

THE DDO Panhandle: cultural heritage assessment



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Cultural Heritage Assessment of the David Dunlap Observatory ‘Panhandle’

Introduction

The following cultural heritage assessment of the Panhandle portion (Part 2 on survey Plans) of the David Dunlap Observatory (DDO) property was undertaken at the request of the Town of Richmond Hill. It follows a series of heritage studies undertaken on the main and original portion of the DDO (Part 1 on Survey Plans) which resulted in the identification of a large area of that original property as a cultural heritage landscape and the designation of that property under Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act. As the main DDO property and the Panhandle section have two different municipal addresses, and as the Panhandle area has been under lease to the Town since 1979, it was not included in the original series of assessments. However the recent change of ownership of the full property (both Part 1 and Part 2) and the Town’s initiative to develop a Cultural Heritage Management Plan and Planning Framework which would include both components of the property indicated the need for undertaking a cultural heritage assessment of the Panhandle as well. The perspective gleaned from this review is then intended to contribute to the consideration of options/recommendations being set forward for the whole DDO property.

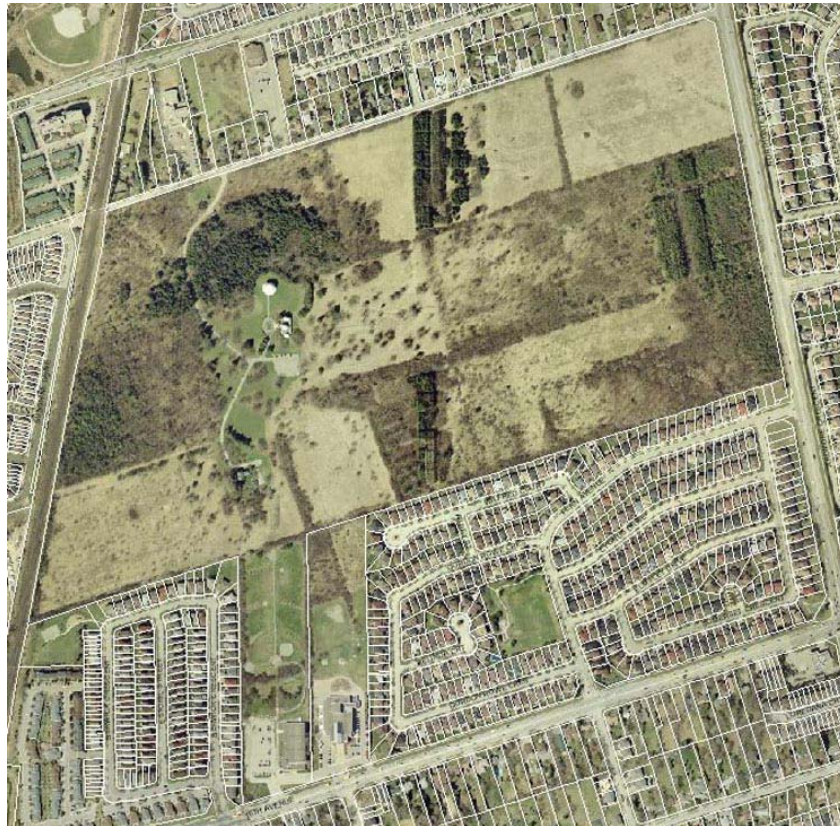


Fig.1: DDO Property including Panhandle

(Town of Richmond Hill)

Historical Background

The property now known as the Panhandle and containing Observatory Park and the Elvis Stojko Municipal Arena was severed from the original Farm Lot 41, Concession 1, (then) Markham Township in 1950 when it was purchased by the University of Toronto (U of T). Its purchase by the University represented the realization of a long standing objective of Observatory founder Dr. C. A. Chant who had, from the very beginning, envisaged a road from the "...Great dome in the precise north-south direction over Lot 41 to Sideroad 40" (now 16th Ave.).¹ However the price being asked at the time was considered too high², delaying the purchase until 1950. Finally in 1949, boundaries were surveyed, aligned to the true north – south axis across Lot 41, forming an "elongated parallelogram"³ consisting of 12.129 acres.

