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A Demonstration of Inter-governmental Cooperation in Ontario

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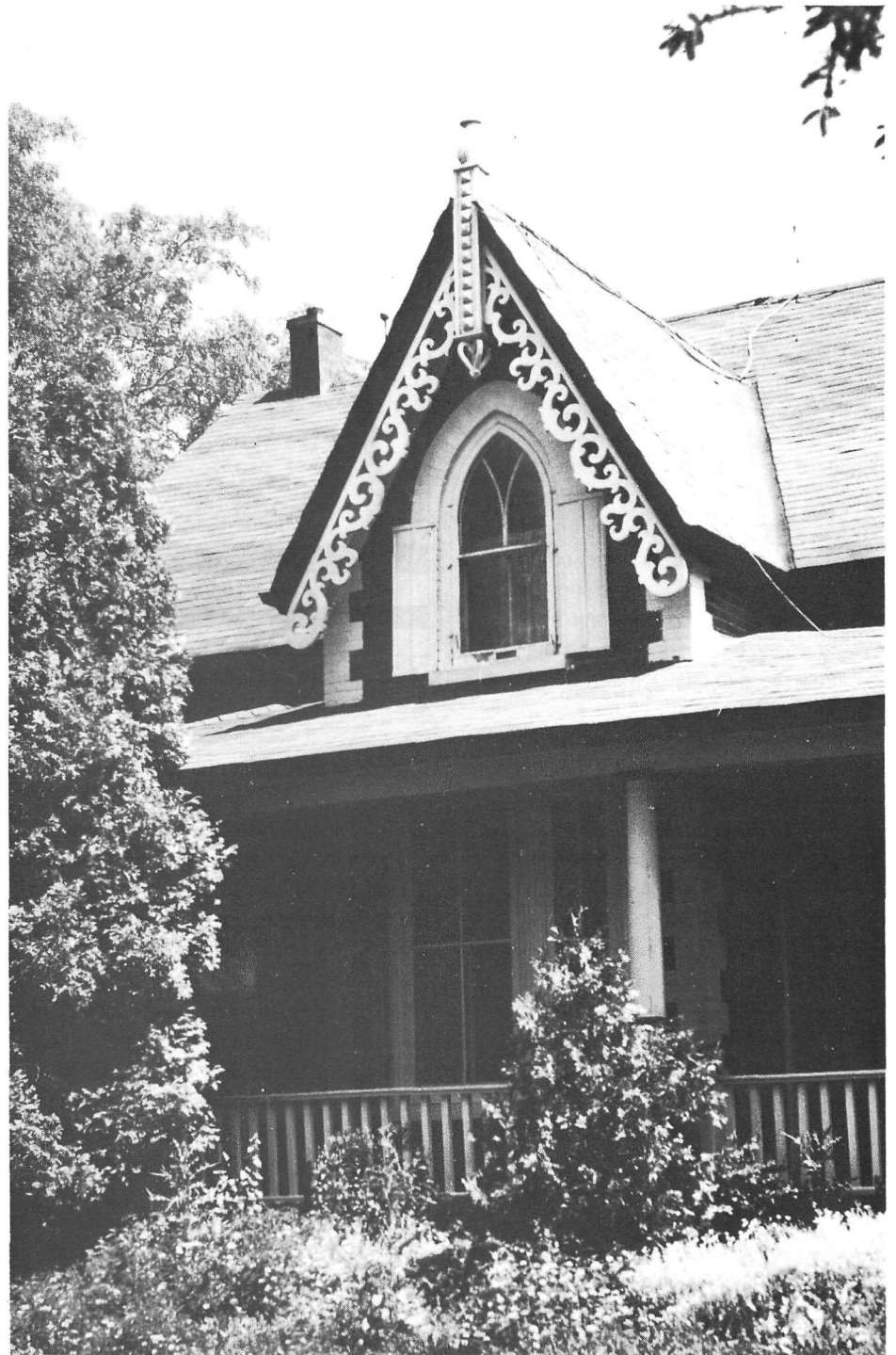
The Nazar House
A Demonstration of Inter-governmental Cooperation in Ontario

Thomas F. McIlwraith

In the rural countryside along the western fringes of the City of Mississauga, Ontario, a curious landscape has taken shape over the past three years. Today, as motorists sweep around a long-radius, right-angle curve on controlled-access highway 403, their eyes are drawn to a scene that is almost surrealistic. Great grey bridges spanning nothing stand up awkwardly without approach ramps. Verdant rights-of-way lie scattered about and segments of concrete ditches begin and end nowhere. Mixed in with this scene is a mellow red-and-buff brick farmhouse. It is a complex landscape demonstrating the rapidly maturing status of heritage conservation in the Province of Ontario.

