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The Toronto heritage property *playbook.*

What designation actually restricts, how the permit process works, and what heritage work realistically costs.

By the MACON Build editorial team

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A NOTE ON THIS DOCUMENT

This document is one of a small collection of resources MACON Build publishes for Toronto property owners considering significant work. It is offered freely, without registration, in the belief that informed clients make better decisions and build better buildings — whether or not they ever engage us.

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Toronto has approximately 9,000 properties on the Heritage Register, and about 4,500 of those are designated under the Ontario Heritage Act. Most owners of those properties do not fully understand what designation does and does not allow them to do. This document explains.

i. Listed versus designated

The two terms get used interchangeably; they should not be. The legal difference is significant, and it determines almost everything that follows for an owner.

A **listed** property is identified on the Heritage Register as having cultural heritage value or interest, but it is not protected by a designation by-law. Listing does not require a Heritage Permit for typical alterations. It does not restrict altering features that do not require a building permit. It does not preclude renovation or redevelopment. The principal constraint is that the owner must give the City 60 days' notice before demolition — time for the municipality to consider designating the property to prevent the demolition.

Bill 23, passed by the Ontario government in 2022, introduced an additional consideration for listed properties: a two-year window during which the municipality must either designate the property or remove it from the Register. Properties removed cannot be re-listed for five years. This has accelerated designation decisions across the province.

A **designated** property is legally protected under the Ontario Heritage Act. Designation happens under one of two parts of the Act:

— **Part IV** applies to individual properties, designated by municipal by-law for specific identified heritage attributes

— **Part V** applies to Heritage Conservation Districts (HCDs) — Cabbagetown, Yorkville, the Distillery District, King-Spadina, and several others in Toronto. All properties within a designated HCD are protected, though each is classified as either "contributing" or "non-contributing" to the district's character

Designation is registered on title and stays with the property regardless of ownership change. The designation by-law lists the specific heritage attributes the property is protected for. Everything that follows starts with that document.

ii. What designation actually restricts

A common misconception is that designation freezes a property in place. It does not. Designation protects the specific heritage attributes identified in the by-law — and only those attributes.

Heritage attributes typically include exterior elements such as a specific façade, original window openings, distinctive masonry, a particular roofline, original brickwork, or a chimney. Some by-laws also identify interior elements — a staircase, a fireplace surround, original plaster work — but most do not. The by-law is specific. What is not listed as a heritage attribute is not protected by the designation.

In practice, this means:

— Most interior renovation work is unaffected unless interior attributes are specifically listed

- Routine maintenance does not require a Heritage Permit
- Work on rear additions, side elevations, and basements is often outside the scope of designation
- Mechanical, electrical, and plumbing work inside the building is almost always unrestricted

The first step for any heritage property owner contemplating work is to read the designation by-law for their specific property. It is a short document. It tells you exactly what is protected and, by exclusion, what is not.

iii. The Heritage Permit process

Work that affects a designated heritage attribute requires a Heritage Permit from the City of Toronto's Heritage Preservation Services. The permit is required before a Building Permit can be issued — the two processes run sequentially, not in parallel.

Heritage Permits follow one of two paths:

- **Delegated approval** is handled at staff level by Heritage Planning. It applies to alterations compatible with the relevant guidelines, particularly where changes are not visible from a public right-of-way. Delegated approvals typically take 6 to 12 weeks from complete application.
- **Council approval** applies to larger alterations, demolitions, or proposals that depart from the guidelines. These go to the Toronto Preservation Board, then Community Council, then City Council. The process commonly takes 4 to 8 months and sometimes longer.

The application is reviewed against the ***Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada***, published by Parks Canada — the federal benchmark Toronto uses for heritage decisions. Proposals that align with the Standards generally receive favourable review; those that depart from them face longer scrutiny.

Pre-consultation with a Heritage Planner before formal application is free, encouraged, and consistently accelerates approval. It is the single most useful step in the process.

iv. The cost premium, honestly

Sensitive heritage work typically costs 15 to 30% more than equivalent non-heritage work. The premium comes from three sources.

Specialty trades. Masonry restoration, wood window rebuilding, original brick repointing, plaster repair, and metal restoration require trades who do this work specifically. Their day rates are higher than general-trade equivalents, and the work itself is slower.

Longer design phase. Heritage-compliant solutions take more design time than freestanding ones. The architect must reconcile what you want with what the by-law allows, often involving consultation with Heritage Planning before drawings are finalized. Heritage Impact Assessments add cost when required.

Conservation reports. Some scopes require condition assessments, material studies, or paint analyses — specialist reports that document the building's existing fabric before work begins. These are protective for the owner and informative for the permit application, but they are real cost lines.

The premium varies sharply by scope. Window restoration on an original heritage façade can carry a 50–100% premium over comparable replacement. Interior renovation that does not touch heritage attributes carries no premium at all. Knowing where your scope falls determines what to budget.

v. Financial incentives available

The City of Toronto and various provincial programs offer financial support for eligible heritage conservation work. Three to know:

— **The Toronto Heritage Grant Program** provides up to 50% of the estimated cost of eligible conservation work on designated properties, subject to maximum grant amounts and annual budget caps. The program covers exterior masonry, wood window restoration, roofing on heritage rooflines, and similar work directly tied to identified heritage attributes

— **Heritage Property Tax Relief** is available in some municipalities — typically a 10–40% property tax rebate for designated properties that meet maintenance standards. Toronto's program has eligibility specifics worth confirming for any individual property

— **Federal incentives** may apply for work that meets the Parks Canada Standards and Guidelines, particularly for properties recognized at the federal level

All programs typically require pre-approval of scope before work begins. Starting work and applying for a grant afterward is generally not eligible. Plan the financial side of the project before swinging a hammer.

vi. Working with heritage well

A heritage property is not a constraint to design around — it is a context to design with. The owners we have worked with who arrived expecting heritage to be a problem ended their projects glad of what the constraint produced. The discipline of working within identified attributes consistently produces better results than the absence of constraint, because the constraint forces consideration.

The practical advice is simple. Read your designation by-law. Engage Heritage Planning early. Hire architects and builders who have worked on heritage properties before. Treat the Parks Canada Standards as a design vocabulary rather than a rulebook. And budget honestly for the premium — the 15 to 30% will be paid one way or another, and the projects that account for it from the start go more smoothly than the ones that do not.

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BY PRIVATE INQUIRY

We have worked on heritage properties across Toronto's designated districts and on individually designated buildings throughout the city. If you own a heritage property and are considering work, we are glad to have a candid conversation about what is possible and what it will involve.

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