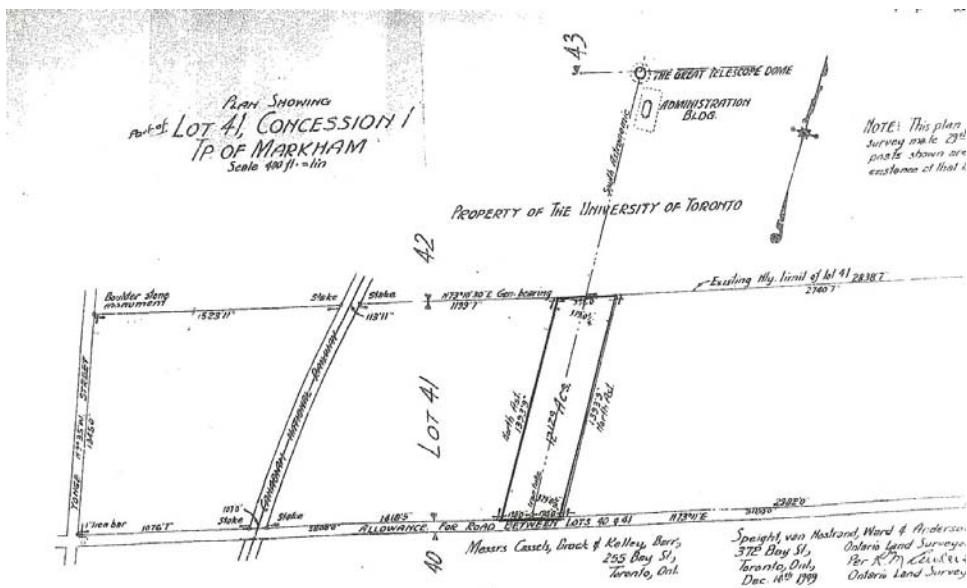


Fig.2: Original Panhandle Survey. Note projection of north- south axis.

However the historic association between Lot 41 and Lot 42 extends back to Robert Marsh's purchase of both properties, Lot 42 in 1802 and Lot 41 in 1815. Together the lands comprised the core of the Marsh homestead with "Lorridge", the frame house (named after Robert's birthplace, Lorridge, Gloucestershire, England⁴) constructed on Lot 41 (Fig.3). Members of three generations of the family lived there until the death of Robert Marsh Sr. in 1852 at which time his grandson, Alexander Marsh, inherited Lot 42 while Alexander's brother, also Robert, took ownership of Lot 41⁵.

¹ Chant, Dr. C.A., Astronomy at the University of Toronto, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1954, p.46.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Murdoch, Su, The Alexander Marsh Residence, Elms Lea; Town of Richmond Hill, p.2