First, the basic facts. The site described above is the future intersection of two controlled-access highways. By 1987 the southern and eastern legs were in use, several of the structures for the intersection were complete, and portions of the road-bed had been graded through the crossing and out to the west and north. Contracts for this work had been awarded prior to May 1985, at which time Ontario experienced a change of government. A review followed and further construction on this property was suspended. On completion of the existing contracts late in 1985, the workers left and the site now stands, as described, in a state of suspense. For the moment it is a modern-day folly.

The house — named the Nazar House after the most recent occupants — too is in a state of suspense, as are the parties that have expressed an interest in it, the City of Mississauga and the Ontario Ministry of Transportation and Communications (MTC). To many people, the Nazar House is an even greater folly than the road structures ranged about it. The structures at least seem to have an obvious future function, presuming construction resumes. The house looks anachronistic. Let us consider its future, and the confidence shown in it by its proponents.



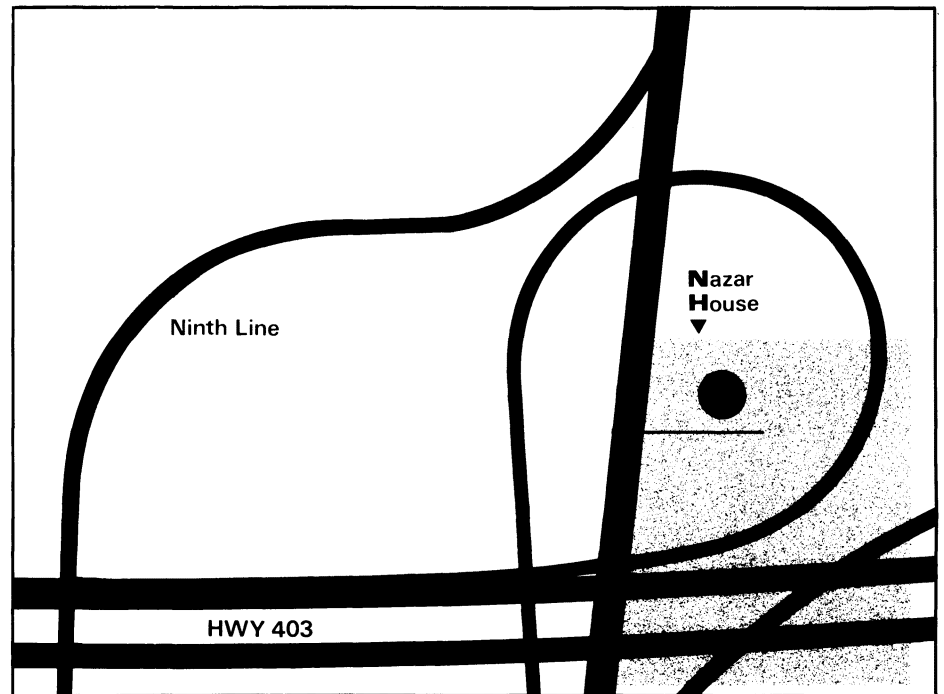
The David Albertson farmhouse, later called the Nazar house.

The Nazar House

In the 1870s David Albertson built a brick house on his farm in the second concession of Trafalgar Township. In all likelihood he was replacing an earlier frame or log structure, perhaps incorporating some of the materials from its predecessor. Albertson built well and his house has satisfactorily served him and successive owners for more than a century. But by the 1970s the spread of suburban development and superhighways was overwhelming the Nazar farmsite. The intersection of highways 403 and 407 was to submerge the small rectangular Nazar property in sweeping curves and gracefully arched bridges and ramps. The barn, a redundant building in a changing agricultural economy, had already been demolished, and there was every indication that the house, windbreak, country road, and every other sign of human habitation would disappear too. A place to live and to carry on a livelihood was to be transformed, without trace, into a place to pass through.

It was a gloomy moment when the Nazar House came up for discussion at the June 1983 meeting of the Mississauga Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee (LACAC). Reports announced that it stood on one of the parcels the MTC intended to purchase for the interchange, and that the MTC had no use for it. These facts alone seemed to doom the building. Furthermore, a curious feature of the Ontario Heritage Act exempted provincial properties from its terms. Once the MTC had taken possession of the Nazar property, the LACAC would have no authority over the fate of the building. Nevertheless, the house had been entered on the inventory of structures of heritage significance compiled by the City of Mississauga, and it was without doubt a handsome example of its type. The LACAC found it a worthy building and the members wished to record their interest in its retention.

Gloom turned to a glimmer of hope when committee members examined detailed drawings of the site. They discovered that the house stood, apparently by coincidence,



The intended highway ramp encircling, but not disturbing, the Nazar house site.

squarely in the centre of a 270 degree loop ramp on a piece of land that was not to be altered. Thus, when the intersection was in use, motorists travelling from north to west would coil their way around the undisturbed site of the Nazar House. Why not the house itself?

