The house at 230 King George Terrace, built in 1945-46, is "probably the most desirable Deco house in the municipality," said local heritage expert Stuart Stark.

"It's a wonderful house."

Oak Bay Mayor Christopher Causton agrees it should be preserved, and maintained in an interview on Friday that a compromise is still possible.

George and Kathleen Caird bought the house in 2002, originally planning to renovate and restore it, but that turned out to be too expensive, George Caird said. The couple later purchased the similar

one next door at 200 King George, built in 1940-41.

"They're landmark houses in Oak Bay. I'm sure everyone who's driven around Oak Bay has been struck by these amazing white modernist houses stuck on the rocks," said Vancouver heritage advocate Donald Luxton.

The Cairds want to subdivide the big view lot at 230 King George and build a 3,900-square-foot custom-designed house at the back of the steep rocky lot.

William Cochrane, Oak Bay's subdivision approving officer, turned down a first request to make two lots of the one big property at 230.

The lots would be too small to fit the residential zoning.

He rejected a later plan to create three properties out of 230 and 200 King George, because one would have an odd-shaped bootleg, and the new lot lines were also too close to the old houses.

"We thought this was simple. We're trying to save a house, guys," said Caird.

The mayor said Friday he still hopes for a compromise to save the house, but first the Cairds have to stop work on their new home. Blasting and excavation have created a building site, but concrete hasn't been poured yet.

In Oak Bay, one lot may not have two houses on it.

Construction can't start on the new dwelling if the original house still stands. Causton said George Caird "is a very sophisticated investor" who bought 230 King George knowing its limitations.

Oak Bay council launched heritage designation proceedings for 230 King George last February, but backed away wanting to avoid a "legal wrangle" with the Cairds over compensation, said Causton.

"I don't believe it's an impossible impasse," said Stark. He said the Cairds might win over Oak Bay by designating both houses. They had offered to designate 230 and put 200 King George on the heritage registry, a lesser form of protection. Rick Goodacre, executive director of the B.C. Heritage Society, said a heritage revitalization agreement, or HRA, is the way to handle the minor concessions the Cairds are asking for without creating a big precedent.

B.C. legislation allows local governments to negotiate HRAs. They give a municipality wide powers to deviate from zoning, subdivision rules and local plans to provide legal protection for a heritage building.

The Cairds are trying to negotiate with Oak Bay, but not getting very far. Goodacre said one reason this dispute has deadlocked is that Oak Bay lacks a real planning department.

Added Stark: "They really don't seem to understand the full range of tools available."

Some people say the Cairds stand to make a lot of money if they win subdivision approval, but Goodacre said the question Oak Bay council needs to ask is, "Do we care about the house or not?" Some prices are too high for a municipality to pay, but in this case ,he said, "They're not being asked to give the owners anything outrageous.

"Either you care about heritage or not," said Goodacre.

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