⁵ Ibid, pp. 3-4

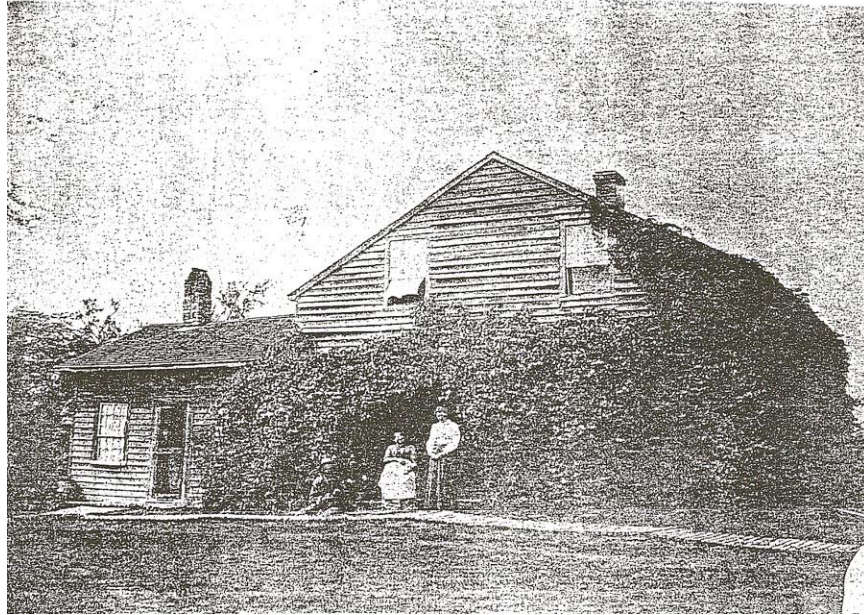


Fig.3: Lorridge, the Robert Marsh home. (Richmond Hill Public library)

Robert Marsh continued to live on the property until his death in 1895⁶. In his obituary it is noted that he “...was born within a few yards of his late residence” suggesting that the original house had been superseded or perhaps that a second house had been built. Like Alexander, Robert played a prominent role in the community. He was a member of Markham Township Council, and the Richmond Hill Board of Education. However his real distinction was as a world class breeder of Southdown sheep for which he won many awards including several at the American Centennial in Philadelphia in 1876⁷.

The 1851 Census indicates Robert Marsh in a 1 storey frame house while in 1861 a 1 ½ storey frame house is recorded. The 1878 York County Atlas map locates the residence in the western section of the lot, reached by a lane from the south. There is an orchard to the north of the residence. Later topographic maps (1922, 1936, 1943) show a residence located in relatively close proximity to the CNR Railway easement, and the latter two indicate a road/lane from the house running parallel to the tracks and joining with the Elm’s Lea lane from Yonge Street.

The ‘Plan Shewing Property of the David Dunlap Observatory and Adjacent Properties’ dated November 15, 1933 (Fig.5) shows the Lot 41 farm complex in some detail including a frame dwelling with ‘tail’, a large barn and several outbuildings. The property at that time was accessed both from the west and the south with the location of the latter seeming to conform to that shown on the 1878 plan. A small building noted as ‘cottage’ is shown to the east of this lane. As well a lane is shown as extending eastward into the heart of the property with the field pattern developed around it. Of interest is that even on

⁶ Obituary in Richmond Hill Liberal.

⁷ Ibid

this early plan the north/south axis from the Observatory Building has been projected across Lot 41 to the side road.



Fig.4: The Marsh properties in 1878 (York County Atlas)

