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King: Future looks bleak for Ottawa's historic 'cottage' gas station

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There's an old cottage in Westboro that looks as though it should be overlooking the water or tucked away in some secluded forest. Instead, it's passed by countless motorists each day as they navigate one of the busiest intersections in the city.

The "cottage" is a little yellow gas station at the corner of Island Park Drive and Richmond Road, a hub for throngs of interprovincial commuters who clog the road on their way to and from the Champlain Bridge. Once indispensable for west-end Ottawa motorists, this quaint corner gas station is an architectural rarity.

SECTIONS



The former gas station at the corner of Island Park Drive and Richmond Road was constructed in 1934 to fit into the surrounding neighbourhood.

Andrew King / Ottawa Citizen

Built in 1934, it's an example of the kind of building needed to dispense gasoline to the then-somewhat new and increasingly popular transportation device known as the automobile.

In the 1920s, curb-side gas pumps downtown were being replaced by drive-in filling stations in the suburbs as more people began to buy cars and move to the outskirts of the city. These new gas stations were created by oil companies who wanted their gas stations to blend into residential neighbourhoods so they built them to resemble the houses that would surround them.

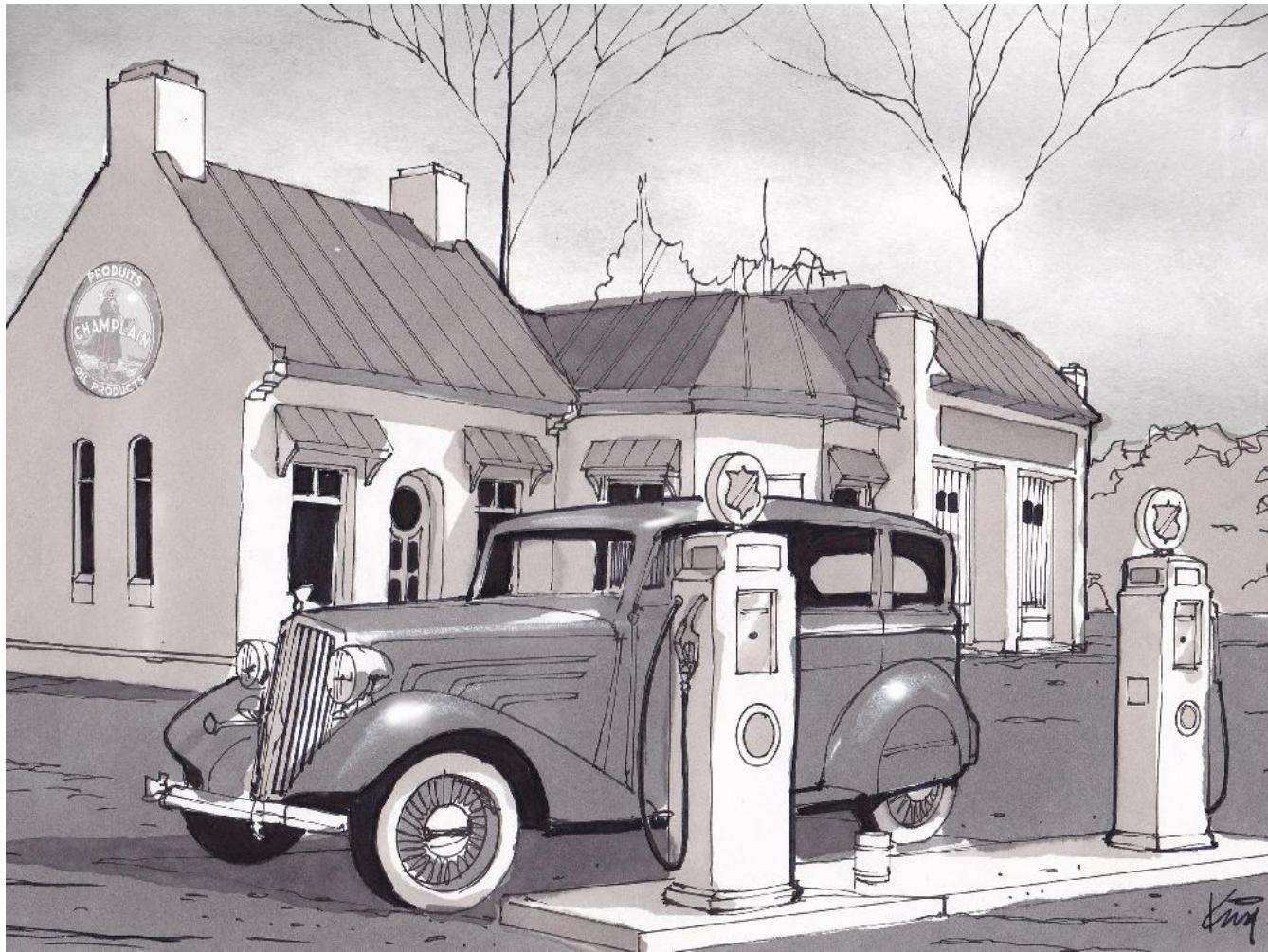
Only a few of these cottage gas stations remain in North America, and the United States recently designated their surviving examples on the National Register of Historic Places.

