



**THE MABEL ROBSON HOUSE**  
**688 CARNEGIE STREET**  
**CITY OF OSHAWA**

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**SUMMARY**

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By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, fewer private residential buildings were being designed by commissioned architects. Of those, few are a complete expression of a style or design theme approach. The Modernist residence at 688 Carnegie Street in Oshawa seems to be an exception. The architect has been able to achieve a harmony by repeating the square form massing, and using monochromatic masonry, plain materials, metalwork, and earthtone colouration. The result is a simple, yet elegant, Modernist interpretation of a Period Revival (Second Empire) style.

Further research is required to confirm if the architectural firm of Brown and Elton is responsible for the design. If the dwelling can be dated to the late 1950s or early 1960s, then it is a significant example of the Modernist style in Oshawa, and of the interest of the Robson family in architectural design. The house has retained its architectural integrity.

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**MABEL ROBSON HOUSE**  
**688 CARNEGIE STREET**  
**LOTS 20, 21,22, PLAN 293**  
**CITY OF OSHAWA**

*It should be noted that this report was prepared without the benefit of the collection held by the Oshawa Community Museum and Archives due to a fire in September 2004. In addition, the only partial legibility of the microfilm provided by the Durham Regional Land Registry Office (Whitby) might have resulted in errors in interpreting the land records.*

**1.0 LOT HISTORY**

The subject property is within Plan 293, registered on July 25, 1927, as a subdivision of part of Lot 11, Concession 3, East Whitby township. The Plan is referred to as the Rossland Park Annex.

On July 27, 1927, Philip Conlin agreed to sell several lots to Arthur J. Carnegie and James Hortop (in business as Carnegie & Hortop). Conlin and his wife completed the agreement by selling the subject parcel (part Lots 20,21,22) to Carnegie and Hortop on June 3, 1929.

By November 1940, the owners were in arrears for municipal property taxes. A tax deed was issued that month to the Township of East Whitby, which then sold in June 1941 to John William Brack. He was deceased by March 1950.

The subject area was annexed into the City of Oshawa in November 1950.

**2.0 MABEL ROBSON**

On October 21, 1955, the executors of Rosina Mary Brack sold the lots to Mabel Robson

for \$6,600. The tradition is that Robson had the subject dwelling built, employing the same architect used for the renovations to the Charles Norman Robson house on the farm property known as 268 Winchester Road West.<sup>1</sup>

The Robson family fortune was founded in the Robson Leather Co. Ltd. James Robson was born on a farm near Whitby in 1842 and learned the tanning trade as a youth. In 1865, he and a business partner, Mr. Lauchland, bought the South Oshawa tannery following the deaths of the owners of two tanneries, Thomas and William Bartlett. In 1893, Lauchland retired and the business ownership was transferred to James, who soon took in his sons Charles (born about 1873) and Frank (born about 1871) as partners. In spite of a destructive fire in 1899, the company thrived and was incorporated in 1904 as Robson Leather Co. Ltd. By 1927, it was enjoying "great prosperity," particularly with its chrome patent leather shoes sold under the trademark of Black Beauty. They sold all varieties of leather used in the manufacture of the upper part of shoes. It is during this period that Charles Norman Robson, believed to be the son of Charles, was involved in the family business. The Second World War (1939 to 1945) proved lucrative for Robson Leather when it was contracted to supply the Canadian forces with boot leather.<sup>2</sup>

Mabel Robson died about 1969. The property was transferred by the executors, Edward D. and Charles N. Robson, to a family owned company, Americana Footwear Ltd.

### **3.0 GERALDINE MURPHY AND DR. DORCAS CANE**

Charles N. Robson and Americana Footwear Ltd. sold in January 1971 to Geraldine Murphy.

Murphy sold in October 1986 to Dr. Dorcas Madeline Cane. Dr. Cane was the daughter of John and Madeline Beaton who owned what is known as the J.H. Beaton house at 55 Connaught Street in Oshawa.<sup>3</sup> In 1963, she and her husband, William F.E. Cane, acquired

her parents' house. The Canes sold it in November 1986 to Bruce Elliott and Joyce Marie Norman, and presumably occupied the subject dwelling.

## **4.0 ARCHITECTURE**

*The dwelling was viewed from the Carnegie Street frontage.*

This dwelling is a composition comprised of a 1½-storey, central structure with a mansard roof, flanked by at least three (visible), flat-roofed, one storey wings and a garage. It faces east to Carnegie Street and presents a complex of proportioned and balanced modules. The landscaping includes a curved driveway, shrubs, older trees, urns, and new plantings.

### **4.1 DATE OF CONSTRUCTION**

The local tradition is that the subject dwelling was built after the property was bought by Mabel Robson in 1955. It is likely that some area residents or family members can recall its construction. Inquiries by Heritage Oshawa may be able to confirm the original owner, date of construction, and architect. Stylistically, it could be an avant-garde example of Modern architecture dating to the late 1950s or 1960s.