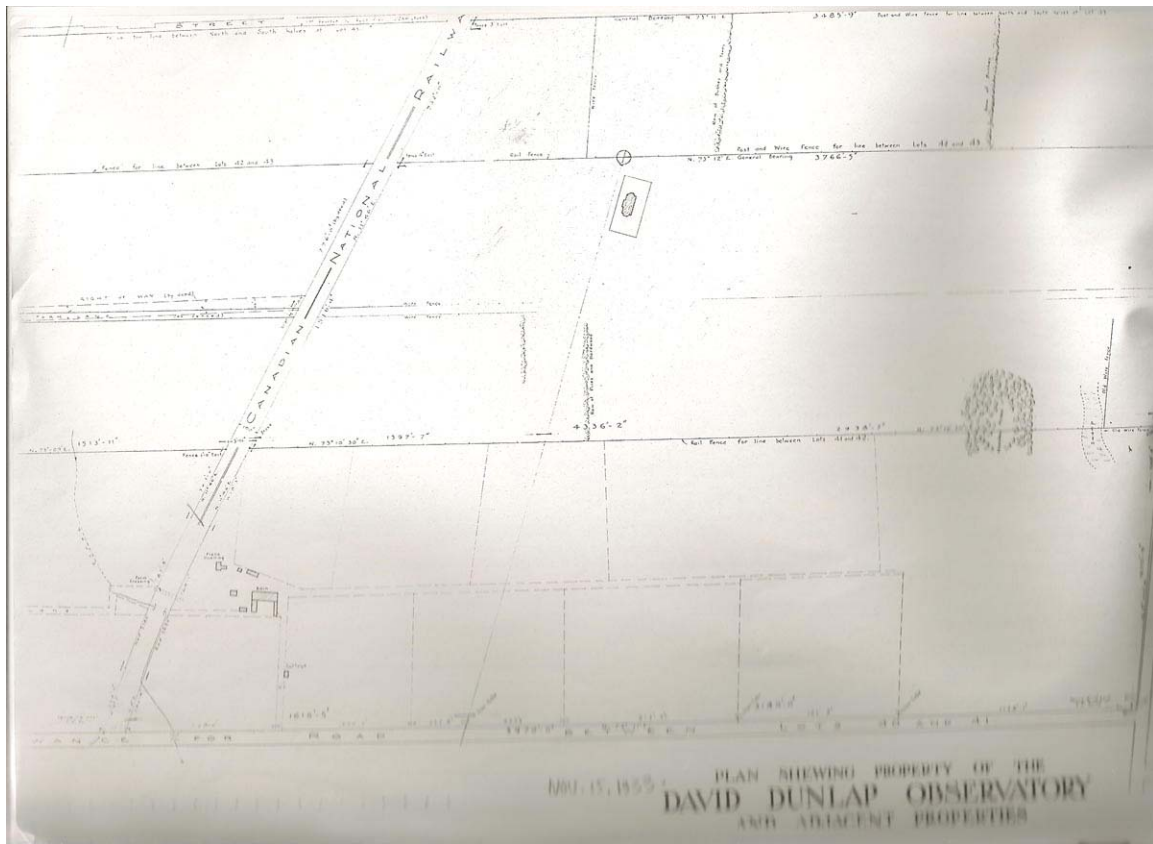


Fig.5: Note farm complex adjacent CNR and projected N-S axis (U of T Archives)

This historic farm complex was well to the west of the Panhandle, as the lands being acquired were intended as a gateway and formal southern approach to the Observatory, necessitating a strip of land rather than a full lot. As noted earlier the land was surveyed in 1949 and on January 31, 1950 the University of Toronto acquired the lands from the

estate of John Gordon Alcombrack who had farmed the property in the early 20th century and died in 1932⁸.

Despite Dr. Chant's longstanding wish that a southern approach be developed it was only in 1958, two years after his death that the potential new access was designed. A 1958 drawing (which seems to use the November 1933 plan as its base) proposes a curving road from the south through a wood which then passes in front of Elms Lea before curving back to the Administration Building and the Dome. A parking lot, roughly in its present location and a turnaround by the Observatory are also shown.

Though long in gestation, the concept of an approach road through the Panhandle was in due course superseded by the option of the shorter access from Hillview Drive leading in 1964 to the construction of the current Donald Drive.

With its use to the university marginalized the Panhandle was leased to the Town of Richmond Hill in 1978. The lease contains a range of provisions including: "That the lessee shall refer to the demised premises in any public signs...as "David Dunlap Observatory Park."; ...that the lessee use the demised premises for passive park purposes and shall make no provision for team sports; The northerly boundary...shall be fenced ...to a height of not less than six feet, and the Lessee shall maintain screen plantings of substantial height and density in a line immediately south of the northern boundary."

In 1984 the Town of Richmond Hill engaged the firm of Harrington and Hoyle Ltd. (hereafter H & H), Landscape Architects to design Observatory Park. The firm developed the master plan for the site including locating the arena, parking lot and walks as well as the solar system themed park itself. They also were engaged to prepare the detailed planting and paving plan for the Park and undertake site review of its construction.