Recently vacated and sitting empty, our unusual cottage gas station property has been purchased by a Toronto developer, Main and Main.

The structure resembles an old English cottage, with its rounded doorway and windows, steeply pitched roof and chimneys, similar to many of the older homes along Island Park Drive. The architectural style of the gas station is called "Tudor Revival" and was created by the American architect Carl-August Petersen,

who was hired by the Pure Oil company in the 1920s. His designs featured canopied windows and stuccoed walls. Like Ottawa's example, the stations were built during the growth period of the automobile, which eventually shaped the North American streetscape as we know it today.

Hoping to learn more about the history of the station, I studied a recent environmental assessment on the adjacent controversial Mizrahi property that revealed the station at 70 Richmond Rd. was a "Champlain Oil Products" service station sometime in the 1940s.



A sketch of the former gas station at the corner of Island Park Drive and Richmond Road showing how it might have looked during its heyday.

Andrew King / Ottawa Citizen

Champlain Oil Products operated a chain of gas stations throughout Montreal and Ottawa during the 1930s and '40s and was owned by former prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's father, Charles Emile Trudeau. The company operated the station from sometime in the 1930s until the late 1960s, when it became a used car dealership.

In order to know the cottage's exact history, I turned to fellow history buff Dave Allston who operates Houstalgia, a business that researches the history of neighbourhoods, properties and homes. Allston's

work revealed plans were drawn up in 1933 by MacRostie (a well-known land surveyor in Ottawa at the time) for the creation of a gas station at this location. "BENZOENE" gas station celebrated its grand opening on June 30, 1934, confirmed by a newspaper clipping Allston found in the Ottawa Journal. The new station boasted free motor oil for customers arriving "noon till midnight." Perhaps the oil giveaway proved too much for Benzolene; the company was short-lived and was sold for \$1 to Champlain Oil Products in 1937.



Advertising the opening of the gas station at Island Park Drive and Richmond Road, June 30, 1934 Ottawa Citizen.

The station successfully operated for years, even after the Island Park Esso station set up shop across the street in 1938. It was eventually sold and began a new life as a used car lot, operating under the name Nepean Motors into the 1980s. A string of car lots then did business there, a tradition that continued until just last month.

Now owned by Main & Main, the property sits vacant.

I asked Daniel Byrne, vice-president, development at Main & Main, what plans they had for the building. Byrne said they foresee a commercial redevelopment of the land for retail or food and beverage use. After two consultations with the community, Byrne says no issues were raised regarding the heritage nature of the building.

I asked if they could perhaps adapt the building into a new development, similar to the Grant House on Elgin Street which has been renovated with half of it enclosed within a glass office structure. Byrne said it would be "extremely challenging" to adapt the station due to its solid brick construction. Byrne also commented that the site is contaminated and that it is "currently underused and has more potential to serve the community in the future."

I contacted Kitchissippi Ward Coun. Katherine Hobbs who made it clear that preserving the building, and others like it, is part of a greater problem within the city system.

"No financial or other incentives currently exist to help save these buildings," says Hobbs, who hopes to change that so buildings can be preserved in the future. The developers, it seems, are faced with the high costs of dealing with contaminants and other environmental concerns and have little choice but to demolish existing structures since the cost of keeping them is prohibitive. "We need some sort of program that helps preserve these historical buildings and defer the cost of their preservation," Hobbs says.

After uncovering the fascinating past of this little 1930s cottage gas station I feel we must try to preserve this valuable piece of Ottawa's history, not only because these unique old buildings are disappearing quickly to urban development but because it survives as a rare example of early gas station architecture.

A unique and visionary approach to the Island Park station could preserve its history while addressing the demands of a modern neighbourhood. It is becoming a growing trend elsewhere to convert old gas stations into restaurants due to their high visibility and desirable corner locations in established neighbourhoods.

A similar gas station in Toronto on Lakeshore Boulevard was recently moved to a new location where it was restored and will begin a new life. Perhaps enclosing the existing building could serve as an all-season farmers' market space, a retail store or an integrated commercial space.

The future has yet to unfold for the old cottage gas station on Island Park Drive, but I fear its days are numbered and it is running on empty.

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