### **4.2 ARCHITECT**

There is a local tradition that the house at 688 Carnegie Street was designed by the same architectural firm retained for the renovations of the Charles Robson house at 268 Winchester Road West in Oshawa. Those renovations were undertaken in 1944-1945 under the direction of architect Murray Brown, with A.G. Elton as Associate.

Born in 1884 in Dundee, Scotland, Murray Brown was educated at the Royal Academy School in London, England. He immigrated to Canada in 1914 and first worked for Charles S. Cobb. By the 1930s, he had his own practice. The Brown & Elton office was in the Confederation Life Building, Toronto. Murray died in April 1958, suggesting that it

may have been the architectural firm that undertook the Carnegie Street project, not Murray personally.

### **4.3 STYLE AND FORM**

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period of experimentation in architecture, prompted, in part, by new building materials such as reinforced concrete, structural steel, and plastics. Several trends in architectural design were the result. The two overlaying themes were Modernism, and the historically based style known collectively as Period Revivals. The house at 688 Carnegie Street has elements of both themes.

The dominant impression of the dwelling is Period Revival; specifically of the Second Empire styling that was briefly popular in North America in the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This composition also incorporates the unadorned and geometric form of Modernism, particularly the International style that came to Canada in the 1940s and survives to present day.<sup>4</sup> The style tends to be modular in approach where one form, in this case a square, is repeated in scaled proportions for the wings of the house and the garage. The surfaces are “severely plain” but the overall presentation manages to harmonize the two style themes (Period Revival and Modernism) and achieve a kind of delicacy.<sup>5</sup>

### **4.4 MASONRY**

The dwelling is constructed of light red brick laid in common bond. There appears to be an overpaint or staining of sand-brown, which, combined with the grey tones of the roof tile, give an overall earthtone to the structure.

### **4.5 ROOF**

The characteristic component of the Second Empire style is the mansard roof with dormers. This is used only for the main (central) section. The ripple-edged (metal?), grey

roof tiles are reminiscent of the slate tiles common on Second Empire structures. The chimneystack is square.

The roofs of the wings and garage are flat, with a cream coloured edging. The rooflines are aligned to the eaves of the mansard roof.

## **4.6 WINDOW OPENINGS**

Historically, a mansard roof often featured dormer windows. In this example, the treatment is Modern, incorporating an almost industrial plainness in what appears to be smooth metal siding with rivets. The segmental shape to the pediment or head over each window is an interpretation of the hooding, labels, and shaped lintels typical of the Second Empire. The window sashes are 6x6, square panes, integrating with the other uses of the square shape.

The ground level window openings are flat, narrow, and also multipaned. They have the effect of sidelights typically used in Classical doorcases.

The wings have a Modernist approach with large, square window openings and square panes in the sashes. Thicker, cream coloured muntins may have been added to accommodate a storm window system.

All window sashes have delicate, almost invisible muntin (dividing or glazing) bars.

## **4.7 DOORCASE**

Second Empire was a lavish style, adorned with a profusion of architectural features and motifs. This example has reduced the ornamentation of the front entranceway to two, X-motifs in the transom over the center, paneled door. The X-motifs are metal (?) and appear to be freestanding, allowing each to create a shadow on the background glazing. The use of shadows and reflections to create patterns was a playful architectural

technique of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> The entrance is deeply recessed, replacing the need for a portico or porch.

## **5.0 SIGNIFICANCE**

By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, fewer private residential buildings were being designed by commissioned architects. Of those, few are a complete expression of a style or design theme approach. The Modernist residence at 688 Carnegie Street seems to be an exception. The architect has been able to achieve a harmony by repeating the square form massing, and using monochromatic masonry, plain materials, metalwork, and earthtone colouration. The result is a simple, yet elegant, Modernist interpretation of a Period Revival (Second Empire) style.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Su Murdoch, "The Magner-Robson House, 268 Winchester Road West," prepared for Heritage Oshawa in 2002. The relationship of Mabel Robson to Charles Norman Robson is not confirmed. She may have been mother or sister/sister-in-law.

<sup>2</sup> In 1963, the firm merged with James Lang Leather Co. of Kitchener to become Robson - Lang Leathers Ltd. with branch plants in Oshawa, Cobourg, Barrie, Kitchener, and London. After a long strike, the Oshawa plant closed in May 1977. On November 8, 1980, fire destroyed the building.

<sup>3</sup> Su Murdoch, "The J. H. Beaton House, 55 Connaught Street," prepared for Heritage Oshawa in 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Maitland, Jacqueline Hucker, Shannon Ricketts, *A Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles*. Broadview Press Ltd., Peterborough, 1982, p.178.

<sup>5</sup> *A Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles*, p.178.

<sup>6</sup> The 1971 museum at Sainte-Marie among the Hurons in Midland incorporates this technique using shadows.

# APPENDICES

- Sources
- Photographs 2004  
3 views of east façade, facing Carnegie Street

# SOURCES

Conveyances Abstract. Durham Region Land Registrar's Office, Whitby.

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