Description of Observatory Park / Elvis Stojko Arena

The Observatory Park is designed around a central walk aligned with the astronomical north-south axis which had been established by the U of T/DDO survey of the property. The visitor is intended to walk past the built-up area (the arena and its parking), up a wide set of stone steps and along a narrowing path placed within a dense canopy, suggesting perhaps a mysterious portal to a different plane, to then emerge into an open area of long views with plantings and paving set out in a generally proportional, mostly two dimensional, representation of the solar system. Paved circles represent the planets while curved plantings of *Fraxinus Americana* (White Ash), *Quercus Alba* (White Oak) and *Malus White Angel* (Flowering Crabapple) respectively represent their orbits. The sun is the only celestial element which is completely out of scale but the size of the planets and their distance relative to each other is generally accurate and was worked out with the assistance of Dr. Tom Bolton, then of the DDO⁹. A number of the planet locations were planned as picnic areas and Saturn has raised masonry walls at the perimeter providing seating.

⁸ Instrument 2851, Deed of sale, 31 January 1950.

⁹ Telephone interview with Ken Hoyle, (17/12/09) formerly partner, Harrington and Hoyle Limited

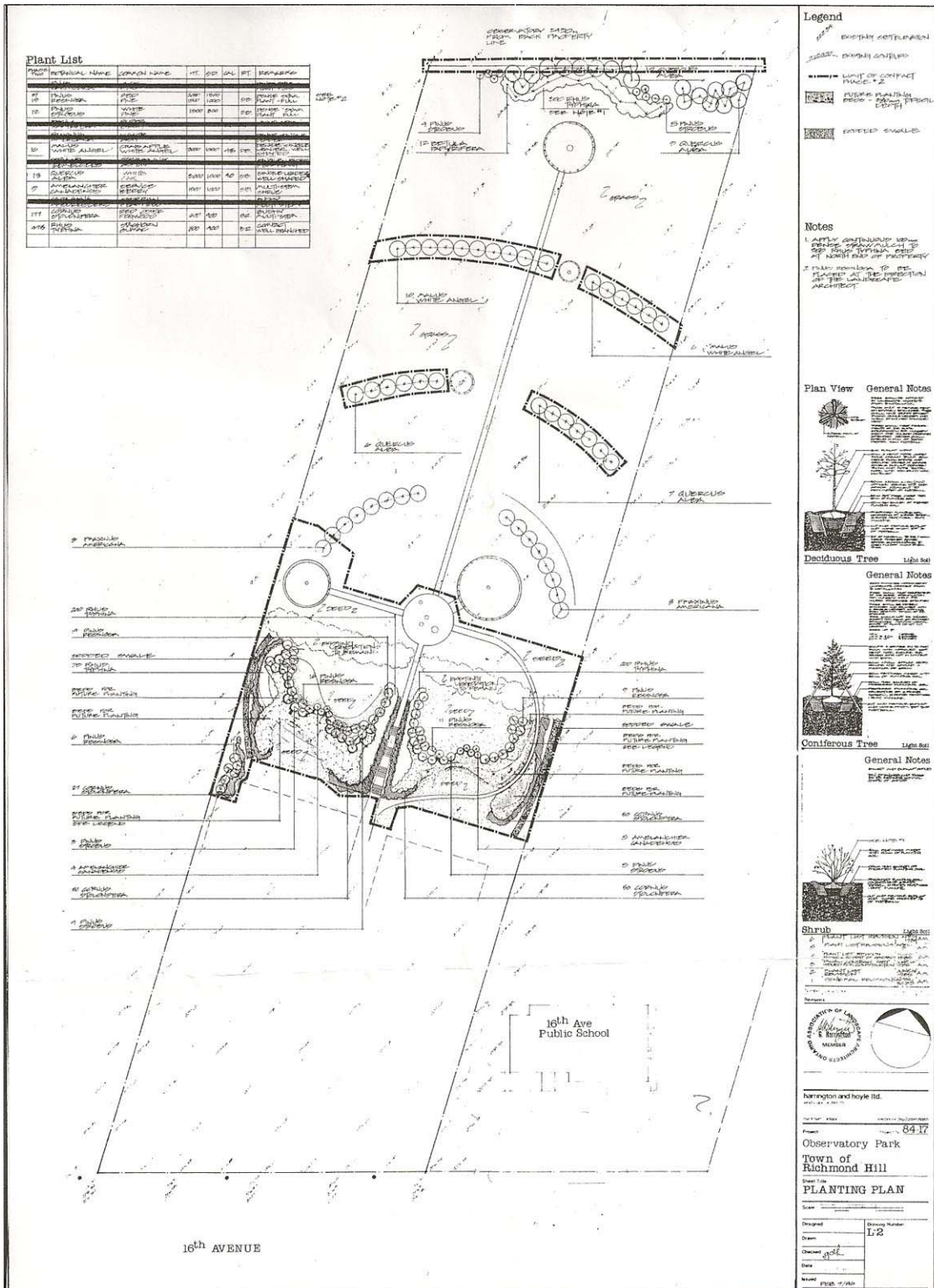


Fig.6: H&H Planting Plan for Observatory Park Town of Richmond Hill

The treatment incorporated existing hedgerows along the south edge of the park proper and along the east and west boundaries of the property. The dense hedgerow at the south,

acting as the final level of screen/enclosure before the open space, was simply “punched through”¹⁰ to create the entrance to the solar system. At the northeast the hedgerow now blends into the regenerating woodland at the rear of the school property. As these hedgerows run either parallel or perpendicular to the surveyed north-south axis it can be inferred that they mostly date to the period of DDO ownership of the property, providing a screen and boundary to the property. The northern boundary is established by a high wire fence and an extension of the old windrow along the original property boundary between farm lots.



Fig.7: Steps up to Observatory Park (A.S.)

The mature hedgerows along the south, east and west are relatively effective in screening out the generally suburban context and the openness within the park allows for long views.

