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Posh Ottawa neighbourhood opposes plans for Iraqi ambassador's residence

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Embassy has applied to demolish bungalow and rebuild it with Arabic motifs

The Iraq embassy's plans to demolish and rebuild its ambassador's residence to reflect Arabic motifs are being thwarted by residents of the upscale Ottawa neighbourhood.

The drawn-out saga of 187 Lansdowne Rd. S. has led to a range of conflicting opinions on whether the water-damaged and fungus-riddled house is worth saving. But the residence is in Rockcliffe Park, a community fiercely protective of its heritage character that has few sidewalks and also monitors through traffic.

Iraqi ambassadors have stayed in the modernist Frank Lloyd Wright-style house since 1979, but the bungalow was abandoned when Canada broke off diplomatic relations with Iraq in 1991 and fell into disrepair. The ambassador has lived elsewhere since relations resumed.

Now, the Iraq embassy has applied to demolish the 1960s structure and replace it with a three-storey building with Arabic architectural motifs, such as geometric detailing and a flat roof. The designs, the embassy and architects say, would offer the ambassador increased security and more room to entertain visitors.

To win over the Rockcliffe Park Residents Association, Iraqi Ambassador Abdulrahman Hamid Al-Hussaini and the embassy's architect, Julian Jacobs, have both said they're willing to consult with the community. They have made three rounds of changes to the designs to make the residence "less institutional" and fit into the streetscape of posh Rockcliffe Park.

"Initially, we had a flat roof, but now we don't. And we took away all the fencing and railings with geometric motifs, which I suppose is kind of Arabic," Mr. Jacobs said. "We made it more western. Let's call it that."

The residents association wants 187 Lansdowne restored to its former glory, when it was the home of grocery magnate Bertram Loeb, who bought the first Independent Grocers Alliance (IGA) franchise in Canada. There is much debate whether Fred Lebensold, the celebrated architect of the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, may have had a hand in designing the custom bungalow. The Loeb family says so, but there are no architectural drawings to support that theory.

"The best solution would be that the house be refurbished," said Anthony Keith, the secretary for the residents association's heritage committee. "And if that isn't possible, then maybe the Iraq embassy could sell the lot and we'll take care of it."

City council is expected to rule on the demolition and the fourth iteration of the design on Wednesday evening. It will likely vote against demolition even though the city heritage advisory

committee recommended otherwise. Mr. Al-Hussaini said in an e-mail to The Globe and Mail that he will accept the decision of city council, although he could appeal at the provincial level.

This isn't the first time the local residents have butted heads with the Iraqi embassy. When the Iraqis bought the residence in 1979, they added a concrete and metal fence, much to the chagrin of the association, which is determined to preserve the neighbourhood's historic feel.

The councillor for the area, Peter Clark, said he understands the need for heightened security since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, but the house should never have been neglected in the first place.

"Just because it's in a bad shape now isn't a good enough reason to tear it down," Mr. Clark said. "It's not a question about what the new plans look like, because the real issue is whether the place should even be demolished."

Rockcliffe Park

Rockcliffe Park is a historic conservation district on the southern bank of the Ottawa River, just northeast of Parliament Hill. It is one of Ottawa's most prosperous neighbourhoods. The community of about 700 homes traces its roots to 1837, when many of the residences were built as summer cottages for affluent families. To this day, it remains a picturesque community characterized by narrow curved streets, a handful of sidewalks, and a mix of housing styles with large grounds surrounded by mature trees. The neighbourhood has a parkland ambience, with the escarpment looking over the Ottawa River and the McKay Lake. Luxury homes in this community can sell for as high as \$8-million, although the average is closer to \$1.5-million. Stornoway, the residence of the Leader of the Official Opposition, is in Rockcliffe Park, and several other diplomats, such as the U.S. and Japanese ambassadors, have made it their home. Rockcliffe Park is also home to two of Ottawa's most prestigious private schools, Elmwood and Ashbury College.