What followed was a creatively cooperative venture by the city and the ministry, conducted in the spirit of, but outside the terms of reference for, the Ontario Heritage Act. It is fair to say that both parties were somewhat bemused by the thought that anyone should wish to preserve a house in such an unusual location, but they were willing to listen to ideas. LACAC members prepared the case, acting under the nebulous heading of "concerned citizens." MTC agreed that the Nazar House would not be an obstruction, either during the building or after completion, and that its continued presence in the loop posed no safety hazard to motorists. MTC made it clear, however, that they were not in the house-preservation

business, and that they had no interest in security or future maintenance, or in paying for it.

At this point, the Parks and Recreation Department and the city's Planning Department entered the picture, with instructions from City Council to establish the costs of preservation. Staff found that the house was in exceptionally fine condition, well painted and having received a new roof in recent years. They estimated that it would cost about \$5,000 to seal windows and chimneys, place ventilators in the roof, break up the concrete basement floor, and remove a frame lean-to from the rear. This amount was equivalent to the amount MTC had already budgeted for demolition and clearing the site. Would the MTC redirect its demolition fund to this new purpose? If the money was forthcoming, the city agreed to undertake the "embalming" and to be custodian of the Nazar House in perpetuity. The Parks and Recreation Department would budget \$500 annually for maintenance.

The Nazar House

All this activity had proceeded through the latter half of 1983 without a firm commitment by either the MTC or the city, although there was nothing either could point to that would suggest preservation could not work. In December the commitment came at a private meeting between Hazel McCallion, Mississauga's mayor, and James Snow, minister of the MTC. With the top official in each party in agreement, the whole idea fell into place. The process had taken less than seven months and matters were arranged fully four months before the Nazars turned over possession to the MTC.

What had convinced the city and ministry? Certainly the insubstantial cost was crucial — there was not much to lose — and for that reason too much importance should not be given to the philosophical arguments presented. But it is nevertheless important to consider these points. They are part of the Nazar House story and are validated as important arguments in heritage conservation activities as we move towards the 1990s.

Critics of the Nazar House project have frequently asked how one gets to the house and, once there, what one can do there. They believe, as we all do, that buildings are made to be entered and used. The fact that this house is beyond physical reach surely indicates a change from familiar function. What else can one do with it? The central idea behind the Nazar House preservation was that it be considered a "heritage sculpture." Simply by standing there, unmoved from its original site, the house is a memorial to a style of living that once flourished in the neighbourhood. In this new function — and it is a function — it corresponds to a landmark tree, a cenotaph, or a gravestone. Each is "read" in its own way, some through inscribed words and others more abstractly through memories evoked by details of the design or by the total feature. The symmetry and strong, simple architectural lines of the Nazar House, and its rich colour, make it easy to read from a distance. It is ideally suited for its new function.

The Nazar House is unique, but it gains strength from countless other similar examples scattered through rural Ontario. This essentially intuitive association will help motorists passing the site to read the history of the setting through the building, despite the loss of usual farm surroundings. Without the Nazar House, this "time depth" at the interchange collapses into a perpetual present, epitomized by the bridges and roadways.

Users experience the Nazar House from one of Mississauga's most familiar vantage points: the automobile. With so much of the city seen through windshields so much of the time, why not heritage? If motorists speeding past simply notice the Nazar House, it will have fulfilled its function. If they wonder why it is trapped by a coiled roadway, a conscious step has been taken towards understanding the process of change in one's milieu. The Nazar House today is, by all standards, incongruous, sending out confusing signals. Literally and figuratively, it is a square peg in a round hole, an old expression for a mismatch which none-the-less tells us a great deal about ourselves.

A heritage sculpture caught the imaginations of people empowered to make decisions. For them to accept a sealed house as a monument without words marks a significant step towards feeling at ease with change in our surroundings. The familiar Canadian style of replacing or occasionally restoring old structures has for years worked against recognition of change, but that style is now clearly being challenged.

The Nazar House is an example of combining past and present in a celebration of change. It recognizes that a mixture of older and newer features in the landscape may add to the vitality of the community. Arguably, in this regard, Mississauga has more to gain than almost any place in the province, for so much of it is new. In the relationship between benefits and costs, the returns are intangible but substantial, while

the outlay is inconsequential. The MTC and the city are to be commended for having seen this to be a very good ratio, and their creative act promises to yield immeasurable benefits in Mississauga and beyond.

In 1988 the Nazar House awaits the encircling roadway that will create the dramatic contrast of straight line and curve. Sealed and unoccupied, it is in the same uncertain state as the bridge overshadowing it - both are currently off public limits. Each has a scheduled function: the one to carry people forward to distant destinations, the other to convey minds back over the course of human history. We look forward to the consummation of this distinctive marriage of past and future.