The southern portion of the site is occupied by the Elvis Stojko Arena (originally Observatory Arena) and a large, asphalt paved parking lot. As noted earlier these elements too, included in the H & H master plan for the site area were aligned along the north-south axis. The arena is a long rectangular structure with a rounded entrance porch and foyer at the southwest corner. This form, the inclusion of a small atrium and the use of polychromatic patterned brick cladding indicate a greater concern with aesthetics than is often afforded this building type. The cladding of the upper wall is of pre-painted metal siding in a green tone similar to the colour of patinated copper.

The property forms a recreational node within the suburban context and, from 16th Avenue is very much associated visually with the Roman Catholic Separate School directly to the east. At the street edge the context is thoroughly suburban residential.

¹⁰ Ibid



Fig.8: Sun and the closer planets

(A.S.)



Fig. 9: Typical planetary representation

(A.S.)



Fig.10: Planet Picnic Area. Note suburban context.

A.S.



Fig.11: View south from Pluto.

A.S.

Evaluation

Historical / Associative

The property represents a section of Lot 41, which, along with Lot 42 formed the Marsh homestead property and was the lot on which the original Robert Marsh dwelling was located. It was here Alexander Marsh grew up and his brother Robert Marsh Jr., also a prominent local figure, lived his whole life.

However, the actual location of the farm complex, including the Marsh home was well to the west, adjacent to the railway tracks. There is little, if anything, remaining of the original field pattern within the Park or any other tangible connection to the Marsh era.

The property is also associated with Dr. C. A. Chant's vision of a southern access to the DDO anticipated in the 1933 mapping of the area and finally realized in 1950. This vision was made manifest to the point of surveying the property in terms of the true north-south axis which has influenced the form of the subdivisions around it as well as the design of the park which it became.

However this aspect of Chant's vision never came to fruition. Indeed it was eventually rejected by the U. of T. in favour of the northern approach. Other than the general property form and possibly the windrow/screening along the boundaries which helps define that form, there is little evidence of U. of T.'s ownership of the site. In fact the DDO/U. of T. undertook no significant initiatives on the site.

