

SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT IN EDINA SINCE 1935: A HISTORIC CONTEXT STUDY

Prepared by Robert C. Vogel, Preservation Planning Consultant,
for the Edina Heritage Preservation Board

September, 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2012, the City of Edina was awarded a Certified Local Government (CLG) grant to carry out a historic context study to guide planning for the preservation of heritage resources associated with suburban development since 1935. The project final report, "Suburban Development in Edina Since 1935: A Historic Context Study," presents the results of that study, which was prepared under the auspices of the city's Heritage Preservation Board (HPB). The report delineates a series of historic context statements that describe significant broad patterns of local development and identifies related heritage resource property types, with context-based goals and priorities for implementing the results of the study. Historic contexts were developed on the basis of background data on local, regional, and national history. The study delineated three thematically based local historic context study units:

- Postwar Residential Neighborhoods
- Midcentury Modern Architecture and Landscapes
- Edina's Recent Past

Each study unit describes one or more aspects of historical development and identifies the significant patterns and trends related to particular types of heritage resources. The organizational framework is conventional: each context narrative is characterized by a theme, geographical limits, and chronological period. Together, the study units represent a comprehensive overview of Edina's suburban heritage from around 1935 down to the present day.

Historic contexts are the cornerstone of the preservation planning process and the present study builds on the results of previous historic context research and preservation planning work undertaken by the Edina HPB since the 1970s. In 1999, the city approved a planning document containing an initial statement of local historic contexts, organized in a two-tier format, which formed the basis of the city's current comprehensive preservation plan. The first-tier historic contexts are organized chronologically and describe in broad, general terms the composite patterns and trends superimposed on the landscape by large-scale cultural processes that unfolded over

long spans of time. In contrast, the second-tier study units are organized geographically or thematically, focusing on particular locations where concentrations of related heritage preservation resources are believed to occur. Recent historic context research has focused on broad cultural-historical themes, such as the heritage of women, and specific heritage resource types, such as Morningside bungalows.

The current comprehensive plan, adopted in 2008, includes a first-tier historic context entitled “The Suburban Landscape,” which focuses on the evolution of the suburban built environment from the 1880s through the 1970s. The chronological limits of this broad, city-wide study unit have been expanded to encompass heritage resource management themes associated with the “modern” or “recent past” periods; that is, the time period has been extended down to the present day. The comprehensive plan also identifies some second-tier historic contexts which overlap to some extent with the scope of the present investigation. With the exception of the study unit devoted to Southdale, the previously delineated historic context statements have not paid much attention to property types associated with post-World War II suburban development.

The report contains historical background information relating to Edina’s historical development, with special reference to important broad themes in late 19th and early 20th century suburban development. The historical overview section of the report discusses the pivotal roles played by transportation and government (federal, state and local) in shaping the patterns of suburban development. The effects of the Great Depression and World War II are also explored. Separate chapter-length narratives outline the historic context study units relating to postwar neighborhoods, midcentury modern architecture and landscapes, and resources less than fifty years old. Each chapter consists of a historic context statement and a discussion of associated historic property types which link specific types of heritage resources to significant events and patterns of events. Historical significance, integrity, and landmark designation requirements are also discussed. Together, the study units serve as a backdrop for understanding important broad themes in Edina history and establish a framework for making consistent, informed decisions about the preservation, protection, and use of the city’s post-1935 architecture and landscapes. The report also includes a comprehensive bibliography of sources consulted, a list of Edina subdivisions platted between 1935 and 1975, and a preliminary inventory of known heritage resources which date from the late 20th century.

The study itself was essentially an exercise in historical research which utilized a wide range of printed and unpublished source materials that were accessed through multiple repositories. Primary sources of archival data included maps, plats, aerial photographs, and census reports. Secondary sources included published local histories, newspaper

articles, scholarly publications, and previous studies of 20th century heritage preservation resources in Edina. These documentary materials were made available at the Edina City Hall, the Edina Historical Society, the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus libraries, and the Minnesota Historical Society. A number of Internet sources were also consulted.

The principal findings of the study were summarized as follows:

- The historic contexts developed by this project provide a framework for consistent, informed decisions about the preservation, protection, and use of heritage resources from the mid-20th century and recent periods.
- The study units Postwar Suburban Neighborhoods, Midcentury Modern Architecture and Landscapes, and Edina's Recent Past will be useful in planning future reconnaissance and intensive surveys. However, the historic context statements are meant to serve as a general introduction only: more intensive archival research and field survey is required to "flesh out" the study units.
- Archival data relating to suburban development in Edina after 1935 is fairly abundant and readily accessible in public depositories. The most valuable data sets are: village and city council minutes, planning and zoning commission minutes, subdivision plats, building permits, property tax assessment records (including field record cards, with photographs, for all properties compiled 1950s-1990s), aerial photographs, city directories, and records of municipal public works construction (streets, roads, bridges, sewer, water, buildings, parks).
- Property types associated with suburban development are predominantly detached, single-family dwellings built in postwar residential subdivisions. A significant proportion of the existing housing stock was constructed between circa 1935 and 1975. (See Fig. 10) According to the most recent census data, 8% of the housing in Edina was built before 1940; 64% of the existing homes date from 1950-1979; in 2010, the median age of all Edina houses was 43.7 years old.
- Background research suggests the vast majority of Midcentury Modern buildings represent only a few common suburban house forms: Minimal Traditional, Cape Cod, Ranch, and Split-Level. Collectively, they are a potent symbol of suburban culture; for a number of reasons, however, the individual houses are usually not regarded as historically or architecturally significant.

- Midcentury Modern and Recent buildings are underrepresented in existing heritage preservation resource inventories and none have yet been individually designated as Edina Heritage Resources.
- Midcentury Modern properties are a vital legacy of Edina's suburban heritage. While some of these properties are unique and irreplaceable, the vast majority of mid-20th century buildings and landscapes represent only a few common suburban building forms. The same is true of properties dating from the last 40-50 years (Edina's "recent past").
- Since the 1970s, hundreds (perhaps thousands) of mid-20th century buildings and landscapes have been destroyed or substantially altered by public construction projects and private development, resulting in the loss of irreplaceable information about Edina history. Although the scale of the destruction of cultural heritage may be increasing (the result of redevelopment and gentrification), plenty of significant properties doubtless remain and it is unlikely that Edina will lose more than a fraction of its midcentury modern resource base in the next 10-20 years. Public interest in the preservation of midcentury modern heritage resources is expected to grow and the city preservation program is well positioned to encourage and facilitate citizen participation in the movement to save the suburban '50s and '60s.

The final report identifies several critical information gaps, including:

- More research needs to be carried out in community newspapers. A potential wealth of information about Edina developers, builders, neighborhoods, local real estate market conditions, and individual properties lies (largely untapped) in community newspapers such as the *Country Club Crier* (1932-42), the *Edina-Morningside Courier* (1951-68), and the *Edina Sun* (1968-73); and in the major metropolitan dailies.
- No systematic, comprehensive surveys have been carried out in any of Edina's mid-20th century neighborhoods and only a small number of individual midcentury modern buildings have been identified and evaluated.
- There is significant disagreement among historians, architects, architectural historians, and preservationists regarding the classification of Modern and Postmodern building styles.

- The way local builders and developers designed, constructed, and marketed postwar housing is not well documented.
- There is a critical need for thematic studies of midcentury modern commercial architecture, churches, and parks.

The study developed an action plan for implementing the results of the study organized around the following (non-prioritized) recommendations:

- 1) The Edina HPB should adopt, modify, or disapprove the historic context study; if adopted, the new historic context study units should be integrated with the historic context statements outlined in the city's comprehensive plan.
- 2) Develop an initial list of 20 to 50 Midcentury Modern buildings and landscapes that the HPB considers historically important and worthy of further research.
- 3) Continue the neighborhood survey according to the priorities set out in the 2008 comprehensive plan; review and adjust survey strategies for the upcoming plan revision (scheduled for 2015-16) to reflect the findings of the present historic context study.
- 4) The redundancy of the most common Midcentury Modern property types calls out for a modification of heritage resource identification and evaluation methods—research designs for future surveys should emphasize neighborhood-specific historic context research, windshield reconnaissance of selected subdivisions (or selected blocks within subdivisions), and intensive survey of properties believed to be well preserved, representative examples of important resource types. In light of the large number of residential subdivisions platted between 1935 and 1975, it may be more cost-effective to conduct neighborhood-level surveys in the areas with the oldest housing stock first.
- 5) More emphasis on cultural landscapes is needed. Because they are often fragile, it is important to identify and record historic gardens and other mid-20th century landscapes, including examples of vernacular forms. In addition to identifying properties potentially eligible for heritage landmark designation, such a project would also be an important educational tool and an opportunity to promote awareness of Edina's cultural landscapes. The HPB should consider undertaking a suburban landscape survey in collaboration with neighborhood groups, garden clubs, or the Edina Historical Society.

- 6) Research should be carried out to identify important architects, designers, landscape architects, engineers, developers, builders, and contractors who worked in Edina between circa 1935 and 1975.