Design

Observatory Park and the Elvis Stojko arena were designed and built over the period 1984 – 1986. The master plan and park design were undertaken by Harrington and Hoyle Landscape Architects, a well established firm which went on to do many interesting commissions, both in formal park design and ecological restoration, prior to dissolving as a partnership relatively recently. As described above the conceptual design for the Park evolved from the north-south axis principle already established, and, along with the relationship/proximity of the DDO, led to the solar system theme manifested in paving and plantings. It is a thoughtful, quite formal piece of work if perhaps lacking in drama and contains as well an educational component.

The project is approximately 25 years old. As a fairly recent work it needs to be of the highest level of design quality in order to be considered 'instant' cultural heritage (such as Frank Gehry's addition to the AGO). Despite its relatively unusual theme and thoughtful realization it cannot be considered at that level, indeed the inclusion of the planet Pluto is now dated and the (understandable) inability to show the sun at true scale

also somewhat undermines the veracity of the conception. Likewise, the Elvis Stojko Arena, while more sensitively conceived than most buildings of this type, is not of that unique design or quality level which would have it be considered cultural heritage at this time.

Context

The Elvis Stojko Arena is a prominent building on 16th Avenue while Observatory Park is rather a hidden gem of open space tucked in behind its consciously designed vegetative screen. As viewed from the street the site is actually dominated by the large parking lot.

Though the arena is an important structure within the neighbourhood, it is so in the way that every hockey/skating arena in the Province is important to their community.

The Park has been so well screened from the surrounding area that it seems almost separate from the general community along 16th Ave. It does however have a contextual relationship with the DDO based on the origin of its general form and its solar theme.

Conclusion/Recommendations

While there are certainly a number of associations and features of interest with regard to the property, in the overall analysis they are not considered of sufficient cultural heritage value to merit designation of the property under Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act.

It should be emphasized that this does not mean that the property does not have cultural value (thoughtful design) nor other positive aspects (public open space) but simply from the cultural heritage perspective it does not meet the standard required for designation.

However there are elements which are worthy of attempting to preserve as well as an opportunity for commemoration/interpretation.

The most important heritage aspect of the site is the “elongated parallelogram” form of the property which originated with Chant’s desire for the continuation of the true north-south axis. This form then dictated the configuration of the subdivision to the west and the planning of the Park. Ideally this form would be maintained into the future, perhaps continuing to be defined by the existing windrows at the east and west boundaries. As this configuration is now well established ‘on the ground’ it is unlikely that it would be lost but the objective of its ongoing preservation still should be acknowledged.

As a vestige of the original Farm Lot 41 which was so important to Marsh family history it would provide an appropriate location to commemorate the Marsh family (focusing on the Robert Marshs’, both senior and junior, and their relationship to Alexander Marsh of *Elms Lea*) in the form of a plaque and/or interpretive display.

List of Sources:

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Gary T. Hunter, *Heritage Resources David Dunlap Observatory and Park: An Assessment*, the Richmond Hill Naturalists, December 12, 2008.

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Alexander Shevchuck, *Cultural Heritage Landscape Assessment The David Dunlap Observatory and Park: A Landscape in Six Stories*, the Richmond Hill Naturalists, undated.

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Markham Instrument 2851, Deed of sale, 31 January 1950, Alcombrack Estate to U of T;
Town of Richmond Hill Panhandle Lease;
Harrington and Hoyle Drawings.
Current Air Photos

Telephone interview with Ken Hoyle, (17/12/09) formerly partner, Harrington and Hoyle Limited.

Websites for: Harrington and Hoyle; Glenn D. Harrington; Kenneth Hoyle.

Map of Markham Township (1853-1854), George McPhillips

Map of the County of York, George Tremaine, 1860.

“Plan Shewing Property of the David Dunlap Observatory and Adjacent Properties” dated November 15, 1933, U of T Archives

Topographic Maps: 1917, 1922, 1936 1943, Queen’s University Map Library